

SF Eagle poster design from 1981 by Uyvari.

ARTS + CULTURE NIGHTLIFE

Making gay leather parties sleazy-fun again

By MARKE B. FEBRUARY 28, 2018

NIGHTLIFE Two of the best parties of the last year pulled off a gay miracle: They combined classic, raw sexuality straight out of the '70s with forward-thinking music. It was like stepping into a time capsule that turned into a spaceship that turned into an orgy. Transformational!

Both parties were thrown by a new crew called **Mr. Drummer 1979**—a reference to classic gay leather scene magazine *Drummer*, based in San Francisco for much of its 24-year existence and once edited by renowned writer Jack Fritscher, who now maintains the **Drummer Archives**. (The magazine was known for its competitive pageants around the country; the Mister Drummer 1979 mascot is **a toothsome hunk named Mike Glassman, who led a vibrant life**, and died of AIDS in 1993.)

The Mister Drummer 1979 parties aim to revive the vibe of historic local leather bars. The first two explicitly commemorated lusty, long-gone SF bars **the Tool Box** and **Febe's**, even printing

retro logo t-shirts for the occasion. “We wanted to recreate old school cruise bar environments while simultaneously celebrating iconic institutions,” DJ Matthew Paul, part of the crew founded by his friend Nick Wafle, told me. “It’s time to make leather fun, sleazy, and relevant again!”



An Eagle Sunday Beer Bust moment captured by photographer Doug Ischar

These parties aren’t the first to model themselves on filthier-than-thou bacchanal of SF in its Folsom Street **Miracle Mile** heyday. DJ Bus Station John’s Thursday weekly **Tubesteak Connection** plays underground disco and Hi-NRG from the time and wraps everything in a retro-porno vibe—it’s now **going on its 14th year** at Aunt Charlie’s in the Tenderloin—and he also spins the classics third Sundays at Disco Daddy, the Eagle’s first-ever tea dance. **Honey Soundsystem** has also feted the music and vibe of that far-off time, with parties that feature vintage porn soundtracks in legendary locations. **The monthly Go Bang parties at the Stud** delve into the gay disco vibe, too, with special guests from the heyday of bathhouses and all-nighters.

But Mister Drummer 1979 is the first to exclusively concentrate on the leather theme, and almost all traces of vintage camp have been subsumed in the sweaty embrace of hard looks and hot muscle. Some of the dudes there are tanks, straight out of the stuck-together pages of a Tom

of Finland calendar. A leather dress code is strongly encouraged, as is making out with as many men as you can on the dance floor.

Don't be frightened, be titillated, a little curious even. Whereas the macho seriousness of original leather bar scene could be a turn-off for more playful-minded folks like myself, these parties are full of conviviality—almost relief, really, at the option of being able to come together in a steamy, red-lit atmosphere full of harnesses and chaps that weren't just purchased on the fly for Folsom Street Fair trendiness. There's also the music: While there are occasional winks to the past, the DJs utilize contemporary techno and synth music to whip up a heady eroticism that wouldn't be out of place in Berlin's notorious sex-dungeon **Laboratory**.

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(I would also add here that now that macho conformity isn't the only option in gay bars, thanks to a vibrant and femme-positive queer underground scene, I don't feel the toxicity in the air I used to at such gatherings.)



During the AIDS crisis (and continuing today) the Eagle Sunday Beer Bust raised money and offered solace. Photo by Doug Ischar.

On Fri/2, Mister Drummer 1979 pays tribute to a bar that's still in existence: the Eagle. “We were inspired to celebrate the Eagle because it’s a legendary SF institution; from leather to biker and even punk culture, the SF Eagle has been a haven for outsider communities,” Paul told me.

The Eagle itself, the real one down in SoMa, opened in 1981 as a leather bar (one of many called the Eagle in various cities, signaling a safe haven for gay men). Over the years it transformed into more of a biker hangout that hosted packed Sunday beer busts for charity, closed for a spell in the early 2010s, **reopened with community help and new owners in 2012**, and now caters to a more dance party-oriented crowd—although there are still plenty of rough characters, cigar smoke, and hot trade.

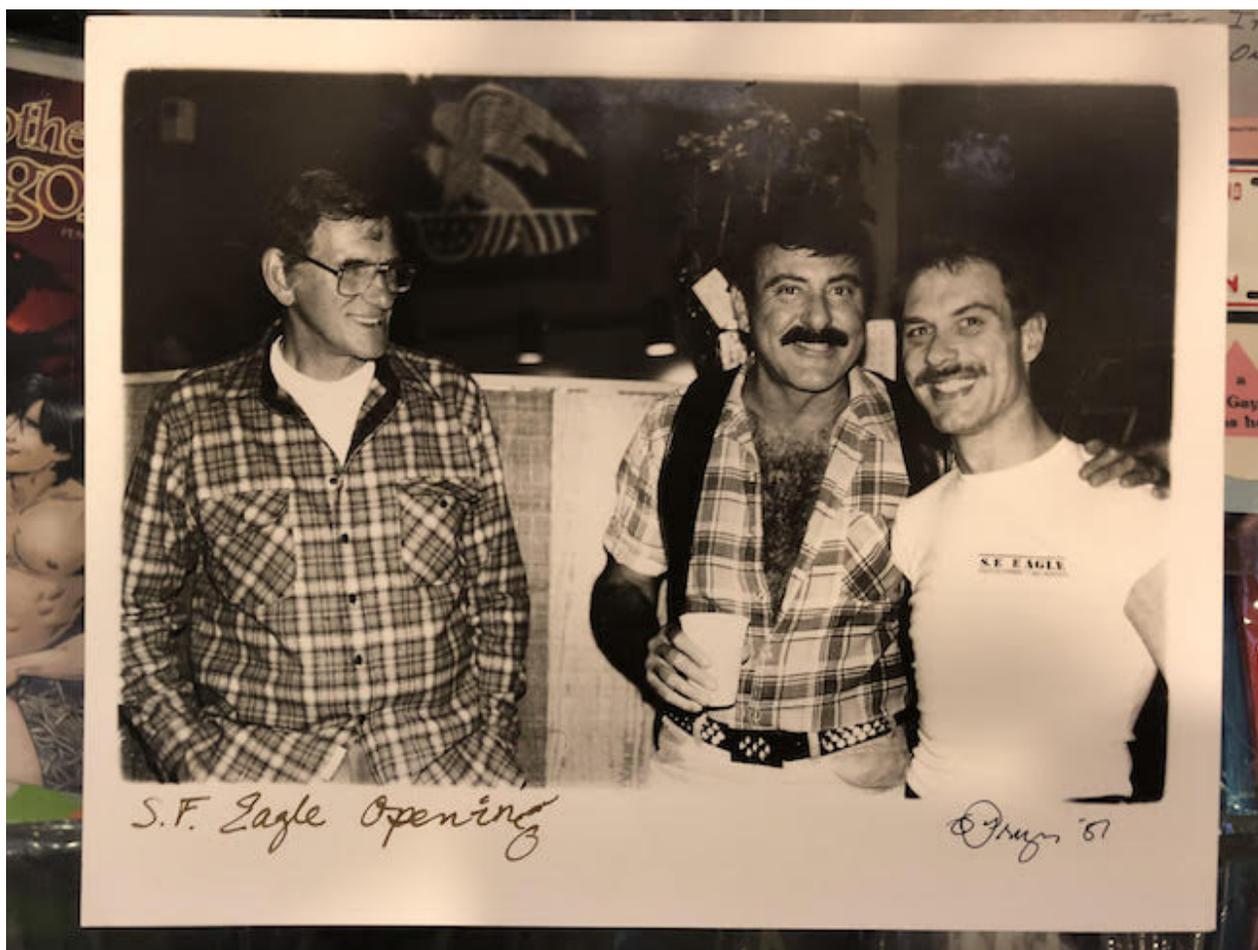
Paul introduced me to the original Eagle manager, Patrick Batt, who moved here specifically to help open the Eagle. Patrick own the **Auto Erotica** store, an upstairs wonderland in the Castro, which has transformed from “just another Castro-strip dildo and lube store” into **a palace of vintage gay porn and retro homo-culture memorabilia**.

Auto Erotica is glorious, go there, buy stuff. It’s full of tasty memorabilia from the golden age of gay media, including stacks of “one-hander” books and bin upon bin of magazines like

Mandate, Colt, BlueBoy, and, yes, Drummer. (Batt told me a 23-year-old customer recently told him this was his first time holding a gay porn magazine in his hands, which made me feel like Methuselah.)

View treasures like an original poster from the Lion Pub poster, **SF's first preppy gay "fern bar" from the 1970s** that transformed into a drum 'n bass music hangout in the 2000s, and has now just hit the market as a single family home **for almost \$6 million dollars**. Gaze upon tantalizing VHS cassettes that will have you plotting to rescue your grandparents' old player from their basement storage.

Owner Patrick was a successful bar manager in Chicago—he ran leather classic Gold Coast—and was moved out here by Eagle owner Bob Damron, creator of the legendary (and, pre-Internet, essential) **Damron Guides** for gay travelers, to give the fledgling leather bar some polish and shine, and to help distinguish it from its many competitors.



The Eagle opening party in 1980: Owner Bob Damron (center) with manager Patrick Batt (right)

Batt made it only a few months into the bar's life until he was quite literally canned. "I was from the Midwest, and didn't know there was a distinct West Coast gay bar culture," he told me. "One of the biggest mistakes I made was stocking the bar with beer in cans. I had no idea that

people here would get so angry about that. People were slamming the cans back on the bar when they were served, yelling ‘What the hell is this?’” But we were locked into a distributor and we couldn’t change to bottles quickly enough. So the Eagle had to actually close for a time while we fixed it. And then I was let go.”

Batt described the SF gay bar scene of the time as “exactly what you’ve heard about it, wild and full of bars and men. Everybody had their little gimmick to distinguish themselves, but it didn’t seem very competitive at the time because there was so much going on.”

Batt went on to work for *Drummer*, in its mail order distribution department (back then you had to send away to San Francisco for sex toys and porn mags in most part of the country), before breaking off and starting his own company, Mercury Mail Order. Mercury’s dildo and lube storage facility became the original Auto Erotica storefront in the late ’80s. And now Auto Erotica sells old *Drummers* and ’70s gay bar memorabilia. Truly, the Circle of Gay Life.

The Mister Drummer 1979 Eagle Tribute includes music by one of the stewards of **gay Hi-NRG pioneer Patrick Cowley’s legacy**, Josh Cheon, formerly of Honey Soundsystem. My fingers are crossed that there will be a retro logo t-shirt available as well. In any case, you will dance, your chaps will squeak, and everybody will probably get laid.

MISTER DRUMMER 1979: A TRIBUTE TO THE EAGLE

Fri/2, 9pm-2am, \$10

Eagle, SF.

[More info here.](#)