

Nobody Did It Better

by Joseph W. Bean

Lines in appreciation of Jack Fritscher
as he appeared in *Drummer* magazine

Jack Fritscher \ʃak-ˈfrɪtʃeɪ[®]\ prop. noun—no plural poss. [Unique coinage, more at homomasculine]. 1. Legendary 20th to 21st Century homocultural figure said to have war-painted himself with the splatter from strafing pop cultural icons and gay pseudo-leather cults with sweat-and cum-scented rounds fired from unimaginable heights at what he viewed as bastions of slow-moving and therefore false imagination below. 2. Variant view: mythical writer whose stream of sanity blew away posers, especially those clad in chaps or leather clothing, while attracting a following as he wrote his heart out into “ho-sex, mo-sex leathersex” reality, creating in his one lifetime an entire non-virtual world of both steam and substance.

Drummer had a long run from June 1975 to its 214th issue dated April 1999. Along the way, the magazine frankly created a good many writers, but it served a more important function for some writers. It gave them a forum where they were free to say what was most on their hearts and minds, what stirred them most powerfully in their guts and groins, and what got them off most perfectly. In those nearly 24 years, few writers took more complete advantage of the special soap-box that was *Drummer* magazine than Jack Fritscher. And very few were as well equipped as Fritscher to benefit the very particular readers of *Drummer*. He had not only the skills and talents, but the lifestyle and experience needed. In fact, maybe no one was better supplied with passions worth exposing to the half-formed world of leathersex for that matter. For volume (both much-ness and loudness) and frequency (both pitch and often-ness) and for both voracity and for veracity...for memorable texts and inescapable even cataclysmic juxtapositions of God and gonads, sweet perfection and drooling desire, nobody did it better. In the entire history of *Drummer* and its many spin-offs, “brother” publications and imitators, and in his

own books and periodicals, Fritscher was creating a unique leathersex universe to which—even now—only a handful of writers have made any additional “direct deposits.”

In one tumbling, fully-conscious stream of truth after another, Fritscher left us *Drummer* readers numb and spent and happy to have been run-over so gloriously. He seldom spoke when shouting would be tolerated and never explained when exuberant telling would get the job done. He grabbed us with his language and his style and, without stopping to ask how we liked to be fucked, just rammed it in and pleased himself, which is just what we’d have asked for if we had the courage and self-confidence to do that.

Leathermen were just steps out of the super-cultural closet when *Drummer* came along. A decade before, or less, they were nearly invisible, and meant to stay that way. Being invisible to the world had a certain positive value, maybe. Being invisible to each other at the distance of a city or two was not so good—damned inconvenient, really. Being invisible to the fresh meat that was seeking hungry users and abusers and brothers and Dads, mentors, re-inventors, bike riders to buddy with and buddies to fuck with... well, frankly, *that* kind of being invisible was intolerable. Even though there were other magazines from time to time—none for long, but always something else—*Drummer* was a necessity. The new Technicolor reality springing up from the gone-gray flats of gay social nothingness needed to be named and defined and cheered and kicked in the butt.

For all of that, the naming and defining for sure, the cheering when absolutely necessary and the kicking in the butt any time at all (thank you), again, nobody did it better than Jack Fritscher.

Fritscher’s straight fiction and features were published years before Larry Townsend, but Townsend in the leather genre hit print first with a publisher to whom Fritscher would not sell his own book manuscripts such as 1969’s *I Am Curious (Leather)* because the publisher demanded ownership of the author’s copyright. Both Townsend and Fritscher published significant books in 1972: Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook* and Fritscher’s *Popular Witchcraft* with its academic analysis of magic ritual in leather culture.

Townsend, a different kind of writer from stylist Fritscher, was doing his own thing, plus a couple of other things. He was entertaining and Fritscher was too, but Townsend was also a lot about scientifically proving what we were and what we did. His column—along with Bill Ward’s *Drum* cartoon—was among the longest running features in *Drummer*, and they both were sources of great bar-talk and cocktail conversation. All good; in fact, these things were very good, but it was culture shock when

the vainglorious bonfires of leather “political correctness” ignited around Fritscher’s contributions. While one circle of leathermen demanded to know, “How could he say *that*?” another would be shocked into asking, “Did you see *how* he said that?”

I don’t know about other readers, but Fritscher was an unexpected shock for me when he appeared in *Drummer*. I didn’t really notice the byline on the piece about the Leatherneck bar (*Drummer* 18) before I saw his name as editor in chief in *Drummer* 19. I was not thinking of writing for *Drummer* myself, not by a long shot. Even though I did a lot of writing for *Drummer*, I didn’t do any of it for another ten years. Hey, it was just about the time of my thirtieth birthday that I saw this new Fritscher phenomenon in print, and my opinion was that the guys who were doing this magazine were gods—ageless and eternal if not omniscient. How could I have known that Jack Fritscher was only eight years and one day older. He was on fire and I was on track to be a late-bloomer (as a writer about all this “jazz”), I guess. But, maybe eight years would have seemed a lot *then*.

In any case, back in the spring of 1977, Fritscher was on a mission which others would attempt to join, but only he could perform, pursue, posterize, and perfect with such zest and energy. He began reinterpreting popular culture in a leather context. This could have been done a million ways, and many famous writers and artists before and since have done something like it, but Fritscher’s method was perfect for who we were and for the time. What’s more, since we learned from Fritscher to think in his “language” (as much as that can be done by anyone other than the man himself), we “naturally” realized that his views were our views, his discoveries our truths. And, to make his dominance perfect, he changed as we changed and kept up with the times in a peculiar, all-Fritscher way that didn’t involve any unnecessary trendiness.

The recipe for the emerging leatherman’s point of view is not something that can ever be entirely clear, but the list of ingredients had to include cynicism and sarcasm along with respect and broad awareness. A special flavor of humor was a requirement, and Fritscher put his finger on the right one after *Drummer* had thumbed across humorous options unsuccessfully for nearly 20 issues. There had to be a degree of separation, even superiority, without the slightest touch of smug condescension. Once this blend of secret brotherhood and popular culture was worked out, we all knew better than we thought we ever could just who we were and where in the Big Picture to “find ourselves.”

In fictions and fetish features and editorials, *Drummer* under Fritscher’s guidance became the leatherman’s mind as well as his heart—without letting go of his sex for a second—and it defied us to be

more or different or otherwise. This was all very good for everyone, particularly a youngish guy who believed that the leather-clad men you could find in *Drummer* were a separate and special creation, on a higher order than *homo sapiens sapiens*. That's me thinking that, until a few Fritscher features drew pictures in which I could see myself without even straining. Then, just to keep me in my place after all, he'd come along with something like the *Drummer* 23 editorial where, in effect, *Drummer* claimed its place in the world and demanded that the readers notice the magazine was hung bigger than we were and had balls like we only dreamed of.

"Just you mention *Drummer* in a roomful of guys," Fritscher wrote, "and you'll get a heavy feedback of attitude. They either love us or hate us. They either understand us (meaning themselves) or they refuse to understand us (again, meaning themselves)." That's balls! And, not surprisingly, the editorial began by asking "where's *Drummer* get the leather balls to..." and ended with the honest answer that the readers who kept buying the magazine gave those who produced it the balls to do it as hard as they did and, in every other way, just as they did.

I don't know that the truth of the moment is really in that. For me, and I suspect a lot of others, it was impossible to see myself as a provider of chutzpah. I was being fed and encouraged, not consumed or reflected... but then I saw it, thanks to that editorial: There was a breed of leathermen—Val Martin and Fred Halsted and Joey Yale and Durk Dehner and the rest, art director Al "A. Jay" Shapiro and editor/writer Jack Fritscher among them—who were the source of all this ballsy machismo. And, closer to my home, there was a less plugged-in tribe—myself included—who were being lifted and flown, like little kids being "airplaned" in circles by their Dads. Fritscher was the Braveheart, the Shaka Zulu, the Kamehameha, the battle-crier who did *not* say something never before said or thought but, instead, gave voice to a thing never before made clear enough to rally around and to pass along to strangers in print.

The style and intelligence and urgency of Fritscher's message were his own, but the message itself was the one leathermen wanted (or, just as often definitely didn't want) disseminated. The essential content of what he was saying in "his" issues of *Drummer* (19 through 30 and his hybrid issues 14-18, 31, 32, 33) and in his other work and, as a contributor, in later issues of *Drummer* changed naturally because we changed, but the essential nature of it, the thing that made it Fritscher, never changed.

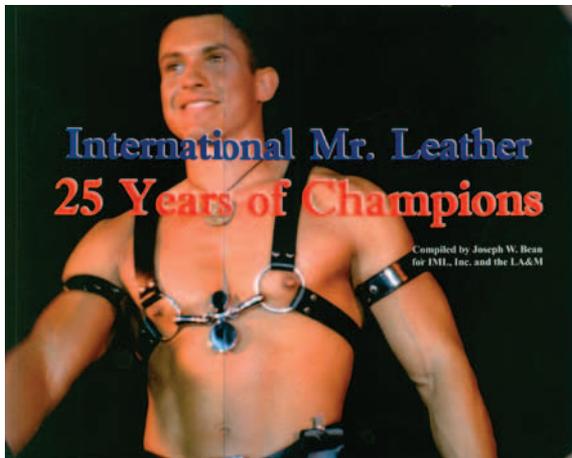
By the time I went to work at *Drummer*, 100 issues after the last one Fritscher edited, he really was a god of leather, an unimpeachable and unassailable solitaire whose very name had developed a meaning. "What do you want done with the 'Leather Lifestyles' theme you announced for *Drummer* 132?" I asked my boss, *Drummer* publisher Tony DeBlase.

“Go all the way with it,” he answered, apparently leaving me unsure of what he meant. “You know,” he added, “do a Fritscher!” Yes, I knew. In fact, either the topic was unyielding or I was unable. It didn’t work that time. Subject after subject thereafter, the concept kept being “do a Fritscher” on it. Brown leather (*Drummer* 134) fell far short of that goal; leathersex and spirituality (*Drummer* 136) almost made it; bears (*Drummer* 140) got pretty close; spandex (*Drummer* 141) felt like a success. We really did a Fritscher on that “kinky softwear” as we called the form-accentuating garments. Edge play (*Drummer* 148) felt even more fully Fritscher-ed, but none of the issues I worked on were sufficiently Fritscher-ed except the ones put on that footing by the one and only *original* Jack Fritscher.

The now infamous “Remembrance of Sleaze Past” issue (*Drummer* 139) has to be the best of that lot and, if I remember correctly that idea either came from Fritscher or from DeBlase in conversation with Fritscher!

I owe Jack a lot, starting with my adult sexual vocabulary, and maybe including whatever success I have had writing and speaking of leathersex. I might never have done any of it at all if I had not been inspired, encouraged and kicked in the butt every step of the way. And, for all that, I can assure you, nobody did it better than Jack Fritscher.

Joseph W. Bean is the bricoleur editor of *Drummer* issues 133-161 who kept *Drummer* alive in the aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake that destroyed the *Drummer* office in 1989. His writing and his erotic art have appeared in dozens of magazines from *Drummer* and *SandMutopia*



Guardian to *The Advocate*. Besides *Drummer*, he has served as the editor of the magazines *Mach*, *DungeonMaster*, *International Leatherman*, *Powerplay*, *Bear*, and *Foreskin Quarterly*. In 1990, he spun his magazine *Tough Customers* from the long-running “Tough Customers” column that Jack Fritscher had invented as a Christmas present to readers in *Drummer* 25 (December 1978). He also served as the executive director of the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago in whose magazine *Leather Times* #1 (2007) this article “Nobody Did It Better” was first published. His many books include *Leathersex Shadows: The Art of Joseph Bean*, *The Master’s Manual: A Handbook of Erotic Dominance* (with Jack Rinella), and *International Mr. Leather: 25 Years of Champions* (2004). He lives and writes in Hawaii.



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