

# **S/M's Copernican Revolution**

**From a closed world to the infinite universe**

**by David Stein**

I started tying myself up before I was eight. Before I was twelve I had developed fetishes for handcuffs, boots, and denim and had a sexually charged fantasy life — except that I had no idea what sex was or even that it was men I was attracted to, not just their gear. But I was twenty-seven before I went to a leather bar, on a trip to New York from Pittsburgh (where I grew up and was again living), and by then I had purged myself of collected S/M porn and bondage equipment at least three times. Each time I had vowed to give up such “sick” stuff and go straight, or at least stick to ordinary homosexuality, though unadorned “vanilla” sex held no interest for me; these resolves lasted a couple of months at most.

After half an hour at the bar, I fled in fear and confusion; it was just too much — too much leather, too many hot-looking men, too heavy an attitude cloaking the simplest transactions. But I went back after moving to New York, and at twenty-nine I finally had my first satisfying sex with another man — the night I wore my first leather jacket for the first time. For the next couple of years, however, at the tail end of the 1970s, I failed to connect with anyone else but that first man, whom I saw once or twice a month for sessions that became less and less satisfying. He was a sweet, hot man, but all he wanted was leather, cocksucking, and a little temporary role-playing, and I wanted more. Much, much more.

Sometimes I felt that my masochism consisted solely of my willingness to warm a bench at the Spike bar in New York for several hours each Friday or Saturday night, inhaling other people's smoke and being assaulted by loud, ugly music. I could have coined the joke that “S&M” means “Stand & Model.” I am not a naturally outgoing person, I don't like drinking, I have fairly average looks, and I tend to be overweight. Nonetheless, I felt that I had a lot to offer someone if I could get to know him, if he would get to know me. At the Spike, or any other leather bar, however, I might as well have been invisible. No one but my semiregular fuck buddy ever approached me, and I didn't know how to approach anyone else — or whom I should approach.

Of course, I checked out the Mineshaft, too, but I was far from ready to start performing in the quasi-public precincts of New York's world-famous (or infamous) gay sex palace. Besides, it was no easier for me to meet someone and talk first at the Mineshaft than it was at the Spike; sight and then touch seemed to be the main senses people communicated with at the Shaft. You saw what you wanted, you reached for it, and if he didn't push you away you went on from there.

I was terrified of rejection or ridicule — not an unusual hang-up for people coming out into gay life, or for any straight adolescent. But I was also terrified of being brutalized or injured if I did finally go home with someone who might give me what I thought I wanted. My S/M bent, and my ignorance of real S/M, only intensified my inhibitions and inner turmoil. I was thirty-one years old, and my sex life appeared to be at a dead end.

More than sex, I needed role models, mentors, to reassure me that S/M was okay, to show me that it could be done safely, positively, not self-destructively. Where were such people? Where were the S/M “exemplars” I had read about in William Carney's fascinating (yet also frightening) 1968 novel *The Real Thing*? Was “the real thing” to be found at all, or was there only dressing up in leather and fuckin' 'n' suckin'? There was *Drummer* magazine, of course, but that was just more fantasy — or else such charming bits of cognitive dissonance as a series of admiring articles on “Famous Sadists in History.” Bluebeard, Jack the Ripper, and the Bitch of Buchenwald — and their victims — were not the role models I was seeking.

Nor did the gay motorcycle clubs seem an attractive option. Despite the image they affected, very few of their members actually owned or rode motorcycles. That was all right with me — I wasn't a biker either — but when I saw club members in the bars, they mostly seemed to drink heavily, back-slap, and camp. The clubs seemed like a gay parody of college fraternities, including weekend "runs" that featured drag musicales and beer busts. And as a God-Damned Independent from way back, I had trouble with the very idea of a club, where you were supposed to like someone — and might have numerous other responsibilities toward him as well — just because he was a "brother." I was searching for the inner circles of S/M, but I hoped that when I penetrated them I would still be dealing with people as individuals — and be dealt with that way in turn.

Although I had many gay friends, none of them knew anything about S/M beyond stereotypes and bad jokes. Not even friends with much better bar skills and far more extensive sexual experience than I had knew anyone else who was "really into it." For a time I worked as a volunteer at Christopher Street magazine, supposedly a bastion of sophistication, where I got an undeserved reputation as an expert on S/M just because I was willing to talk about it.

Why am I telling you all this? Because such a tale was not unusual back then. To update a cliché, there was leather, leather everywhere, but hardly any S/M in sight. By and large, except for the nightly costume show at the Spike and some ass slapping and titwork at the Mineshaft, S/M was what went on behind closed doors; outside, it was discussed in whispers or code.

Plenty was going on, as I know now, but you had to be invited to the party. And, just as in other areas of gay life, the invitations went first to the young, the beautiful, and the reckless. You couldn't talk your way in, because bar etiquette stipulated that no one talked to anyone unless they were already friends or else cruising each other. It was no place to ask naive questions, because you'd lose competition points. To admit your inexperience was to insure that you'd never get experience. If you didn't know the score already, you had to be prepared to fake it, or you'd never get a chance to play. Catch-69.

## How It Changed

What a difference a decade makes! Today there are openly S/M-oriented gay organizations in every part of the United States. Most advertise some of their meetings and other events in the general gay press, as well as in such specialized media as *Drummer* and *The Leather Journal*. Most groups are listed with gay switchboards and community centers, and many attempt some sort of educational outreach. All, in their own ways, introduce new people into the scene. There's no reason for any gay man coming out into S/M today, even in a small town, to feel as isolated and unconnected as I did back in 1980 in one of the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the world.

The situation for S/M women today is similar. Though there aren't as many organizations as for men, there are many more today than there were in 1981, when San Francisco's Samois group published the landmark book *Coming to Power*. Several national lesbian publications are hospitable to S/M erotica, like *On Our Backs* and *Outrageous Women*, and while the women's movement as a whole is still more hostile to S/M than not, lesbians who want to learn more about S/M can do so.

Moreover, within the gay movement the political climate with regard to S/M has clearly changed. Ten years ago S/M was a dirty little secret, equated with sleaze, drug abuse, and promiscuity. But in the planning for the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, a seat on the national steering committee was reserved for male and female representatives of the S/M-leather community, and that community responded to the outreach with more than a thousand marchers — as well as packing the stately Commerce Department auditorium building the day before the march for the first truly national S/M-Leather Conference.

At the 1989 Gay Pride Day March in New York, marking the twentieth anniversary of Stonewall, the S/M-Leather contingent was one of the largest, and in 1990 and 1991 organized leathersmen and -women — not to forget dykes on bikes — were a significant presence in the Pride Day marches in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other big cities. Today the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) invites representatives from S/M groups to its annual “Creating Change” Leadership Conference, and a leather workshop is held concurrently with the annual National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference. And when conservatives attacked the homoeroticism and sadomasochism of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photos, most gay leaders, whatever their personal inclinations, realized that it would be no use trying to defend the one by denouncing the other — our enemies make no such fine distinctions.

None of this happened by chance, or without plenty of struggle. If the situation that faced many of us at the beginning of the last decade has changed, it’s because we worked to change it. In many ways, the turning point was the founding of two new organizations in New York toward the end of 1980: Gay Male S/M Activists (GMSMA) and the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM).

Unlike nearly all their predecessors, both of these groups were committed to open enrollment — that is, new members did not have to be vouched for by old members or to pass any tests of experience, ideology, or sexuality (besides gender). Moreover, both groups did outreach to novices. And, not least, both groups made their gayness and their commitment to S/M part of their very names.

There were a few gay S/M groups before GMSMA and LSM. I’ve already mentioned Samois (which broke up early in the 1980s), and on the male side there were, and still are, the Chicago Hellfire Club and the 15 Association in San Francisco. But CHC was very closeted back then, very shy of publicity and hard to approach, and the 15, itself less than a year old when GMSMA got started, was also in the club tradition; you couldn’t join either group or come to one of its functions without the sponsorship of an existing member.

There had also been “open” S/M groups before, in particular the Eulenspiegel Society in New York and the Society of Janus in San Francisco, both of which also still exist. But although Eulenspiegel and Janus each had had a high ratio of gay members when they began (some say they were predominantly gay), by 1980 they were overwhelmingly heterosexual — and not especially friendly to gay men or lesbians who approached them. (I well remember my own couple of forays to Eulenspiegel meetings in the late 1970s and the chill I felt, during the introduction period, when I announced to the room that I was gay.) GMSMA and LSM were the first S/M organizations that were open and explicitly gay.

The great success of both groups — and especially of GMSMA, which was drawing more than a hundred men to twice-monthly meetings by the end of its first year — precipitated a fundamental change in the S/M scene nationally, from a closed structure to an open one. Although not all of the later groups emulated GMSMA and LSM’s open membership policies, some being more like clubs in that respect, the idea that gay S/M could and should be discussed openly, taught openly, and defended openly took root across the country.

What happened was comparable to the great Copernican Revolution in the history of science, in which the ancient view of the world as a relatively small, closed sphere centered on a stationary earth was replaced by an infinite universe where the earth is merely one planet among many and the sun is just another star. From a small, closed, closeted world with its own rules and its own values, a world set apart not only from straight society but also from the vast majority of gay people, gay S/M has evolved into being one option among many in a world of infinite possibilities.

Just as the new astronomy could never have won acceptance, even among the intellectual elite, if people had not been ready for a changed view, so the change from a closed S/M world to an open one would never have occurred if the existing structure had still been functional. By the beginning of the 1980s, however, it was clearly dysfunctional. The codes and institutions

that had been passed down from the 1950s and early 1960s, when gay S/M first flourished in the United States, did not survive the maturation of the baby-boom generation.

### **Old Guard, New Guard, Avant-Garde**

Pre-Stonewall gay S/M was a *very* small community: perhaps a couple of hundred serious tops and bottoms around the country and a few hundred more hangers-on. Nearly everyone knew everyone else, or at least everyone who mattered. It was not an easy group to join. The primary entry points were maybe a dozen “real” leather bars. While anyone could come into these bars, outsiders tended to be ignored, or even deep-sixed if they were viewed as presumptuous. A wanna-be couldn't just walk up to an exemplar and start talking. It might take years before a newcomer was accepted and taken seriously by initiates. But in the process of earning acceptance, those who persevered absorbed a common set of standards and a common code of conduct. An elaborate etiquette helped everyone find his place and know what was expected of him in different situations.

I know of this community only secondhand, from the testimony of men who were part of it. By the time I was coming out into S/M, it had ceased to exist. It was swept away by the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Once the lure of S/M was discovered by those outside the ranks of aficionados, the trappings of the scene, stripped of its essence, became fashion. Leather bars, at least for men, proliferated, and publications featuring fetishes and kinks were sold on newsstands. Thousands, then tens of thousands of gay men adopted a carefully studied Tom of Finland look, but the sexual flavor of choice for the vast majority, once out of their clothes, was still plain vanilla.

Many serious and experienced S/M men, and women, had reacted to the explosion of designer leather by giving up the bar scene entirely and retreating to their established circles of friends. Private play spaces, invitation-only loft parties, and “runs” held by the very few serious S/M clubs, like CHC and the 15, were where the action was, not at places like the Spike or even the Mineshaft. The old S/M community fragmented; it became many different communities, often with little contact between them.

By 1980, there was no telling any more who was who in S/M, only how they wanted to be viewed, and there were no more community wide standards, just a dress code. Surveying the hundred-plus men, most in full leather, packing the Spike on any Saturday night, how could you tell who was a heavy player and who was a dabbler — or not into S/M at all? After a few months, you might get to know whether someone was a regular at the bar, but what did that say about his expertise, or even inclinations, in a scene? I wasn't the only one wandering around month after month, year after year, looking for the right door to knock on, a door that no longer existed.

Another seeker in New York was a young man named Brian O'Dell. Having come out as a gay activist before he recognized his attraction to S/M, he tried a gambit that would never have occurred to anyone who kept his sexuality and his politics separate: In the summer of 1980 he sent a letter to Gay Community News in Boston, the only gay newspaper of substance in the East at that time, asking if any other gay men in New York City were interested in getting together to talk about S/M, fantasies, roles, and related topics. And he gave his real name and phone number.

After his letter appeared Brian received a handful of calls, and he set up a meeting at his apartment. One of those calls was from me, and all that each of us can remember about our first contact is that we both imagined things about the other that turned out to be moonshine. I know I was surprised to discover that the gutsy Mr. O'Dell was another bottom, younger than I was, and even less experienced.

That first meeting was not very promising — the five of us there were mainly just feeling each other out — but it led to another attended by a few more men, and then another, with still more brought in through word of mouth, and another and another. Meeting all through the fall

and into the winter, we quickly went from seven men to twelve to fifteen to more than anyone's living room could hold comfortably. The first meeting that we publicized, which was therefore the first to draw men who didn't already know someone involved in the planning group, was in January 1981, and we later regarded that as GSMMA's "official" beginning.

As we outgrew one meeting space after another and I became more and more deeply involved with the organization, I had no idea that what started as a modest discussion group would eventually become so significant. And I had no expectation that I would remain involved with GSMMA almost continuously for the next decade, serving in offices ranging from president to newsletter editor. Perhaps because I needed so much what GSMMA was working for, a true S/M community, it became the focal point of my life.

What we mostly talked about in those last months of 1980 was what kind of an organization we wanted to have and what we wanted it to do. A couple of political firebrands, who had responded to Brian's initial letter but hadn't been able to make the first planning meeting, were all ready to rent a hall and hold a town meeting to speak out against S/M-bashing by other gays and by the feminist movement. These men were comfortable with their S/M identities and felt they had little to learn from discussions of technique or life-style. Others of us were more concerned with issues raised by our own slow coming out into S/M. We had very real fears, and a lot of questions, that we wanted addressed before we could think about trying to convert outsiders to an S/M-positive point of view. Still others in the group had other agendas, and many of us certainly hoped that the new organization would help us meet other S/M men in a more congenial, less competitive environment than the bar scene.

From the beginning, three quite different goals dominated the discussions that led to the formation of GSMMA: (1) creating a forum for discussing personal issues and learning about S/M technique, (2) creating a supportive environment for meeting and getting to know other men interested in S/M, and (3) creating a vehicle for addressing the sexual politics of S/M and combating anti-S/M prejudice in the rest of the gay world (no one thought we'd have much success trying to educate the straight world). Arguments over these goals threatened to shatter the group before it ever got going. Just about everyone agreed that all three were worthwhile, but we differed on priorities and strategies.

Eventually most of us agreed that if we were ever to achieve all three of these goals, we would have to put discussion and education first, socialization second, and politics last. While a political purpose was by no means an afterthought — as is shown by the name we settled on, Gay Male S/M Activists, deliberately meant to evoke the old Gay Activists Alliance — we felt that the ability to make a meaningful political impact would grow out of our success with more inward-looking efforts.

The same debate has recurred during most of GSMMA's history as different factions have tried to tip the balance to favor one of our three purposes over the others. Usually there's been a small, but often very vocal, activist faction that wanted to make the group more overtly political — endorsing candidates, issuing position papers, and holding protest demonstrations. And there's been a persistent "party" faction that has wanted to make GSMMA primarily a social/sexual organization — sponsoring bar nights, play parties, and even "runs." But our tripod of purposes has proved to be remarkably stable. A "center" faction committed above all to education and discussion has managed to hold the other factions in check and in harness.

LSM had it easier, in a way, because it was started by a couple of women with real experience in S/M, Jo Arnone and Dorothy Allison (and Dorothy got advice from friends in Samoia). But it was harder, too, because bringing lesbian S/M out of the closet was actively opposed by most of the women's movement. LSM, in fact, originally defined itself as a haven not just for women

into S/M but for women interested in “politically incorrect sex of all types, including fetishes, fantasies, toys, and butch/femme role-playing.”<sup>1</sup>

The founders of GMSMA and LSM aimed to create a new S/M community, and we decided that the best way to do it was not through exclusion — trying to keep out the uncommitted — but through inclusion — drawing in as many men and women as possible who identified themselves with gay S/M. If the trappings of S/M had gone public without the essence, driving aficionados further underground, we would try to bring the essence, too, into the light. If the old secrecy and discretion were now barriers to sincere seekers, without managing to deter the merely curious, we would conduct our business as openly as possible. Through articles and interviews in the gay press, through speaking engagements, through our own publications, and through our open meetings, we would tell the world who we were, what we did, and what we wanted. Instead of presuming to select who could enter the sacred precincts, we would make our precincts big enough to accommodate anyone who wanted to participate.

Once the remnants of the old community got the idea of what GMSMA was about — making it easier for everyone who wanted to practice S/M to do so safely and satisfyingly — many of them came to us, especially New York-area associate members of the Chicago Hellfire Club and members of the Northeast-based Pocono Warriors club. They generously gave of their time, connections, and expertise to help produce GMSMA's early programs and special events.<sup>2</sup>

## Forging a New Community

By now, after ten years of GMSMA and LSM and a proliferation of other organizations, the whole dichotomy of “serious” vs. “unserious” leather and S/M has become questionable. The S/M scene has been opened up, and perforce it's been opened to the casual as well as the committed. There are few universally respected exemplars: rather, many men and women set a good example in their own circles.

Just as hardly anyone today thinks less of someone who switches roles, playing top one night and bottom another, perhaps even with the same partner, so no one puts anyone else down for not being “heavy” enough or versatile enough. It's perfectly all right, for instance, to be into bondage but not pain, or to like flogging but not electricity, or to like a little spanking and tit play but nothing more. No one today expects you to “earn” the right to wear black leather, or a uniform, or anything else you want. Each to his own taste, we say now, and the stance of our organizations is: Do whatever you want as long as it's safe, sane, and consensual.

Having come in on the cusp of the change and even sharing some responsibility for it, as a founder and mainstay of GMSMA, I can well understand the feeling of some veterans that we lost something in the process. There is no denying that a great deal of the mystery has gone out of S/M as it has emerged from the closet and the back rooms into the light of public meetings and open discussions. Being a master of bondage or flagellation these days is like being a minor-league pro athlete; people may respect your skills, but no one looks at you in awe.

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<sup>1</sup> Like GMSMA, LSM owes its start to the gay press. Around the time Brian's letter appeared in *GCN*, Jo was working for the company that published *Christopher Street* and was about to launch the *New York Native*. Several free display ads in the *Native*, plus word of mouth among Dorothy and Jo's friends, were enough to get a critical mass of S/M dykes together. When I heard about their new organization, I called Jo and set up a dinner meeting so the four of us — she, Dorothy, Brian, and me — could compare notes. I'll always remember that dinner. Each pair of us arrived wondering what we could possibly have in common with the other pair: we left feeling we had met ourselves in a mirror. It was the first time in my life I had been able to talk about sex with a woman and feel understood — and feel that I had understood her.

<sup>2</sup> It wasn't pure altruism, however, as GMSMA quickly became a prime source of recruits for these clubs and their own events, such as CHC's annual *Infernos* and the Warriors' *Whitewater Weekends*. The dungeon at *Whitewater Weekend* in 1981, during GMSMA's first year, is where I finally came out into S/M in a big way, thanks to several sensitive and understanding topmen, but especially one visiting CHC member, the late Chuck Barrow, the most seductive of painmasters. I realized many of my longtime fantasies in a couple of days and won the “Biggest Oar” trophy in the process. But that's another story!

When tops outnumbered bottoms by ten to one, the way they did in the 1950s, the incentive was greater for tops to spend the time and energy to master esoteric specialties or to reach new heights of ability in the staples. Nowadays, when bottoms outnumber tops by at least four to one, and when there are so many more bottoms altogether than in the old days, a top can be a success with much less effort. Now it's bottoms who compete with each other, and what less discriminating or less committed tops usually value most is appearance, not attitude or endurance or responsiveness.

S/M skills used to be conveyed from master to disciple, one on one. While there's no doubt that such training is the best, it's just not a realistic option for most people today. Instead, at a public GMSMA meeting 80 to 150 men can listen to an expert explain his specialty, then ask him questions, and a few days later attend a more private demonstration. Or a group of eight to ten may meet in someone's home for a technique workshop or a discussion group to explore a shared special interest. Other organizations use different methods, but some type of group-based instruction is the rule.<sup>3</sup>

Has the quality of the instruction been diluted by such expansion? Possibly, but with open sharing of information and techniques, one could also argue that S/M teaching today is better than ever — more comprehensive and far more safety-conscious. Has the average level of the resulting action fallen from that of the “golden age” of the 1950s? Probably, though again one could say that with so much more happening, the number of exceptional-quality scenes has increased along with the number of mediocre ones. Are today's approaches fairer and more humane than the old system? Unquestionably.

S/M no longer belongs just to a small fraternity. It has become the avant-garde of safer sex in the age of AIDS. The genie is out of the bottle, and it's no use wishing that people wouldn't pick up a whip or buy a cattle prod or pair of handcuffs without serving several years' apprenticeship first. Everyone wants a chance to play. If everyone is to learn how to play safely and responsibly, observing the principles of informed consent, we need to knit together a new community on a much vaster scale than the one we used to have — the one I could not find back in 1980.

That community consists of individuals, of course, but the only thing that can hold it together is organizations. Individuals come and go, taking what they need, giving what they have to or want to, then burning out or dying or passing on to other interests and concerns. Organizations have their limitations as well, but successful ones can endure to become more than the sum of their members. The best of our organizations embody visions — whether visions of social change or just of a safe venue for the fulfillment of sexual fantasies — that can inspire people to achieve and contribute more than they would have thought possible.

Today's S/M exemplars are, for the most part, the men and women our organizations call on as instructors and demonstrators. The people who win leather contests may get more publicity and be more avidly sought after by the uninformed, but few title holders are asked to teach technique or to answer questions about safety and responsibility. Even their often laudable efforts as goodwill ambassadors to the wider gay world can be questioned as presenting too narrow, too “sanitized” an image to reflect the full spectrum of S/M life-styles. They are role models only if you put the emphasis on “model.”

Because exemplars today are given a forum and an imprimatur by organizations, it is organizations rather than individuals that set the standards for acceptable S/M behavior. Novices look for guidance to GMSMA and organizations similar to it, organizations such as Philadelphia's Gay Men's S/M Cooperative (GMSMC), Avatar in Los Angeles, Vancouver

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<sup>3</sup> For many men the “finishing school” in their S/M development is CHC's Inferno, which annually draws more than 250 men from around the world to experience and learn about S/M in two intensive four-day sessions (to meet increased demand, the second session was added in 1990). Granted, Inferno is still by invitation only, but with CHC associate members in every state and many foreign countries, most of them active in other groups such as GMSMA, it's not hard to get your name put on the invitation list.

Activists in S/M (VASM), SigMa in Washington, D.C., and Boston's Dreizehn; to women's groups like New York's LSM, the Outcasts in San Francisco, Bound & Determined in Western Massachusetts, and L.A.'s Leather & Lace; to established clubs like CHC, the 15 Association, the Pocono Warriors, and Dallas's Disciples of DeSade; to the bondage clubs that have sprung up in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere in the last few years; and to straight/bi/mixed groups such as the Society of Janus, L.A.'s Threshold, New York's Eulenspiegel Society, and the local chapters of the Seattle-based National Leather Association and of People Exchanging Power (which started in Albuquerque, of all places).

It is remarkable how much these organizations agree on when it comes to the parameters of safe and sane S/M action. It has been sad to see how often they disagree when it comes to common action in the political sphere. Turf battles, old grudges, regional styles, and, yes, a few issues of substance still divide East from West, women from men, straight from gay, big cities from small towns. Sometimes it seems that true community is an illusion, a futile quest. But looking back at how far we've come in little more than a decade, I cannot give up hope.

When I think how easy it is for men coming into the scene via GMSMA today compared to what I went through — how quickly Erik, say, or Richard, or Michael, or Gil (you know who you are) had their fears calmed and their questions answered and were steered toward men who could give them the experience they needed — it is hard not to feel a little envious. But what I mostly feel is very, very proud — of all of us.