

SAM STEWARD

The Godfather of Homosurrealism

**Jack Sanders
Interviews
Jack Fritscher**

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Jack Sanders: You've mentioned that your longtime friend, the legendary artist, writer, and tattooist Sam Steward was a prototype of Homosurrealism.

Jack Fritscher: Absolutely. Sam Steward, who learned a thing or two from his friend Gertrude Stein, was a practicing homosurrealist. That term did not exist when I met him in 1969 when he was sixty and I was thirty, but he is an iconic avatar for homosurreal artists, writers, and photographers in the twenty-first century. My friend Justin Spring has written a powerful biography that was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2010. It's called "Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade." Almost forty years before, in 1972, I interviewed Sam and wrote about him in my 2008 book "Gay San Francisco." Here's a free live link to that: http://www.jackfritscher.com/PDF/Drummer/Vol%201/32_Etienne_Mar2008_PWeb.pdf

Jack Sanders: Let's play "Reader's Digest." Give us homosurrealists a crash course in Sam Steward—in terms of your relationship with him and, maybe, pair it with a guide to Justin Spring's book.

Jack Fritscher: Justin Spring, author of many books, has great credentials having written for "Artforum" magazine and international museum journals for thirty years. As a practicing homosurrealist, I appreciate the authenticity of his vivid biography which is a pitch-perfect portrait of Sam. Born in 1909, Sam defied the stress of the anti-gay century when owning one gay photograph meant jail. Raised by maiden aunts because his mother died young and his father was an opium addict, he dared live his wild outlaw life, and double-dared fate and the government by documenting his subversive sex and art adventures in his books, sex diaries (1924-1973), tattoo journals, and performance-art S&M films shot by his friend Dr. Kinsey at the Institute for Sex (1949-1956). Sam was a handsome aristocratic little banty of a man. He was more like

a butch Quentin Crisp than he was like his pen name and alter-ego “Phil Andros” who readers likened to drawings by Tom of Finland. Sam charmed Gertrude Stein, Jean Genet, James Dean, Kenneth Anger, Bobby Beausoleil, Robert Mapplethorpe, the Hells Angels, and me.

He was a polite Ohio boy, and sexually aggressive teenager, whose anxiety-driven life was an existential pile-on of family dysfunction, literary ambition, alcohol, celebrities, needles, speed, hustlers, censorship, inter-racial S&M, rage against ageing, and a soul shared with a cancerous unborn twin in his left testicle. Before Hitler invaded Poland, Gertrude Stein, mothering her “dear Sammy,” clucked about his lifestyle. She needn’t have worried. His international sexcapades fueled his extraordinary erotic esthetic. Alcohol, tobacco, speed, and sailors gave him plenty of drive for his writing and his Picasso-infused drawings and tattoos, even till his last days struggling to score barbiturates from his doctor. He died in his little cottage where he lived with his little dog in Berkeley, California, on New Year’s Eve, December 31, 1993.

Jack Sanders: So Sam and you were friends in San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s and Justin was in New York. How did Justin learn about Sam who was hardly known outside the Bay Area?



Jack Fritscher: Justin was seven years old when I was introduced to Sam in 1969. In 2001, eight years after Sam died, Justin was researching his book “Paul Cadmus: The Male Nude” when, just like in the movies, he stumbled across the “cold case” of Samuel Steward aka author/hustler “Phil Andros” aka tattooist “Phil Sparrow” stored in the attic of a pristine Arts and Crafts house in San Francisco. Cadmus and Sam had been friends. When that archive led Justin to my door, I was delighted that a noted next-gen biographer who was not part of the San Francisco leather scene was going to write a specific dedicated book I knew should be written but did not want to write myself because I was busy writing about more general gay history in which Sam was included but not the star. Justin’s critically acclaimed character study perfectly contextualizes Sam’s diaries, letters, and art work without morally judging or overpowering Sam’s outrageously risqué voice.

Jack Sanders: The objective eye of the younger East Coast critic. Different than the subjective eye of the older West Coast friend. That’s an

evolution of perspective. Perhaps like the changing perspectives in Homosurrealism itself.

Jack Fritscher: Exactly. At Stonewall, gay character changed. Reading “Secret Historian,” you see why it had to. And, why, if it hadn’t, we’d all still be in the closet.

Jack Sanders: So Sam danced on tables in Paris so we could too? Like at our “Homosurrealism 2019” exhibition at Les Souffleurs, 7 rue de la Verrerie?

Jack Fritscher: That's what pioneers do: prepare the way for the next generation. Sam was a bon-vivant bohemian swinger whose life, like Christopher Isherwood's, was a cabaret. He was a social climber climbing up and climbing down. Sunbathing in France in 1938 in the garden of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, dining in Paris at his favorite restaurant the Vagenende Brasserie still open at 142 Boulevard Saint Germain, helping Thornton Wilder write "Our Town," fleeing Nazis by ship, he was an ambitious boy from Ohio who knew how to sing for his supper at the tables of Stein-Toklas, Oscar Wilde's lover Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas whom he fucked when the young Bosie was a very old man, Thomas Mann, George Platt Lynes, Tennessee Williams, and, even, my lover Robert Mapplethorpe and me when Sam, a veteran of Stein's Salon, joined what he playfully dubbed when I was editor of "Drummer" magazine, the "Drummer Salon" which included the internationally respected poets Ronald Johnson and Thom Gunn who both knew their way around literature, art, hustlers, and S&M just like Sam.

Jack Sanders: So "Drummer" was...

Jack Fritscher: The "Homosurrealism" mag of its day.

Jack Sanders: Cool. Homosurrealism existed long before we gave it a name in our movement. So Sam liked "Drummer." Who did he meet in the Drummer Salon?

Jack Fritscher: Sam liked being published so he loved appearing three times in "Drummer" which came out monthly. I printed his cop-fetish story, "In a Pig's Ass," in "Drummer" 21 (March 1978). Just before that, something more important happened.

Jack Sanders: What was that?

Jack Fritscher: Maybe one of the more interesting nights in queer art history happened on February 9, 1978. In retrospect it was an epic night when artists who were about to become gay icons met for the first time. As the editor of "Drummer" privileged to publish all these men, I arranged a dinner party at 11 Pink Alley, the home of Catholic priest and leatherman Jim Kane who had introduced me to Sam in 1969. Ever the Francophile punster, Sam pronounced "Pink Alley" as "Pigalle."

My guests, who were all at least accidental homosurrealists, were "Drummer" contributors who had never before met each other. That was my job. They knew of each other by reputation only.

So I invited Sam living incognito in Berkeley; a very shy Tom of Finland and his lover Veli on Tom's first visit to America; "Drummer" art director and cartoonist, A. Jay; Oscar streaker Robert Opel, founder of San Francisco's first gay gallery Fey-Way Studio where he was murdered in 1979; and Robert Mapplethorpe with whom Sam shared a taste for kinky Polaroids and black men.

Around that divine supper table, I watched the stoned and depressed Sam, a graduate of Stein's "Charmed Circle," regain some joy in the convergence of the kind of shining company he had adored since his twenties at Gertrude's home in Bilignin where one night he opened the bathroom door and startled Gertrude who was standing nude in front of a mirror looking at the scars of her mastectomy which she had kept a secret. Sam was a diarist. What happened in Bilignin did not stay in Bilignin.



In 1977, he published his book, “Dear Sammy: Letters from Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.” He followed that in 1984 with his roman à clef, “Parisian Lives,” with names changed—particularly that of painter Sir Arthur Rose who was a Rose who was a Rose—to protect some famous friends and the hustlers who consensually abused them. So enamored was he of Gertrude and Alice who loved him back that he turned them into a pair of fictional detectives in his two mystery novels, “Murder Is Murder Is Murder (1985) and “The Caravaggio Shawl (1989).

Jack Sanders: Speaking of mysteries, I’ve heard that Sam sucked off Valentino, the biggest star in silent movies.

Jack Fritscher: Yes. Rudolph Valentino, America’s first Hollywood heart throb. In the Roaring Twenties Sam was a roaring teenager. The day after Sammy boy turned sixteen in 1925, as he told me on audiotape, he posed as a hotel bell boy and went into Valentino’s suite and blew him while with a tiny scissors he snipped bits of pubic hair which he kept enshrined in a gold reliquary for veneration in his home forever. Valentino died suddenly one year later and the women of the nation went mad with grief. What irony. Blowing Valentino. That’s when Sam’s writing, art career, and erotic documentation started. A lifetime hoard of gay treasures piled up in his Berkeley cottage, and then the Arts and Crafts attic of his executor, librarian Michael Williams.



Jack Sanders: Sam was masculine identified, right? He liked butch guys.

Jack Fritscher: In order to hunt your prey, you camouflage yourself to look and act like your prey. He was a performance artist. He smoked and drank and tattooed himself to disarm the rough-trade sailors and bikers he invited into the back room of his tattoo parlor. After he was beaten up for real and robbed a couple of times, and after the shopkeeper next door was shot and died in his arms, he closed the Oakland tattoo parlor doors in March 1970, just months after we met.

Jack Sanders: Yet he seems a man open to diversity. Not toxic. Not sexist. Not racist. He apparently cherished Gertrude Stein. What about her partner, Alice B. Toklas, and her famous recipe for hash brownies?

Jack Fritscher: Sam met Gertrude and Alice in 1932. After Gertrude died in 1946, Alice and Sam kept in touch with visits and letters until her death in 1967. Sam wasn’t into baking Alice’s brownies because he was more into liquor and barbiturates. Actually, Sam was very generous to friends. He was faithful to the women in his life; he admired lesbians like

Gertrude and Alice; and he courted black, Latino, and straight men. He chased Gide and Genet, fucked Gide’s young Arab lover, ran from the existential novelist James Purdy who chronicled the 1930s Chicago sex scene, balled Rock Hudson, tattooed James Dean with a black panther, hid the stolen reels of the rough-cut of Kenneth Anger’s film “Lucifer Rising” in his cottage walls, and wrote two screenplays, “Seven in the Barn” and another based on his novel “\$tud,” for San Francisco filmmaker and male madam J. Brian

Donahue who supplied him with gentleman callers from his famous stable of pornstar hustlers.

His sex-tourist diaries of San Francisco (1953-1954), written in his forties, give eyewitness to bars, baths, and sailor sex so wild at the Embarcadero YMCA he was banned from Y's everywhere in the world. Now that's an award better than an Oscar, an Emmy, and a Tony wrapped in a Pulitzer.

He did thousands of homosurrealist etchings and drawings such as: "Standing man with leather jacket and seated male nude, gouache on board (10" x 15") signed "Sam Steward" on verso and dated "5-VII-53" along with penciled notations ("Embarcadero").

Jack Sanders: So he was raised in Ohio, traveled in Europe, taught and tattooed in Chicago, tattooed in Oakland, and retired to Berkeley...

Jack Fritscher: ...where at his home he had a lot of "Doorbell Trade," young men, married and single on the down-low, who heard on the grapevine it was okay to show up anytime 24/7 on his porch without calling ahead. Sam always depended on the cockiness of strangers. As a popular university professor and zealous masochist (1930s-1993), he willingly paid to worship and service stud athletes, lawmen, and sadistic sailors. I gave him several police and deputy uniform patches to add to his big collection of patches he cadged from his lawmen who were his main fetish.

To get his hot hands on hot young skin he taught himself tattooing and, while still teaching at Depaul University, opened "Phil's Tattoo Joynt" (1956-1963) in a skid-row Chicago arcade with "coin-operated sailors" from the nearby Great Lakes Naval Training Station whom he paid with free tattoos and thousands of dollars at three bucks a pop. Wrongly accused of child murders by a dragnet of weird uptight citizens who confused the "unsavory clientele" around his South State Street tattoo parlor with sex and violence, he fled west to Oakland opening his "Anchor Tattoo Shop" (1964-1970) where the Hells Angels adopted him, and he tattooed them and their president Sonny Barger. I asked him, "Why Oakland? Why not San Francisco." He said, "Oakland is only fifteen minutes from the Naval Air Station in Alameda with thousands of sailors and Marines."

Jack Sanders: What was his Chicago life? And his life with America's best-known leather entrepreneur, Chuck Renslow, the great 1950s beefcake and physique photographer.

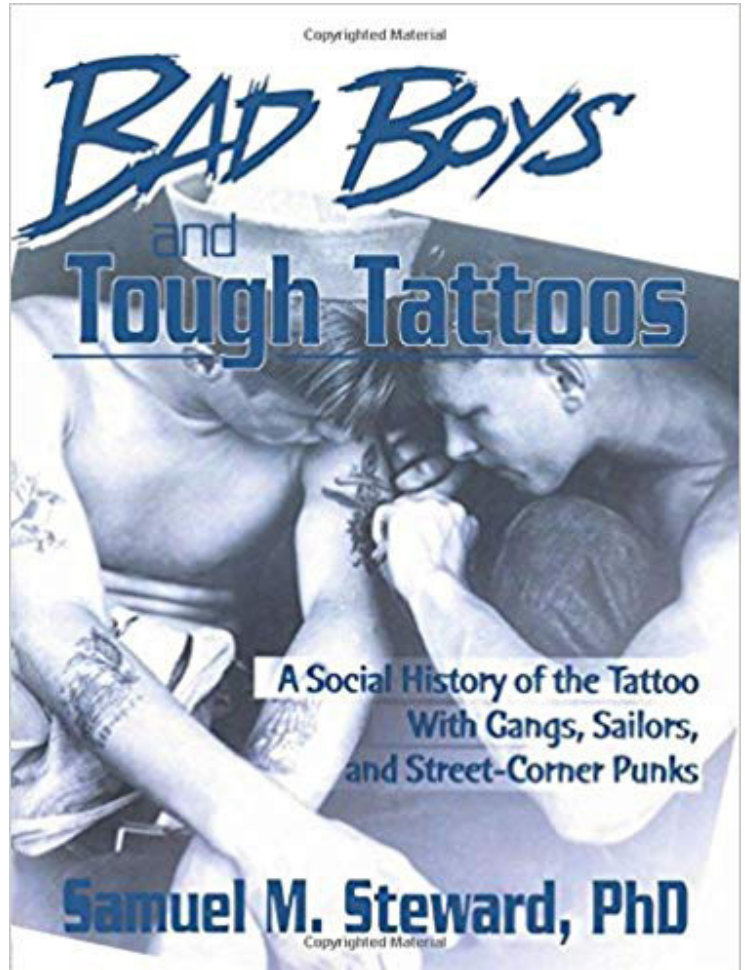
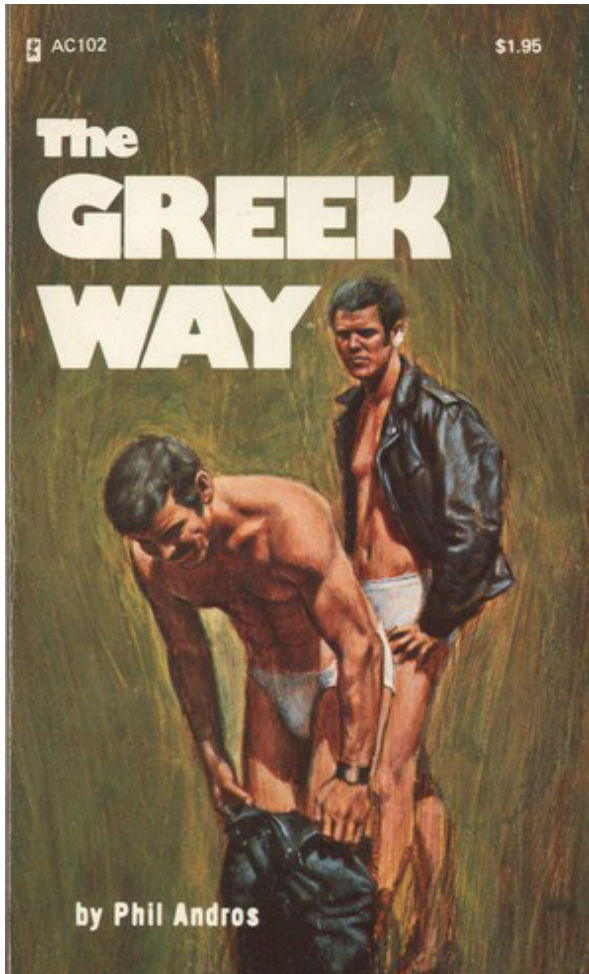


Jack Fritscher: Sam said he had tattooed 150,000 men starting in Chicago where he practiced his inking skills by tattooing potatoes. He pioneered today's tattooing style, mentoring young Ed Hardy in San Francisco and leatherman Cliff Raven in Chicago, who, like Sam, was intimate inside Chuck Renslow's Family. Justin confirms that Sam documented how Renslow, the great unrequited love of his life, and the Hispanic artist Etienne organized 1950s leather culture around their muscle photography for their Kris Studio, their magazines "Mars" and "Triumph," their famous Gold Coast bar, and their 1950s-1960s physique contests that evolved

into the International Mister Leather contest (IML) that is now the kink world's most homosurreal annual event. Renslow and Etienne scored safe hustlers for Sam who scored fit sailors for them to photograph. Etienne/Dom Orejudos designed the book jacket for "\$tud" in 1966. In 1993, six months before Sam died,

Chicago author Owen Keehnen, who with Tracy Baim authored the biography, “Leatherman: The Legend of Chuck Renslow,” recorded Sam’s last interview in “A Very Magical Life: Talking with Samuel Steward.”

Jack Sanders: I know Sam worked with Dr. Kinsey during the 1940s for “The Kinsey Report” and wrote for “Der Kreis” in Europe in the 1960s. When that magazine closed, did Sam kind of disappear? And how was he resurrected?



Jack Fritscher: When I met Sam, he seemed an old man at sixty playing the part of “Camille” at eighty. In 1969, the mantra was “Don’t trust anyone over thirty.” Yes, Sam worked with Kinsey who shot 16mm films of him having S&M sex with the closeted New York artist and suicide Mike Miksche aka Steve Masters whose 1950s work is archived at the Kinsey Institute. I’d love to have seen those films. So would have Warhol. They must be quite homosurreal. Sam himself said the shoots were “unreal” because Mrs. Kinsey would change the sheets between takes, and hang about the set.

So, with Kinsey dead since 1956, Sam and I both feared in 1970-71 that he might die without a post-Stonewall update. In that way, I was privileged to be the first gay scholar to interview him. Our session was recorded in his Berkeley cottage in the summer of 1972 while I lived with Jim Kane in San Francisco. This was three years before the founding of “Drummer,” and a decade before younger writers such as Joseph Bean, John Preston, Patrick Califia, and Gayle Rubin courted him as a Grand Old Man.

As Sam talked on tape, his self-esteem seemed to buck up a bit because he felt encouraged by my arts grant to record him for the “Journal of Popular Culture.” But what a bummer! He stipulated after the fact that I could never publish or write about his narrative while he was alive, “because I have to live off my story.” He meant at dinner parties and in autobiographical essays and university lectures. Fuck.

Jack Sanders: Did you feel betrayed?

Jack Fritscher: Not betrayed. Just a bit pissed off. He was elderly and a high-functioning addict. I had a prestigious grant to the arts that he valued and yet he wouldn't allow me to write even an essay about him to justify the project to the grant giver. As a university professor required to publish or perish, I knew there was a book to be written about him, but because he tied my hands, I early on refused to ever go to that great specific effort on his behalf, although I sucked it up because I had a deep affection for him, because of parallels in our lives, and continued to help him revive his career in "Drummer" and "Man2Man Quarterly." He was so charming, it was impossible to quit him. So I was very happy when young Justin who was not involved emotionally came along to write what needed to be written for the sake of American art history.

Jack Sanders: Because he had not met Sam and was not emotionally involved and....

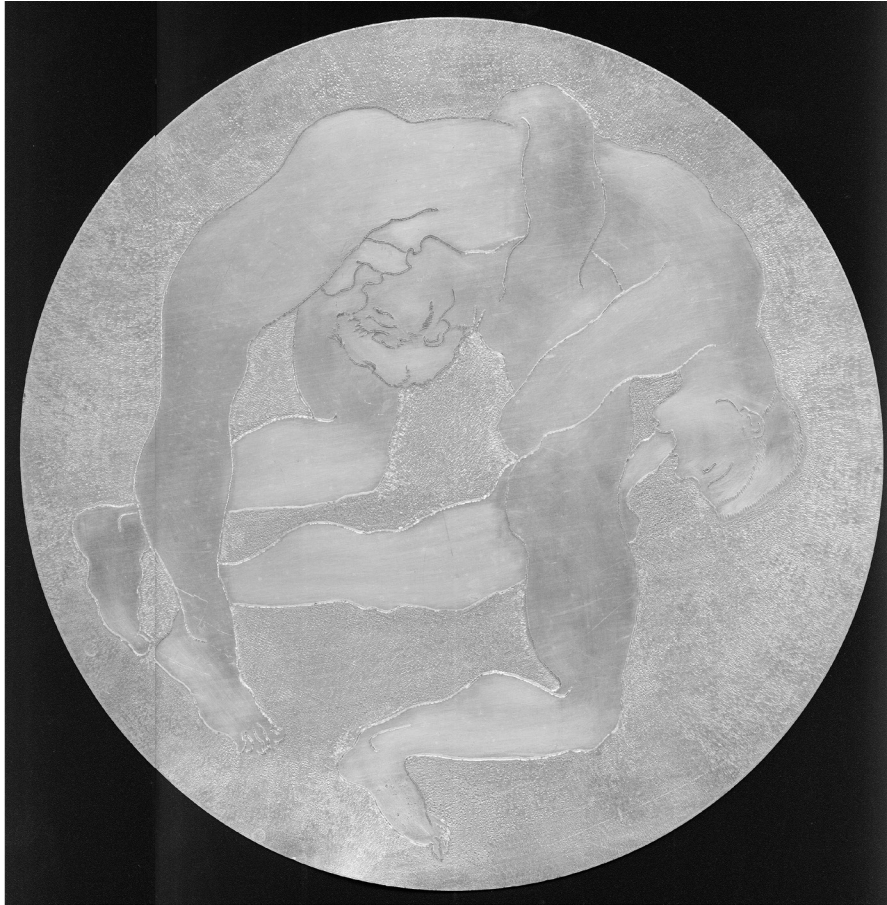
Jack Fritscher: ...and was so well connected in the New York publishing world around the great "Artforum." The very dear Justin has an author's Midas Touch in turning hidden gay history into best-selling literary gold. He published a second quite homosurreal book in 2010, "An Obscene Diary: The Visual World of Sam Steward." In a limited edition of 1000 at \$500 each, the deluxe "Diary" is illustrated with Sam's sketches, drawings, paintings, sculptures, and decorative objects as well as his Polaroids of sailors having sex in Sam's studio, and the famous 746 index cards from his "Stud File" in which for years (1924-1974) the Master Oralist documented his tricks, his cops, his deputies, his bikers, and all the seafood he caught and swallowed, often blotted with DNA samples of sperm. I might add that this man, as wild as Genet, was a sweetheart in his endorsement of my books and in his gifts to me.

Jack Sanders: Such as?



Jack Fritscher: I've saved everything he gave me. On June 6, 1978, as thanks for that dinner party, he wrote on the first page of the rare first edition of his priceless 1966 hardcover novel, "\$tud,": "Pour Jack Fritscher—co-travailleur dans le vignoble, en souvenir d'une nuit memorable a Cap d'Antibes. —Tou

amant fidele, Phil Andros. [For Jack Fritscher—a co-worker in the vineyard, a souvenir of a memorable night at Cap d’Antibes—Your faithful lover, Phil Andros] In 1984 when two of my erotic books were published by Gay Sunshine Press, he congratulated me with his own newest book. He wrote a compliment I treasure on the cover page of “Different Strokes”: “For Jack Fritscher—He knows more strokes than I ever did. —Phil Andros.” He reviewed my 1990 book “Some Dance to Remember” as “possibly the great gay American novel.” Most splendidly, he gave me a ten-inch-diameter gray metal plate he had engraved of two Greek youths from a Grecian urn sixty-nining in a tumbling pose titled “Le Sport des Matelots,” signed and dated December 12, 1954.



Jack Sanders: Art and life before AIDS. You were all so lucky. Thanks for alerting me to your recording of your interview with Sam now that you have digitized it.

Jack Fritscher: You’re welcome. Very few people now alive have heard Sam speak. On my audiotape, his soft professorial intonations can give some idea of the rate, pitch, articulation, and tone of his voice. After you hear him once on tape, you can imagine how he would sound reading his letters and diaries quoted in Justin’s book.

Oh, and life before AIDS? That window between penicillin and HIV. That had its own dangers. Sam spoke frankly on my tape about his risky literary life, affairs, beatings, arrests, and divine lunches in Paris, Rome, and San Francisco. He smoked his cigarettes, tilted his glass, swallowed a doll, pet the little dog in his lap, and spun his true oral history of sex, intrigue, revenge, and literary gossip in phrases so authentically measured I realized he had long ago decided precisely how his story should be told. He had memorized what he had written in his official unpublished autobiography which he then recited on tape. He was a raconteur who knew how to sing for his supper and still get breakfast.

Jack Sanders: Did you believe him?

Jack Fritscher: I believe anything any gay man tells me about his sex adventures because my own experiences have been so outrageous. That very “telling” is exactly how artists turn the realities of gay life into homosurreal art.

Jack Sanders: That’s the process, okay.

Jack Fritscher: I believed every word Sam told me. That’s why I gave my now almost forty-year-old transcripts to Justin who fit eighty-four years of Sam’s drama into his biography that finds a universal gay story in Sam’s specific life. That cautionary tale and remembrance of things past is important to how we live and create now. Steward would have loved Spring who made him live again. In 2017 like a “Star” on the “Hollywood Walk of Fame,” the “Ringold Alley Leather Memorial” in San Francisco honored Sam with his own bronze “Boot Print” set in cement along with twenty-seven other deceased leatherfolk—including Jim Kane—who are historically important to the art and culture of the leather community.

Jack Sanders: So what books by Sam Steward would you recommend?

Jack Fritscher: Back in the day, Sam wrote under many pen names, but today all his work is identified as Samuel Steward. As Phil Sparrow, he wrote: “The Motorcyclist” (1953); “\$tud” (1966); “The Joy Spot” (1969); “My Brother, the Hustler” (1970); “When in Rome, Do...” (1971); and “Different Strokes: Stories” (1984).

As Sam Steward, he wrote: “Pan and the Fire-Bird” (1930); “Angels on the Bough” (1936); “Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: a Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-Corner Punks, 1950-1965” (1990); and “Understanding the Male Hustler” (1991).

Other books include “Philip Sparrow Tells All: Lost Essays by Samuel Steward, Writer, Professor, Tattoo Artist” (2015), and “The Lost Autobiography of Samuel Steward: Recollections of an Extraordinary Twentieth-Century Gay Life” (2018).

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Editor: Dr. Fritscher has written about gay culture and history since 1968 and his twenty books are available in paperback, Kindle, and free to all as a gay community service at www.JackFritscher.com.



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