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MARCH 2020 • ISSUE 305 • AMERICA'S AIDS MAGAZINE

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for Our Equality •
Paul A. Aguilar Resists
"AIDS" Erasure •
Bruce Ward on
The Inheritance

plus

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The Legendary Writer, Scholar &
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Some Life to Remember

Writer Jack Fritscher Talks Gay Liberation,
Robert Mapplethorpe, the Advent of AIDS, and
the Course of Gay Life over the Last Fifty Years

by Lester Strong

Photographed Exclusively for A&U by Michael Kerner Photography





Jack and Rosie

Jack Fritscher: writer; journalist; editor; novelist; professor; film (video) maker; photographer; gay rights, AIDS, and leather culture activist; former Catholic seminarian; ordained exorcist; historian; arts critic; archivist; pop culture scholar and founding member of the American Popular Culture Association....Along the way he received a PhD in literature from Loyola University Chicago, was a lover and close friend of renowned photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, met and later married his life partner Mark Hemry, lived through and survived physically intact the AIDS crisis, and was friends with gay writers, artists, and poets like Samuel Steward (aka Phil Andros), Tom of Finland, and Thom Gunn.

Fritscher has worn many hats in the course of his life and career, and at eighty years old that career hasn't stopped yet. But to start at the beginning:

Born on June 20, 1939, in Jacksonville, Illinois, but reared in Peoria, Fritscher's family was Catholic. "Groomed from birth to be a priest," he said when interviewed for this article, "I felt a call to study for the priesthood, hidden away from 1953 to 1964 at the Pontifical College Josephinum [located in Columbus, Ohio], which is directly subject to the Pope." However, his life did not exactly follow the way he and his family originally laid out for him. "I didn't see myself as a priest living in a rich rectory with servants," he explained. "I saw myself as one of the French worker priests who has a job and lives on his own simply ministering to people. As a seminarian, tutored by Saul Alinsky [influential American community organizer; 1909-1972], I worked and lived the long, hot summer of 1962 in the black community at 63rd and Cottage Grove going door-to-door in the same South Side of Chicago in which Barack Obama worked as a community organizer twenty-five years later. It's true, I haven't become a priest. I was called to the old-school Roman Catholic Church that disappeared with the Vatican Council in 1961, which threw the Church into the turmoil we see today. I couldn't promise permanent vows of celibacy and obedience to an institution having mood swings about its identity. Instead of becoming the editor of a Catholic newspaper, I've become a teacher and writer whose parish ministry is gay culture."

Fritscher may not have become a priest, but his Catholic education, which involved studies in philosophy, sociology, and theology, led him toward an interest in the occult. In his own words: "We studied the history of the protagonist God. And his antagonist Devil. So to give the Devil his due, I developed a journalist's interest in the occult because people are more superstitious than they are religious. So during the Sixties sexual revolution and the Catholic Church's Vatican Council revolution, it seemed worthwhile

to research witchcraft as another evolving theology in American pop culture." Interviewing witches across what he labeled the "sexual spectrum," as well as what might be called the "theological spectrum," in 1972 he published a book titled *Popular Witchcraft*, which he described as "about the popular culture of American sorcery." Again Fritscher's words: "I am not a Satanist. I'm a journalist. I'm also a magician. As an erotic writer, I conjure sex magic to seduce readers into transformative orgasm by casting the 'spell' of words into erotic runes that burn the reader down."

An erotic writer. After a stint in the 1960s as a tenured college professor at Western Michigan University, located in Kalamazoo, he moved to San Francisco, where he had already established a professional presence in his off-time from teaching duties in Michigan. Once in California permanently, he moved full time into writing and editing on gay themes.

As portrayed in Fritscher's *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*, the 1970s for gay men was one long hedonistic excursion into sex, drugs, and partying, as they celebrated the loosening of social and legal penalties against being gay following the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, with the fun being interspersed by political demonstrations in favor of gay rights initiatives and against the homophobic backlash spear-headed by the likes of Christian fundamentalist singer Anita Bryant in Florida and conservative politician John Briggs in California.

The celebratory atmosphere, of course, came to an end in the 1980s with the advent of AIDS. As Fritscher described it in the interview: "On May 11, 1982, gay character and culture changed. The glorious post-Stonewall celebration of the 1970s that wouldn't quit finally ended. I was Manager of Marketing Publications and PR at an engineering firm in Oakland and, that morning sipping coffee at my desk, I noticed a [San Francisco] *Chronicle* article about a gay disease. . . . The threat was more real than Bryant and Briggs and the Moral Majority who prayed for a plague on us. Were we all going to die?"

At the time, Fritscher was well into writing his novel *Some Dance to Remember*. He had originally conceived it as a "gay pop-culture comedy of the first decade of gay lib on Castro and Folsom streets." But he quickly realized that what he called his "little comedy of manners" had to be re-cast "against a larger existential theme." As a result, "*Some Dance* became an eyewitness story capturing the almost play-by-play unique moment AIDS arrived and changed how we looked at each other's faces, bodies, and actions."

For many gay men, including Jack Fritscher, the AIDS crisis also changed their behavior, both sexual and otherwise. Even before AIDS, Fritscher began raising alarms about the state of gay men's health: "In the 1970s when we all traveled as sex tourists on planes flying the gay Bermuda triangle of San Francisco, New York, and L.A., I began noticing health problems escalating in our state of play. No one wants to play Cassandra, but as the responsible editor-in-chief of *Drummer* [California-based magazine oriented toward leather culture], I broke the taboo about never mentioning sex diseases in an erotic entertainment magazine and began writing editorials about sexual hygiene and self-care because I thought a sex magazine the perfect forum to promote a change in sexual behavior. At the time, it seemed to me that too many gay men were sick too much too often from too many different things. I wanted *Drummer* to address the problems to raise awareness."

The question was: Would the readers of *Drummer* and friends Fritscher talked to about the problem take the warning seriously? At least one person did not. According to Fritscher: "In late 1979, I warned Robert Mapplethorpe that we all had to clean up our act because, as I told him, 'I'm tired of everybody always being sick with hepatitis and amoebiasis and clap and crabs and you name it.' Robert, the Manhattanite, giggled at me, the health nut who got a gamma globulin shot every six weeks and who always took egg and orange-juice protein shakes in a thermos for nutrition during marathon nights at the baths. His reply: 'Oh, Jack, you are so California.'"

Ten years later, in 1989, Mapplethorpe died of AIDS-related causes. It was Fritscher, taking his own warnings seriously, who remained HIV-nega-

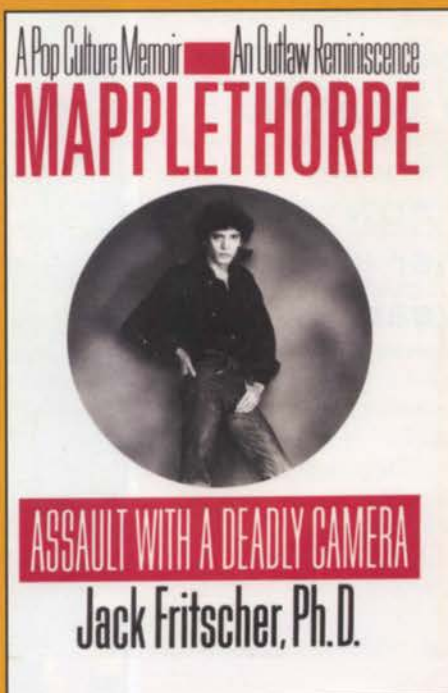
tive and survived the plague.

Which brings us to the relationship between Fritscher and Mapplethorpe. The two met around Halloween in 1977. "Robert flew to my desk at *Drummer* to show me his portfolio. I immediately hired him to shoot a color cover portrait, and later published nine of his photos. My international leather magazine needed his homomascuine photos of leathermen as urgently as he needed our 40,000 subscribers to grow his fan base when people still thought his last name rhymed with 'apple' rather than 'May Pole.' With a speed fast even in the 1970s, we liked each other instantly and durably for the rest of his life. Our bromance was a bicoastal affair of the traveling kind. We commuted on airplanes between San Francisco and New York. We ran up immense telephone bills with late-night sex calls and talk about life. He was an artist deeply embedded in Catholic ritual and imagery who cast me as a sort of priestly confessor."

However, it was more than a "bromance" between the two. According to Fritscher, they were "chronologically correct lovers" during the years 1977-1980, after which they "shifted to an abiding friendship over matters of hygiene. Our one and only argument was about hygiene, but it was the beginning of the end of our sex trips."

The AIDS crisis for Fritscher encompassed more than the death of just one lover and friend, no matter how intense the feelings between them were or how famous the person was. "At the start of the epidemic we thought we all were going to die because it would be three years of intense stress before any AIDS test arrived to help navigate the nightmare. Every morning friends would call me and tally up who was sick or dead, and every day I would keep on writing *Some Dance to Remember* in tears. So many friends died quickly. Sex tourism stopped. Everyone's Rolodex turned into the Book of the Dead. Back then, Mark Hemry and I had some extra housing space that we turned into a hospice for a family to live with their son, the media co-chair of San Francisco Pride, who suffered and died there."

Fritscher met Mark Hemry near the end of his love affair with Mapplethorpe. "We met on May 22, 1979, to be exact," he recounted, "around twilight, under the bright marquee of the Castro Theater during a demonstration celebrating the first postmortem birthday of Harvey Milk [first elected gay San Francisco Supervisor, slain by fellow Supervisor Dan White on November 27, 1978]. It was a tense atmosphere as thousands of gay folk crowded the street fearful there would be a repeat of the night before when police had burst into a gay bar and



"I asked Mark to come home with me, but he said he couldn't because he had to study for a molecular genetics exam. I said: 'I've been turned down before, but that's the greatest line ever. I'm a teacher. I get it.' When he graduated three weeks later, we celebrated together, and have now been together forty years."

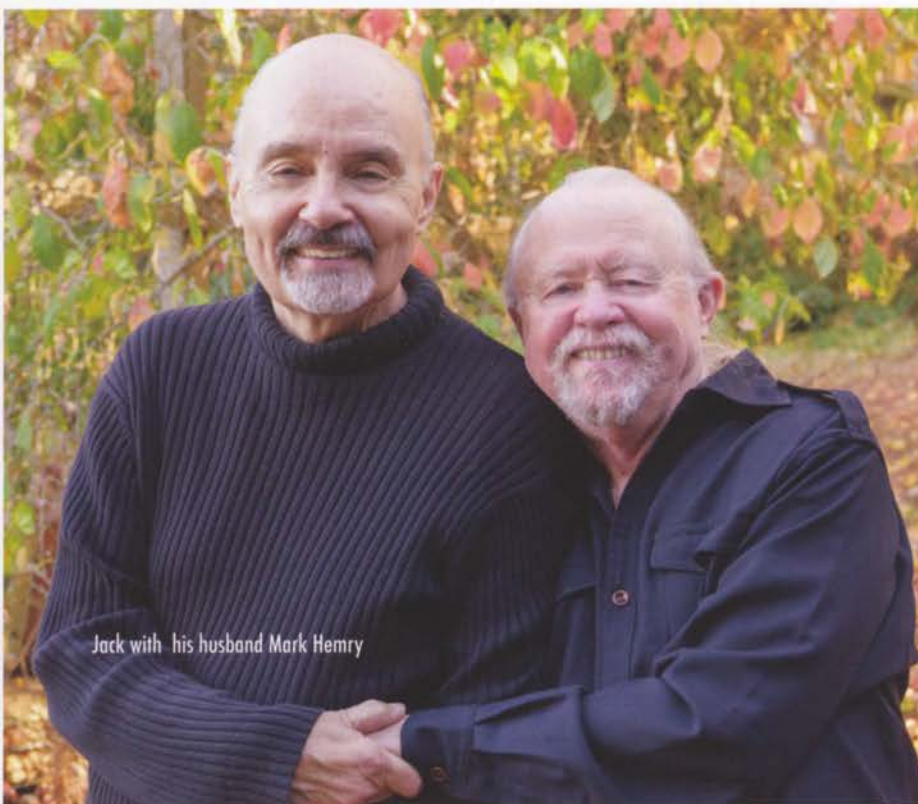
began beating patrons."

He continued: "I asked Mark to come home with me, but he said he couldn't because he had to study for a molecular genetics exam. I said: 'I've been turned down before, but that's the greatest line ever. I'm a teacher. I get it.' When he graduated three weeks later, we celebrated together, and have now been together forty years—half of my lifetime at age eighty and more than half of his. He's eleven years younger than me."

As already intimated, Fritscher and Hemry have been very active around AIDS. More about that later. But they were also active around another important and controversial issue: "In the 1980s," according to Fritscher, "we were politically active around gay marriage. We spent years creating a paper trail to boost government statistics proving there was a need and a call for gay marriage. We went through several domestic partner ceremonies in San Francisco, flew to Vermont the first day of Civil Unions, were married by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom in City Hall on Valentine's day with hundreds of other gay couples in the 2004 Winter of Love, drove to Vancouver the minute Canada approved gay marriage, and in 2008 became one of 16,000 [gay and lesbian] couples married in California before Proposition 8 slammed the window closed [until the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015 declared marriage equality the law of the land]. In the summer of 2009, we took two 'No on 8' lawn posters to Paris, where we carried them in the Pride Parade marching with Democrats Abroad to surprised and welcoming cheers of recognition by Parisians of our

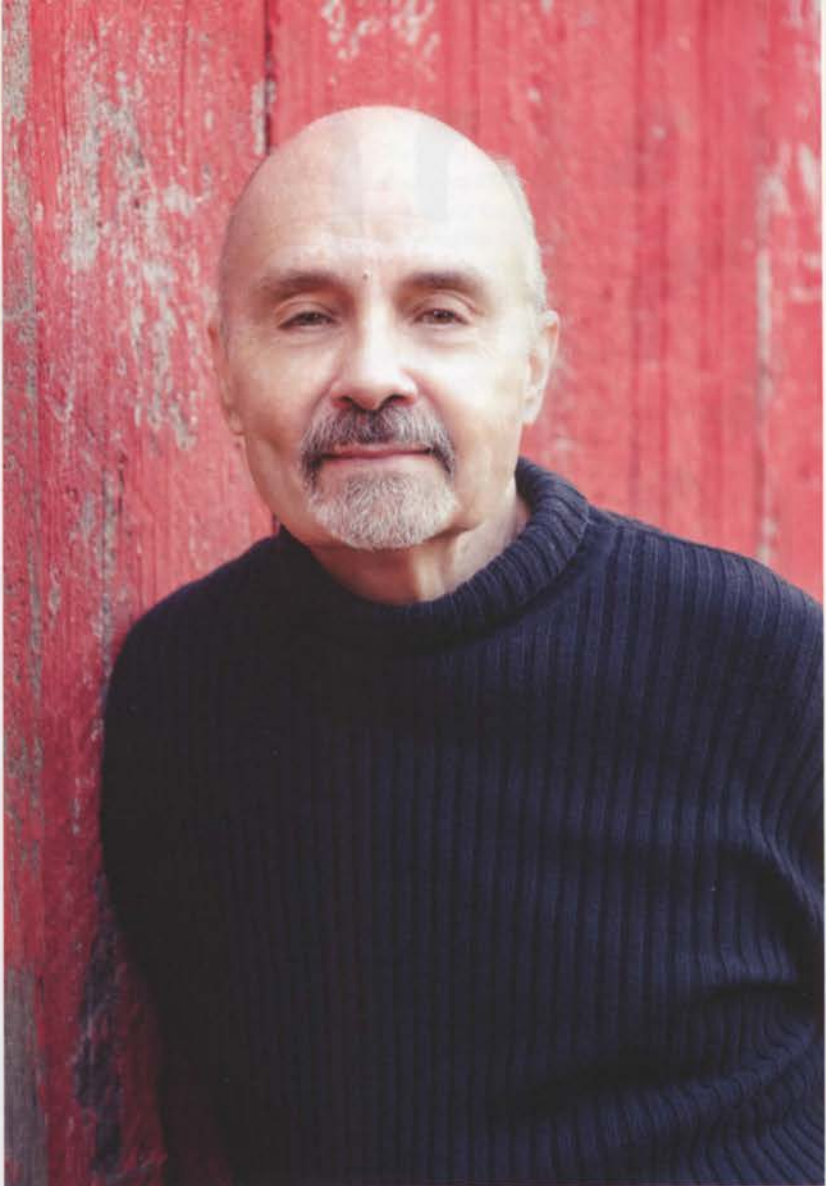
American struggle for marriage equality."

As important as the legalization of gay marriage is—and its importance can hardly be exaggerated—the main struggle for the LGBTQ population over the last forty years or so has arguably been about AIDS. In that regard, Fritscher's and Hemry's contributions have been immense, in several ways. For Fritscher himself, perhaps his earliest contribution was embodied in his novel *Some Dance to Remember*: "I book-ended the time frame significantly from 1970 to 1982 to dramatize how the way we lived in the golden age of liberation became the new way we had to be with the arrival of AIDS. One of my goals was to defend 1970s behavior from hysterics who began scape-goating liberated gay male sex as the cause of AIDS. Sex didn't cause AIDS. A virus did. In 1966, I'd written my PhD dissertation on eros and thanatos in the plays of Tennessee Williams, so I was schooled in the literature of sex and death. *Some Dance* is a memory novel balanced on the fulcrum of May 11, 1982, when I first learned of the disease. I took the title from lyrics in the best-selling album of the 1970s, the Eagles' *Hotel California*, which offered a lifestyle choice of affirmation or denial: 'Some dance to remember, some dance to forget.' Played constantly in bars, the album celebrated the coming of the 'new kid in town,' 'life in the fast lane,' and 'lines on the mirror.' That album became a soundtrack of gay life during the 1970s and continued as a soundtrack in the 1980s, when AIDS turned all gay male space into a viral *Hotel California* where 'you can check out at any time you



Jack with his husband Mark Hemry

"To be a functioning eyewitness to the face of AIDS, we shot many documentaries of street fairs, rallies, ordinary street life, and gay events to show how the disease was morphing the gay body, face, and 'look.'"



like, but you can never leave."

As editor-in-chief of *Drummer* magazine, he created a monthly column titled "Dr. Dick" with the help of Richard Hamilton, MD, who treated many gay men in the San Francisco area. It offered health advice from a doctor who, Fritscher noted, "did not shoot patients up instantly with antibiotics, which the the San Francisco Department of Public Health did to every gay man the minute he walked in the door. It's my opinion that those no-cost 1970s antibiotic shots may have had a lot to do with compromising the immune systems of very many San Franciscans."

In 1980, Mark Hemry and he started what Fritscher called "the passionate little zine *Man2Man Quarterly*." But they closed it down in 1982 the moment the AIDS plague hit the headlines, worried what the take-away might be from the personal ads the magazine ran, which became "disconcertingly dirty."

Another contribution by the two in regard to AIDS: In 1985 they founded their boutique studio Palm Drive Video with the dual purpose of entertaining buyers of the solo masturbation videos they produced "during the viral war" (Fritscher's words) with hot images of men they could identify with and promoting a completely safe type of sex that did not require the exchange of bodily fluids.

Still another contribution: "To be a functioning eyewitness to the face of AIDS, we shot many documentaries of street fairs, rallies, ordinary street life, and gay events to show how the disease was morphing the gay body, face, and 'look.'"

And still another contribution: "When the October 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed the *Drummer* office, I suddenly woke anew to the devastating effects of AIDS on the lives of friends, acquaintances, artists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, and ordinary guys, and began to record their stories, with permission, over the phone. Those recordings are being digitized, identified, and logged right now in the hope that one day they may be valuable to scholars interested in the voices of the first generation most devastated by AIDS."

Fritscher, it's clear, has created quite a legacy. How does he view that legacy himself? "I'm grateful that my sixty-two-year writing career brackets the AIDS emergency by chronicling the way we were in our joy before the plague, during the shocking first headlines about its arrival, and after we learned existential lessons about suffering, compassion, safe sex, acting up, and the problem of evil. I'd be over the moon if the voice in my writing was remembered as literary erotica that started in the head and worked its way down. Sex is the Universal Eternal and I hope I captured its frisson on the page so that a hundred years from now a lad can pick up one of my stories and I can reach out from the grave and make him think and cum, and in his seed be alive again."

For more information about Jack Fritscher and his work, log on to: jackfritscher.com

For more information about the photographer, visit: kernercreative.com

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