

Satyr Satire...

CASTRO STREET BLUES 1978: or, Even Blue Boys Get the Cows

***Years from now when you read this
–and you will read this–
remember The Way WE Were (1978 Style)***

**Written May-June 1978, and published in *Drummer* 24, September 1978
to present photographs David Sparrow and I shot at the 1978 Castro Street Fair**

**Historical Context Introduction
written February 21, 2000**

My express purpose in this feature essay was, as stated explicitly on the Contents page, to reflect ourselves to ourselves then, and to bury a self-aware time capsule of the way we were, “1978-Style,” so history would—my constant invocation word—*remember*, because, up to that time, so much of gay history had been destroyed and forgotten. *Drummer* in the 1970s was a magazine for literate and older (30-something) men, and never really changed as the 80s and 90s became addled with MTV.

Because in the 70s we all knew we were over the moon as no generation—including the Roaring 20s—ever had been before, my satire tried to nail gay pop culture with real names, real places, real attitudes, real slang, and real dish, because we all knew—like group common knowledge—that no future generation would believe what heights we reached because no such party could last. We gay men in the 70s were a group of people who, except for our sexual preference, had virtually nothing in common. We weren’t fools or victims of circumstance, but regular people who happened to be gay when history suddenly opened up and put our preference in play. We were so not-organized that anyone who thinks there was a gay white male fraternity or conspiracy to keep out minorities and women gives too much retro-credit to their own socialist hindsight fantasies. Within that group, as a couple, David Sparrow and I were real people who really loved each other, and worked together, and made a life.

Twelve of the photographs were shot by David Sparrow and me posing John Trojanski’s name—with his permission—on the credit line, again, as always, to divert publisher John Embry. John Trojanski was, in fact, one of my real-world employees whom I had hired on my writing staff at Kaiser Engineers where I worked the whole time I was driving *Drummer*. I levitated him into *Drummer* because *Drummer* needed the photographs he sometimes took and the articles he would sometimes write if pressed hard enough. I liked his work, and I liked working with him on several *Drummer* pieces like “Footloose” in *Drummer* 29, May 1979. We had both been Catholic seminarians, and I commissioned him to write a piece about seminary life: “Getting into the Habit: Sex in the Monastery, My True Experience,” in *Drummer* 25, December 1978. My expression of this theme is in my novel, *What They Did to the Kid: Confessions of an Altar Boy*, which as the pre-quel to the *Drummer* novel, *Some Dance to Remember*, explains how an altar boy grows up to become the editor and chief writer for gay magazines like *Drummer*.

For “Castro Street Blues,” I wrote the captions for our twelve photographs to illuminate what was actually in the pictures. “The big ‘S’ and the little ‘G’ were, of course, syphilis and gonorrhea, two sexual “colds” that, by policy, we hardly ever mentioned in *Drummer*. One caption points out that the tiny marquee of the Castro Theater does actually read “Liza Minnelli! *Cabaret & New York New York*.” Talk about double-features in heaven. The “Rent-A-Pose” was a wild bodybuilder in the door of the designer gift store, the Obelisk, that became A Different Light bookstore where Mark Henry and I have videotaped over the years little documentaries of so many authors reading.

“Castro clowns? Castro clones? Victor or victim?” That caption, spinning out of Stephen Sondheim’s “Send in the Clowns,” did a couple things pointing out that the photo is a reflection in a mirror. My lover David Sparrow can actually be seen shooting the shot: a perfect passive-aggressive autograph. The caption also played with the name of the man in the photograph: Victor was having great ups and downs about managing or owning—I don’t remember which—the Castro bar called Moby Dick.

The satire of the pope and the belly dancers in their harem drag was meant to poke fun at all religious garb. The “Macho Macho Men” was a send-up of the Village People who were only once mentioned in *Drummer* when I made a crack about them in response to a “letter to the editor.” In the 70s, men understood the Village People as comic and commercial images of stereotype rather than *Drummer*’s images of men dressed similarly as the archetypes of homomascularity.

The thirteenth photograph was taken by the ever-reliable Efen Ramirez who shot many *Drummer* pictures. Ramirez himself collected a dozen photographers for the article he wrote, “On Gay Photography,” published in *Drummer*’s sibling magazine, *The Alternate*, Volume 2 #8, January 1979. Although Robert Mapplethorpe and other photographers refused to be profiled because they did not want the limiting adjective “gay” to label their work, Ramirez included: Crawford Barton (whom I interviewed in 1990 some years before his death) with one of the first photographs of a heavy-set bear; Jeff Clark; Roberta Dill; Hal Fischer; Sandra Graham; Ginny Lloyd; Robert Opel; Blair Paltridge; Greg Reeder; and Fisher Ross. Efen Ramirez described himself: “Efen Ramirez is the author of a photographic collection, *In Pursuit of Images*. He has an M. A. in Art History and Photography from San Francisco State University. With many years’ experience as a photographer, his work has been published in various gay magazines and newspapers. His project for 1979 is to expand his survey, *In Pursuit of Images*, on a national scale with an eye to a major exhibition in the U. S. Interested gay photographers may contact him by writing: San Francisco Arts and Letters Foundation, PO Box 99394, San Francisco 94109.

Gay-studies paleontologists may examine two things: 1) that in this 1978 essay are bits and pieces that are directly quoted from *Some Dance to Remember*, the historical novel of San Francisco which I had been writing in my journal since 1970; and 2) these photographs are part of the on-going graphic documentaries I shot of gay culture beginning with the Gay Freedom Day Parade in 1973 on Super-8 movie-film to the dozen video documentaries Mark Henry and I have shot together since 1984 of Gay Pride, Folsom Street Fair, Castro Street Fair, and Dore Alley Street Fair.

Additionally, in my short story, “Rainbow County,” written in 1974, I analyzed, by including quite a bit of gay history, the siren call of the Castro. I’ve always thought that all the stories people told about how they journeyed to San Francisco in the ’70s were positively Chaucer, which is why I have often, as in this story, named as the hometown of my characters, the mythical small Midwestern town of “Canterbury.” In the story, which is like a two-person one-act play, a young gay immigrant lands in Lloyd’s Barber Shop (actually Floyd’s Barber Shop) upstairs over the Elephant Walk bar on the southwest corner of 18th and Castro. The historical thread is how men came from all over to the intersection and once there, after creating fraternity, almost immediately, created “attitude.”

The lead line for this Gay Immigrant’s Tale is: “In the gay world, everything is always reversed and Through the Looking Glass, and Over the Rainbow. He was looking for the Face of God at 18th and Castro. There, at the other foot of the Rainbow Arch from Oz, he found Rainbow County.”

The story opens, fixing 18th and Castro, mythologically. “On the last day of spring, June 20, 1973, at high noon, at the corner of 18th and Castro in San Francisco, Robert Place found the Face of God in a pornographic photograph. Not that he was given to dirty pictures. Rather, he had been drawn, by some—what?—thing to this neighborhood, by some thing he had vaguely heard or read or sensed that...had everything to do with whatever was intersecting the intersection which was inventing its flamboyant self even as he watched....He had walked all four of the single-block arms reaching out like a cross from the main intersection which was more like

ground zero than anything he'd expected even in California. Everything rushed oingo-boingo right up at him: the omelet-brunch cafes with cake made out of, go figure, carrots; the dandy little flower shop near the corner kiosk where a one-legged ancient eye, maybe the world's oldest newsboy, hawked the call, "*Chronicle!*" like the last screech of a dying species; the loud beer bars with slender young men in white tanktops and baseball caps posing and partying in windows open to the street; the chic boutiques selling nothing anybody would ever need after a nuclear attack.

"All of it was alien to him. Or he was alien to it. He had entered foreign territory. Fear—not so much the fear of the unknown, but more like the human animal's fear of his own kind—bristled the shorthairs on the nape of his neck. The unexpected thrill of temptation put him on edge....

"Until that bone-bright noon hour when Robert Place actually witnessed what looked like the campus of the world's most flamboyant boys' college, he had little more than a tourist's curious Kodak hope that there, at that world-famous intersection, he'd see people unlike any of the people back home in southern Illinois, people stranger and more festive even than the hippies he'd seen on TV in the Haight, people, who, rumors persisted, had always existed, the way bohemians and gypsies and magicians, all of them outlaws, had always existed, even before the Druids, but had never been seen before, at least not in broad daylight, in such visible numbers....

"Because of his uneasy feeling that he already recognized these new people even if he did not know them, Robert Place immediately affected toward them a distanced attitude which he knew camouflaged his ground-glass fear he might, in fact, be one of them, whatever they really were."

The barber Lloyd, who is almost blind, sits in his shop overlooking 18th and Castro, his eyes as big as the eyes of T. J. Eckleberg overlooking the events in *The Great Gatsby*. He says to Robert: "I spend all day looking out the window. Take a look. You'll see. What a parade. It looks like half of Noah's ark. The stag half if you catch my drift."

I admit I was at an early age very influenced by the short stories of Tennessee Williams, particularly the title story of his collection *One Arm*, as well as his "Desire and the Black Masseur." I tried a bit to apply his eye to the Castro phenomenon. "Castromania" quickly became "Castrophobia." The story continues, as Lloyd shows Robert magazines like *Young Adonis*, *Mars*, and *Physique Pictorial*. Looking at the pictures in these magazines, Robert freaks internally at his own gush of coming out. "Robert, in fact, sat helpless in Lloyd's barber chair. He made small gurgling noises as he turned the pages. Back in Canterbury, he had only imagined what he would find out west. But he had not found it; it had found him. His hand clutched his throat as his breath finally, totally, slid out of him. He suddenly saw how life was going to be with him. Really be with him. Really in control of him. The thought took root like mandrake in his heart. He had never considered until that minute that everything he was about, had always been about, had masked the slow flowering fact that he was not different from all those men and boys cruising arm in arm in the street below. The same wild lemming call that had summoned them from everywhere had summoned him from the south-midlands to them, to this city, to this very intersection, to this catbird seat in Lloyd's Barber Shop looking down on something that was totally new to him, but also totally known.

"He was not sure he like the convergence.

"What the fuck was Rainbow County?"

And that precisely—about the "Bali Hai" siren call of 18th and Castro—is the historical question.

The point of quoting this short story as "back story" regarding *Drummer* is that I came to edit *Drummer*'s pages with a certain exhibited sensibility and feel for living among the gay lib pioneers. That was precisely why publisher John Embry hired me when he moved *Drummer* to San Francisco. When it came time to write *Drummer*'s 1978 satire, "Castro Blues," what was behind it as subtext was the 1974 "Rainbow County." I had a deep familiarity—and frank affection—for the intersection and its radical symbolism which continues to this day, for me, as both "history" and "nostalgia." What once was the Sodom-Oz "18th and Castro Model" for white gay males has become, in the twenty-first century, a Model of Mecca for lesbians, bisexuals, and

transgendered people from all around the world. As a destination on the freedom bus, Castro's siren call, as an inclusive "Rainbow County," continues.

The short story, "Rainbow County," is also intentionally a bit of homage to the voyeuristic suspense films of Alfred Hitchcock—particularly his voyeuristic *Rear Window* as well as his homosexual *Rope* and his San Francisco *Vertigo*. It's title is a salute to Ross Lockridge who wrote one of my favorite novels, *Raintree County*, and then locked himself in the garage and committed suicide—even before the film with Eva Marie Saint and that legendary gay-man-straight-woman coupling of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. It was published by Larry Townsend as the title story in *Rainbow County and Other Stories*, L. T. Publications, 1997. At the national Book Expo America in Chicago, that Larry Townsend edition won the "Best Book 1998 Small Press Book Awards for Erotica and Sex" in a field of gay, lesbian, and straight fiction and nonfiction.

The companion piece to "Castro Blues" titled "Gay Deteriorata" is on page 38 of *Drummer* 21, March 1978, and was reprinted in *Some Dance to Remember*, Reel Two, Chapter Four. —© Jack Fritscher, February 21, 2000

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***Years from now when you read this
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In SFO, gay guys talk about sex, gyms, and real estate. They worry about being hot, too hot, or not hot enough. They fly so often they call cities by airline baggage initials. They hate LAX "attitude." They call the West Hollywood boys up for a visit: LAX-landers. They love NYC and want to fly to JFK for some Manhattan "energy." They wish SFO weren't quite such a laid-back fishing village.

Yet gays have the same love affair as straights with SFO. Paradise is the place where when you go there, you get to be yourself. SFO has a grand tradition of tolerance for offbeat characters whose best creation is themselves.

TRUCKSLUTS

On SFO weekends, little Algonquin Clubs brunch at Mena's Norse Cove across from the Castro Theater. They dish the macho boys in the Ford pickups jockeying down to the intersection of Sodom and Gomorrah at 18th and Castro. They watch the Harleys, Kawasakis, and Mo-Peds park side by side in front of Toad Hall. Vehicles are an extension of gay sexlife. You are what you drive. Bored by Castro? Cruise over to Polk. Revolted by Polk? Head down to Folsom. Tired of Folsom? Try Land's End.

HOT

Hot is as hot does in SFO. Scratch the word *hot* from gay chatter and stop the conversation. *Hot* is the ultimate review of anything. Roller skating Tuesday nights in South SFO once was *hot*. Currently, every Saturday midnight it's *hot* to light candles on cue at the Strand's ritual *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. *Architectural Digest* on an art-deco table is *hot*. So is the straight outlaw biker magazine *Easy Riders*. So is Disco. So is Crisco
Only God Herself knows what next will be *hot*.

TWINK CITY

Gays in SFO prefer costumes to clothes. Twinkies live in the Castro. Twinkies are no older than 24 and no taller than 5 foot 6. They sport cropped black moustaches and short black hair often with a gratuitous long lock left at the nape of the neck. They have hairy little muscular bodies of death.

Only a clone could figure the source of the breed.

Twinkies wear too-small LaCoste alligator shirts and size 28-28 pressed jeans. They tuck red hankies meaninglessly in their rear pockets. They prefer thick-soled hiking boots to gain an inch or two in height. With no visible means of support they are whisked away like Dorothy and Toto in Corvettes to Diamond Heights, in Jaguars to Marin, and by PSA to Palm Springs.

FOLSOM TUCKERS

Leathermen hang out South of Market. Their bearded faces have the character that comes from surviving one's own roaring twenties. They admit to no more than "mid-thirties." They corset themselves in tight leather, western, or uniform gear. Unlike the Twinkies, Leathermen own several units of escalating real estate. By night they are rugged, because by day they are disciplined professionals who fill your teeth, bank your money, and draw up your last will and testament. A hanky in a right-hand leather pocket means the tucker is a catcher. In the left, at best he'll negotiate who will pitch. Leathermen prefer cycles and Jeeps, but only as second vehicles. Leathermen look fine in the acid-red light of bars and baths on Folsom. At 2 AM in the back of a fluorescent MUNI bus, they look like mackerel.

GYM TRICKS

In SFO, no one who is anyone lives alone. Gays have roommates to handle press releases. Roommates blab to friends what hot tricks you were up to the night before. In LAX, chandeliers are for show. In SFO chandeliers are for swinging from. You can buy designer track lights at "Work Wonders" (which should be the name of a gym, but isn't).

Bodies are, after all, what this is all about.

A guy gets in shape by pumping iron M-W-F at the Pump Room. Some work up a sweat at the Y with its game-set-and-match-making of dollies in Levi's. More re-fined types pop their niacin, and get their cardiovascular flush riding their naughty Nautilus exercise machines sidesaddle. Steroids to build muscular bulk are the street drug favored by jocks. At the hustlers' corner of Sutter and Polk, ten Arnold Schwarzeneggers loiter under a lighting shop sign that says, "Any object made into a lamp."

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT?

Spectacular parties in SFO are not thrown. They're produced. Everybody is a star. Disco systems are flown in for the night from NYC. Fountains splash. Light shows flash. Grapes cascade. Rome declines. Aerialists perform above oiled wrestlers. Stud-mouse Mr. America types pose like 200 pounds of dynamite that won't go off.

SFO doesn't measure gay Saturday night fever with an oral thermometer.

Start dancing at Alfie's on Market, move on to the I-Beam on Haight, and cruise out at Trocadero Transfer, South of Marker. Collapse at dawn in the tubs on Folsom. Civilizations are

judged by their plumbing. The SFO gay subculture bathes in elegant whirlpool grottos and Fellini Memorial steam rooms.

The hallways at the baths are the real gay parade.

NATURALLY GAY

American boys are not raised to be gay. Mom never takes her son aside the way she does her daughter and says, "Look, kid, you're going to be gay. Lose some weight." Gay kids have to figure it out themselves. SFO is full of theories. "Would Anita understand," a gay priest confides at The Elephant Walk, "that God calls certain people to a gay vocation? Homosexuality is a religion." Down the bar, twin Latino gay brothers smirk and say they were born again, yeah, born again for Salsa. Outside the Star Pharmacy, an ancient peg-legged newsboy cackles out the single raw word, "*Chronicle!*"

Precisely because of the newspaper headlines from the dark interior of the fundamentalist American continent, gays bring their hearts and other parts to SFO.

THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE

Sunday afternoons male belly dancers perform for coin-tossing crowds in front of the Hibernia Bank [at the south-east corner of 18th and Castro, aka "Hibernia Beach"]. A blond boy with punk-chopped hair recently mimicked the belly-boys' boogie. He wrapped himself in a swirl of bedspreads and garter belts. He twirled like a laundromat dryer exploding. The crowd threw pennies at him as hard as they could. He retreated to play toreador with the traffic.

Buses often drive picture-taking tourists through the Castro. Gay photographers snap back through the bus windows at the Iowans dressed in their polyester Protestant Anita-wear. Cameras are the guns of our time. SFO supervisor Harvey Milk's Castro Camera develops the film.

STAR PHARMACY

A man leans against the Star Pharmacy. He played a bit part in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He saw ACT's *Travesties* twice. He jots notes for the very, very wonderful screen comedy he is writing about a macho type who freaks out at 18th and Castro. Movie mad scenes fascinate gay men. In his script, his jock hero blocks traffic by locking himself inside his truck in the center of the intersection. He rubs Oil of Olay all over his face, screaming in three languages how moist he is. A crowd gathers on this very Castro spot where a baby was born on an 8 Market/Ferry bus, attended to by a dozen gay waiters. Restaurants again carry white towels to the intersection. The man jots more notes.

The Star Pharmacy is closed on Sundays. Just when you need aspirin, where is the Star's Jackie, the Sweetheart of the Castro? In SFO, gay refrigerators carry gay staples in their gay freezers: ice cubes, brownies, and poppers.

DOWN HERE ON A VIDAL VISIT

In SFO, believe it or not, some gays are native to the City. One third-generation gay man centers himself against the gay immigrant madness. He shuns motorcycle christenings, tricycle races, bedraggled empresses, and full-moon bar promo parties. He owns no albums by Donna Summer. He meditates. He refuses to do to himself gay illnesses with symptoms like an RCA Colortrak TV commercial: "My eyes are yellow, my urine's brown, my shit is white." In SFO, love is always chancey. But better a positive visit to the clinic than never to have loved at all.

OUTER SPACE

"Maybe we gays are a religion," he says. "More likely, the difference between straight and gay is simple. Straight people are the real earthlings. Gay people are just dropped down on

this planet for a visit. That's why we seem alien. Another difference is straight people don't stand you up for dinner."

He looks down at his vintage Earth Shoes.

"With all this religion and politics, I don't know how long we can hang around on Castro singing some gay national anthem like 'Over the Rainbow.' Gay surveillance squads on Folsom? Gay deputy sheriffs? Bryant? Briggs? Shit! I can't wait till we all fly back to Alpha Centauri."

Just like the last reel of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Meanwhile, in SFO, without peccs you're dead. © 1978, 2003 Jack Fritscher