

17

**COMING OUT IN 1950s LOS ANGELES
THREE MONTHS OLDER THAN JAMES DEAN
CRUISING THAT FAMOUS L.A. GAS STATION
FOR SEX**

Larry was my platonic friend for almost forty years, and for all his gruff demeanor, he was so alive and kicking and contrary he was always interesting. He was a contentious West Hollywood superstar whom friends dealt with, and fans adored. Mindful of his public image, and constantly in search of an author head-shot that matched his idea of himself, he drove from Los Angeles to my home near San Francisco in 1995 and asked me to shoot him in a series of pictures, with and without his newest Doberman named “Mueller.”

Thirteen years later, during the last desperate spring of his life, he insisted he needed a new author photo so that Mark could re-start his website for him after he had let his ownership of his original domain name lapse. He also feared prosecution from new witch-hunt rulings from the U.S. Attorney General designed to cripple photographers who were suddenly required to have at least two proofs of identification plus a witnessed release to prove their models’ ages. Following the former protocols, he had no more on file for his archive of photos than a signed model release. It also depressed him that the internet claim-jumper who had bought LarryTownsend.com would not sell it back to him, he said, for less than a king’s ransom. When his new head-shot by an LA photographer arrived in Mark’s email, Larry wanted to Photoshop the truth of the original image. In Hollywood where the close-up is everything, and Hurrell lighting is something, he looked in the mirror of the photo and saw a vulnerable old man.

In 1996, when Larry asked me to write an “Introduction” to the forthcoming “Silver Anniversary Edition” of his *Leatherman’s Handbook*, I profiled him with the essay, “Leather Dolce Vita, Pop Culture, and the Prime of Mr. Larry Townsend.” The next year working together, we won the 1997 National Small Press Book Award for Erotica for the S&M anthology I wrote and he published: *Rainbow County and Other Stories*. Linguistically, he was one of the earliest leather authors coining portmanteau keywords tying *leather* and *sex* and *men* together to form the standard vocabulary of *leathersex* and *leathermen*.

Miffed at the queenstream’s relentless civil war of disinformation against leather males, including that which would become a kind of alleged institutional misandry at *The Advocate*, he continued to call out politically-correct leather-haters as he had in his purposeful opening paragraph in his own 1972 “Introduction” to *The Leatherman’s Handbook*:

There have been many books printed over the last few years dealing with various aspects of homosexual behavior and lifestyle. In all of these the leatherman is constantly neglected—neglected or ridiculed by the fluff or the “straight” reporter who wrote the book. In reading these previous efforts...I have been more than a little annoyed. So have many of my fellow leather people.

There is a pop-culture timeline for the always sassy man born during the Depression, a generation before the post-war baby boom which became what publisher Dave Rhodes dubbed the “Leather Boom” of twentysomethings who came out into their gay-male gender identity in the 1970s. In degrees of separation, Larry was only three months older than James Dean who in the 1950s shared the screen with Elizabeth Taylor who shared the screen with Montgomery Clift who shared “that lover” with Larry.

Cruising LA streets and freeways in the 1950s, driving the circuit that locals had called “the Run” since World War I, Larry knew a thing or two about Scotty Bowers’ Richfield gas station at 5777 Hollywood Boulevard with its drive-in sex service to the stars, including Monty Clift. Its dynamic fascinated Alfred

Kinsey who once spent a week observing the action for *The Kinsey Report* (1948). Larry acknowledged in *The Leatherman's Handbook* that the toilet for Cinema, the leather bar where he officially came out at twenty-five, was not in the tiny Cinema building, but was next door in the adjoining gas station.

Saying in his lovely requiem for Cinema that he “was just old enough to get in,” he mis-remembered, I think, the actual location of that pre-historic leather bar. He recalled it being on Santa Monica Boulevard when it was likely, because of archival evidence and testimony from original Satyrs interviewed about their favorite bar by Kate Kraft at Yale, on the corner of Melrose Avenue and Gower. Having worked with several of his manuscripts over the years, I know he was no more a proofreader of his own texts than he was a fact-checker. Everything he self-published was a first draft written off the top of his head. He wrote: “The john [for Cinema] was outside in the gas station.” I’m no Hollywood detective able to solve this mystery, but how many bars near sex-tolerant filling stations could there be in that neighborhood? He dropped a clue in 1972 when he wrote: “The site [of Cinema] is now some kind of tire repair shop.” Gas? Tires? It all kind of fits the style around that corner location.

In 1965, when Larry was thirty-five, Scotty’s Richfield Station closed to become Christie’s Richfield which in 1973 became the Hollywood Arco Station. For fans of Stuart Timmon’s WEHO Walking Tours, urban renewal replaced that final third Arco at 5777 Hollywood Boulevard with Fire Station 82 in 2010. Was it close to Cinema? At the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California, I found but one lonely listing for Cinema bar. Logged in as “1960,” it was a matchbook printed discreetly with two code words, *Cinema* and *Melrose*, with no street number. At his urging, Dave Rhodes and I theorized from the keyword *Melrose* and from Satyrs history that the long-lost Cinema bar was likely founded around 1953 at what became a perpetual gay-bar legacy address, 5574 Melrose at Gower, and was, like as not, the world’s first leather bar.

It was, of course, “very Larry” that he would come out in 1955 at the very model of a modern major leather bar. As a pioneer living inside leather history, he had the luck, the knack, and the

talent of a writer in the right place at the right time. The way he studied books on sadomasochism he studied leather life at the foundational Cinema which he described in his 1972 *Handbook* as the platonic ideal of a leather bar. It gave him ideas, credentials, and hands-on experience while he hung out with the first generation of post-war gay bikers whose vintage faces, voices, aura, and fuckery can be seen on YouTube in the documentary *Original Pride: The Satyrs Motorcycle Club* (2005).

As an eyewitness participant in our leather roots, Larry, like *Drummer*, helped create the very leather culture he reported on. In 1969, the changling bar first anchored at that iconic Melrose address became the Arena until 1973 when it became Griff's (owned by a Satyr) where in 1976 Larry attended the first known leather wedding whose two grooms *Drummer* then featured kissing on the cover of issue seven.

Sorting history, of course, is all *Rashomon*; but the historically important one-story brick-and-mortar building that may have been Cinema at 5574 Melrose, located next door to an autobody shop (with its toilet), was a five-minute drive from Scotty's gas station at 5777 Hollywood Boulevard. If I were a Hollywood screenwriter mulling this mystery of 1950s leathermen cruising the gayborhood, I'd conflate all these mashed gay *Brigadoon* addresses. Where else but at Scotty's Richfield would a young Larry living in a new tract house in the San Fernando Valley in the 1950s have met Monty Clift?

Larry was a proper upstart rebel with a cause, romancing the Hollywood-and-Vine charisma of Marlon Brando whose blue-collar and rough-trade sex appeal in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *The Wild One* (1953) was queering the Hells Angels outlaw-biker scene swarming the Sunset Strip—confusing the LAPD who couldn't keep straight which manly leather riders were fags. Midcentury LA roared with “gay bike gangs” like the Satyrs (1954) and the Oedipus (1958) motorcycle clubs. These men grew up masturbating to the rough sex in straight men's-adventure magazines like *Argosy*, *Saga*, and *Easyriders* that inspired the gay men's adventure-magazine *Drummer*. The first gay easy riders picked bad-boy rebel names. Satyrs were lusty half-beast gods. Oedipus was a motherfucker. Gunning two-thousand pounds of

hot steel throbbing between their legs, the gay leathermen rode their Harley hogs out nights in squadrons to city bars. On weekends, like the gay-orgy bikers partying in Kenneth Anger's iconic *Scorpio Rising* (1963), they roared down the freeways to tribal bike runs at wilderness campgrounds which Larry described in detail in the *Handbook*, Chapter 13. In Chapter 8, "The Bike and Its Owner," he admitted he once bought a motorcycle, but sold it because it was difficult to repair and he didn't think it was safe to drive in LA traffic and put his sex life on the line in a crippling accident.

Instead, he drove his Corvette out at nights, stopping to buy little tin boxes of yellow-mesh amyl nitrite poppers at drugstores like Schwab's on Sunset Boulevard, cruising Pershing Square for Marines who, if interested and interesting enough after a drink at the Biltmore Hotel, he brought back to that small starter house he had bought on the G.I. Bill out in the Valley. He wrote that leathermen should prioritize buying their own homes for the sake of the privacy needed around S&M action. Was there any homage to Brando in the name of the last Doberman he bought just months before he died? He called the pup "Brandon." Jeanne Barney quipped in an email:

He should have named it "Brandy"...so when he ran down the street chasing the runaway dog, he could yell...!

From the 1950s, Larry kept up with gay popular culture in the La-La-Land he loved, making late-evening pit stops at the famous and cruisy Universal News Stand, now gone with the wind, where we sometimes browsed magazines together at the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and 1655 N. Las Palmas. It was a kind of Hollywood version of the outdoor bookstalls, the *bouquinistes*, lined up along the Seine in front of Notre Dame. With its own outdoor magazine racks stretched as long as five parked cars, it was open 24 hours—a Technicolor scene by day and a film noir by night—under a blue awning with white stripes covering thousands of brightly lit international magazines and periodicals inviting leisurely browsing and cruising and knuckle-bumping on

the narrow Las Palmas sidewalk. Fred Halsted included footage of it in *LA Plays Itself*.

In among the industry folk and movie stars who pulled up to the street curb to buy *Variety* and newspapers from their hometowns, Larry early on discovered, next to Bob Mizer's self-published *Physique Pictorial* (founded 1951) two new little gay physique and leather magazines, *Mars* and *Triumph* (founded 1962), both self-published by his contemporary, and future friend, Chicago leather tycoon Chuck Renslow, and his lover, the artist Etienne, of Kris Studio whose homomasculine photography, drawings, and mail-order business, like Mizer's Athletic Model Guild mail-order studio in LA, lit a lightbulb over his head.

These first owners of the first gay small businesses that weren't bars, particularly in grass-roots mail-order, created the first nation-wide gay web. They pioneered a communications network of political and erotic writing, art, and photography that educated urban and rural readers about gay liberation, pop-culture entertainment, and sex styles while inviting the readers to express themselves through letters to the editor, and to hook up through Personal Ads describing who they were and what they wanted so they could meet. Paying twenty-five cents a word, they wrote in S&M shorthand. "GWM bottom seeks masc GBM top for TT, WS, VA, and FF. No fats, femmes, phonies." Translated, that means "Gay white male slave seeks masculine gay Black male master for tit torture, water sports, verbal abuse, and fist-fucking."

As a psychologist seizing the moment, Larry was a leather-identity author staking out and mapping gender legitimacy for leathersmen un-closeting their virilized homomasculine selves in a Stonewall culture of fey liberation resisting their existence. The novelist whose social actions spoke even louder than his erotic words got up from his desk and practiced his midcentury community spirit in his volunteer work as an activist Democrat and as the founding president of the Hollywood Hills Democratic Club. He also served on the board of the Whitman-Radclyffe Foundation when gay Californians first set about erecting a united political and philosophical platform.