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**TOWNSEND AND EMBRY RIVALRY
WHEN QUEERS COLLIDE
THE SECRET SAUCE OF LEATHERSEX**

In 1972, Larry became president of the Homophile Effort for Legal Protection which he helped found in 1968 to defend gays during and after entrapment arrests by the LAPD. He led the founding of the *H.E.L.P. Newsletter*, the yellow-pulp tabloid forebear of the slick and glossy *Drummer* magazine founded in LA in 1975 by John Embry (1926-2010). Larry chose not to accept Embry's invitation to be a co-founder of *Drummer* because, among other reasons in the soul-destroying cage-fighting that was the LA social scene around the peccant John Embry, Larry did not want to bow to a competing gay alpha male anymore than he wanted to be part of a magazine with a hungry deadline needing to be fed every thirty days. Had he wanted that, he could easily have founded his own magazine titled *Leatherman's Handbook* in 1972.

Even so, Larry was basically always involved with *Drummer* and the *Drummer* Salon of talent because he and Embry hate-liked crossing swords to cross purposes. Was it their male chromosomes that destined them to fight to survive like sperm that carry toxic mutations that poison rival sperm? Nearly the same age and build, they found distorted fun-house mirrors in each other. Neither was a *beau ideal*. So their switch from the Los Angeles cocktail-bar scene of the suit-and-tie 1950s and 1960s to the pre-and-post-Stonewall acid-rock bars where being “fat and forty”—the kids’ words in a hippie decade that did not “trust anyone over thirty”—was an unwelcome education. When Townsend published his *Handbook*, he was 42. When Embry founded *Drummer*, he was 49. When Barney began editing *Drummer*, she was 37. When I began editing *Drummer*, I was turning 38.

Both average joe's used leather to date out of their league, as did all we average joe's, because in the leather-bar scene, where leather trumps lookism, there was always a surfeit of eager handsome young masochists seeking anyone from Nostradamus to Nosferatu in a leather vest who would master them. They benefited from the wonderful anti-lookist and anti-ageist ingredient that is the secret sauce of leather joy that adds years to one's sex life.

To captivate interest and signal their top intent in crowded bars, both men wore their keys on the left and dressed simply in leather vests and jackets as was the laid-back custom in the 1970s before expensive and extravagant tailor-made leather wardrobes became the style with 1980s road warriors laced tight into assless leather chaps, girded with big studded belts, and cinched inside vests topped with age-defusing sunglasses and Muir caps.

Like feuding movie stars, Townsend v. Embry was one of the great gay Hollywood rivalries worthy of its own *Baby Jane* feature film. When Larry declined to contribute to the first issue, Embry so wanted—so needed—to market the popular “Townsend” brand that he made a point to review Larry's novel, *Chains*, so he could print Townsend's superstar name on the contents page to buzz up a connection and to imply an endorsement. However, Embry, in true frenemy fashion, had his reviewer, a certain “Cam Phillips”—who was likely Jeanne Barney—trash the novel and the author:

the author [was] obviously confused; dull sex scenes; Townsend is not a “good” writer in the sense that Christopher Isherwood and John Rechy are “good” writers [This calculated slam inside *Drummer* that Larry was not “literary” was the same slam made by gay mainstream literary mavens.]; he is weakest when dealing with his characters outside of the bedroom, or when he makes them open their mouths for anything other than sexual purposes; and the cover [which Townsend designed] promises an extremely heavy sexual book, but this is definitely not the case.

In short, because Embry wanted a mystique—and a mail-order company—as powerful as Larry’s, he co-opted Townsend’s name, topics, and mail-order business plan sired out of Mizer and Renslow. In truth, in a corporate takeover by his Alternate Publishing, Inc., CEO Embry hijacked Larry’s *H.E.L.P. Newsletter* and *Leatherman’s Handbook* into his own monthly magazine, *Drummer*.

So even before I convinced Larry to begin writing his monthly *Drummer* column “Leather Notebook” in 1980, his influence as a leather guru shaped the psyche and content of Embry’s iteration of *Drummer* that thrived on Larry’s synergy of marketing, initiation, and identity for 1970s men self-fashioning themselves as a new archetribes of homomascuine men in that first decade of gay lib when women were self-fashioning themselves in feminism.

Larry’s *Handbook* reported an existing and projected leather lifestyle and thus created even more emerging kink culture—such as kick-starting Embry into creating *Drummer*. Pushing beyond the revelations in the 1948 *Kinsey Report*, his *Handbook* was indeed the first analysis of leatherfolk in the twentieth century. It pairs perfectly, as noted, with William Carney’s intense leather-identity novel *The Real Thing* (1968), an epistolary book which Larry admired and cited specifically in his *Handbook*, and imitated in the format of his “Leather Notebook” and “Ask Larry” columns responding to letters from his network of readers. In his archives, Larry saved all his fan mail. In 2012, his niece Tracy Tingle remarked to sex-positive feminist Carole Queen at the San Francisco Center for Sex and Culture:

There are letters from guys in the early 1970s—resplendent with the vernacular of the day—letters from closeted guys in the Midwest, letters from people in enema clubs...*the letter writers reflected the AIDS epidemic unfolding in what they wrote about and requested* [Italics added]. It was really touching and beautiful to go through some of those.

In a bonding 1972 coincidence caused by leather BDSM ritual and gay-wicca ritual rising together after Stonewall, Larry

published his *Handbook* at the same moment my two books touching S&M rites and rituals, *Leather Blues* and *Popular Witchcraft*, were also published. In 1969, before Larry and I met face to face, I received his Kinsey-like sex questionnaire whose fetish answers he used to build his first *Handbook*. I sent him my dozen pages of answers, and added some suggestions about magical S&M rituals. While I then quoted some samples of his questions in *Popular Witchcraft*, he added “Witchcraft and Demonology in S&M” into his *Handbook*. His concluding Chapter 18, “Where Do You Stand?” reprinted the entire questionnaire. His *Handbook* went on to prepare the way for Radical Leather Faerie Mark Thompson’s landmark anthology, *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (1992)—in which Thompson, the former editor of *The Advocate*, included essays by twenty-seven leather authors, including me, while excluding Townsend, Barney, Embry, and Earl.

In 1976, when *Drummer* shook the trust of its masculine-identified readers with that camp cover of the Cycle Sluts shot by stalker Robert Opel, psychologist Townsend told editor Barney he was not surprised to learn of pissed-off men who demanded camp to be taboo in *Drummer* where masculinity was totem. As a unit of desire-as-identity in the mindset of leathermen in the 1970s, the words most repeated in the *Drummer* classifieds in which readers wrote Personal Ads identifying themselves, as well as what quality they were seeking in sex partners, were *masculinity* and *masculine*. It was to that homomale choir that Larry preached.

In 2020, Sister Leucrazia of the Toronto Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, invoked a “Litany of Leather Saints” as a blessing:

Oh, St. Tom of Finland...Oh, St. Peter of Berlin...Oh,
St. Brando of *The Wild One*...Oh, honored Pat Califia...
In the name of Larry Townsend, may your saddle soap
froth eternally, and in the name of Bettie Page, may your
pin-up be honored, and your riding crop strike true.