

The Porn Capital Of America

By WILLIAM MURRAY

SAN FRANCISCO.

EVERYTHING'S up to date in San Francisco these days, which means, according to some, that they've gone about as far as they can go. Too far for Dianne Feinstein, the attractive brunette who happens to be president of the city's Board of Supervisors. Mrs. Feinstein and a party of concerned citizens recently made an educational tour of the town's booming pornographic establishments, or porn shops, as they're more familiarly known to thousands of contented patrons. What they found appalled them. "Appalling is a modest term," wrote one, columnist Merla Z. Goerner, on the society page of the daily Chronicle. "What we found was total degradation of the human spirit, a terrifying look into the darkest recesses of the sick mind." Mrs. Feinstein herself gave an interview to the press in which she pointed out, while calling for legislative curbs, that the pornographic movie industry "has spread so drastically in San Francisco that we have become a kind of smut capital of the United States."

Mrs. Feinstein is quite right. San Francisco today is indeed the porn capital of the country, a sort of Copenhagen of the Western Hemisphere. But it's important to understand that this exalted status hasn't been achieved simply on the basis of the quantity of pure porn being hustled. New York and Los Angeles, for instance, have just as many dirty movies, book stores, nude dancers, live sex shows, model studios, massage parlors, swap clubs, underground publications and prostitutes. Probably more, even when counted on a per capita basis.

What distinguishes San Francisco from any place else is the style with which porn is marketed, its practitioners' attitude toward it and the tolerance most square citizens display concerning the whole question. The basic assumption, it would seem, even on the part of Mrs. Feinstein and some of her fellow crusaders, is that a "mature adult" is entitled to get his kicks any way he can, provided decent citizens don't have to witness the process and nobody gets hurt. (All Mrs. Feinstein apparently would like to do is regulate the porn movie houses more closely and perhaps confine them to one area of the city.)

This attitude is clearly consistent

with history, because San Francisco, ever since the gold rush and the advent of the forty-niners, has always enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for glamorous vice, with or without the open connivance of the authorities. Rushes of civic virtue to the head have been infrequent, short-lived and generally regarded with contempt. Gerard van der Leun, the longhaired editor of an underground erotic newspaper called *The Organ*, thinks this is because "San Francisco is a continental city. From the beginning it was never a WASP city, and that sort of kept things loose. New York is a huge vertical filing cabinet and in L. A. everybody wants you to do

a little dance. But somewhere in San Francisco there's a section of the city where anybody's life style, no matter how far-out, is considered normal." Or as the old song used to put it, "The miners came in '49/ The whores in '51/ And when they got together/ They produced the native son."

The native son has had a lot to be tolerant about recently. Prostitution is flourishing, with open solicitation taking place on street corners in the heart of town and even outside such fancy hotels as the St. Francis, where a ring of teen-age boys and girls was doing a brisk business a few weeks ago at \$50 to \$100 a body. There are about 30



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Gold Rush. A San Francisco tradition of "glamorous vice" is upheld today on the North Beach (left) and in a spate of newer spots that mix pornography and the youth culture.

movie houses scattered all over that screen only hard-core films. Several places put on live sex shows. Dozens of book stores deal exclusively in porn and others maintain porn sections for the prurient browser. The underground press churns out newspapers, comic books, posters and postcards to delight the dirty-minded. And in the North Beach and Tenderloin districts naked girls dance continuously for the exclusive delectation of the imbibing voyeur. Just walking around the city can give the casual visitor the impression that porn, not tourism, is San Francisco's leading industry.

The two, of course, are closely
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Porn Establishment. Among those who have made San Francisco a pornography capital are movie-maker Jim Mitchell (left, middle) with two of his actors; Alex de Renzy, the "Jean-Luc Godard" of porn cinema (right), with the two women he lives with and their children; Davey Rosenberg, "inventor of topless" (below left); and theater manager Arlene Elster (below right).



Photographs by SAM FALK

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linked. In fact, the true native son wouldn't dream of patronizing the garish topless-bottomless emporiums, many of which use gravel-voiced sidewalk barkers to lure the suckers in. Davey Rosenberg, a 360-pound press agent who thought up topless back in 1964, made a world celebrity out of Carol Doda and her silicone bust, and who functions as a public-relations pooh-bah for the entire North Beach scene, admits that tourists and conventioners comprise what he calls "the street's" only clientele. He maintains bravely that the new hard-core porn shows are not hurting the street's business at all, though in practically the same breath he'll complain about the city's recent attempts to tone down his industry's advertising techniques. "The only real obscenity is the politicians," Rosenberg says. "You notice we only get hustled at election times."

Last spring the Board of Supervisors passed a law prohibiting barkers and overly explicit marquees and window displays. The industry promptly announced that it would ignore all the key provisions of the city's new regulations, and it has done so. Naturally, because this is San Francisco, nothing drastic has happened. The barkers are still barking, the display ads are just as lurid as ever and all Davey Rosenberg has to worry about is that his audience will continue to drift off to the hard-core shops. "What's to worry?" he says. "There's no substitute for the live thing."

That may be, but the old-fashioned Tenderloin and North Beach joints are not offering the most up-to-date live entertainment in the field. Once you've seen one naked go-go dancer you've really seen them all, even if they're lowered from the ceiling on pianos or gyrate in transparent plastic bathtubs, as at two of the clubs in North Beach. For the new style in live shows you have to go to a dreary bar called The Outer Limits, near the Cow Palace, or drop in at the New Follies, a crumbling old theater in the Mission district. There, living people, young and mostly attractive, get together to depict actual sexual intercourse, both real and simulated. The surroundings are tawdry in the familiar

old style of the B-girl bar or the run-down burlesque house and the places seem to be patronized mostly by balding middle-aged men in flapping overcoats, but the performers themselves are a new breed. Like the hippie girls who bounce up and down for \$25 a night in Davey Rosenberg's clubs ("They like to do it," he has said, "they're all exhibitionists"), the sex performers, even though they go through the motions essentially for the money, are not embarrassed by what they're doing. Some of them even enjoy it.

Harold, for instance, is a 27-year-old actor. He and Sue, the girl he's living with, have been putting on five very explicit short performances a day and they're happy to be earning \$300 a week between them for doing what comes more naturally at home. Sue, a tall, pretty blonde in her early twenties, dropped out of college two years ago and worked briefly as a go-go dancer in one of the North Beach clubs before meeting Harold, who had come west after a series of short-lived Off-Broadway ventures. "I don't mind if people want to watch us make it together," Harold said recently. "That's their hang-up, not ours. Meanwhile we're making good bread and I have complete artistic control of everything we do on stage." Harold and Sue think up all the little dramatic scenes, mostly pantomimed, that precede the grand finale and they spend a good deal of time working out bits of business, selecting the right prop or piece of furniture and making sure that light levels and mood music suit the action. "What I mean is, we don't want something like 'Tea for Two' on the sound system when we're about to —," Harold explained.

"What we have here is an act of theater, after all, regardless of what's going on in anybody's head out there."

Harold's attitude is probably typical of that of most young people making a living in porn these days. The basic audience for hard-core stuff, in San Francisco as elsewhere, is still the middle-aged, middle-class white male, but the chief makers and purveyors of porn, at least in this city, are no longer the aging, cynical exploiters of yore. That world is best symbolized by the old-style North Beach night club,

which specializes, really, in titillation and pseudo-porn, all aimed essentially at separating the out-of-town mark from his bankroll. The new style is to provide the customer with the genuine article while at the same time the entrepreneur hangs loose and manages to get his own thing on.

A PERFECT example of the dichotomy between these old and new attitudes is the contrast between the drag shows at Finocchio's in North Beach and the irregular local appearance of a new transvestite group calling itself The Cockettes. Finocchio's, which has been around for over 30 years, presents a conventional night club musical revue in which the performers make much of the fact that they are actually men dressed as women and the audience is frequently reminded that the whole thing is being "brought to you in a spirit of fun." The Cockettes, on the other hand, have been described as hippie drag queens, some of them in beards and mustaches, who put on anarchic parodies of all the old movies you've ever seen on television. Usually fully attired only down to the waist, in the sort of elaborate



Anti-Porn. Dianne Feinstein, president of the Board of Supervisors, leads the movement to curb San Francisco's booming porn industry.

plumage that Carmen Miranda used to flaunt, they, in the words of a local critic, "romp, bump, grind, kick, scream, flaunt, swish, stagger and writhe their way through the rooms behind your mind."

These performances take place as part of the Nocturnal Dream Show, an old-movie orgy that a young promoter named Sebastian puts on weekends at midnight in the Palace Theater, which the rest of the time shows only Chinese films. The Palace also happens to be in North Beach, but it is pretty much off the

tourist beat. The cognoscenti now begin lining up for the Nocturnal Dream Show hours before, and inside the theater the aura of pot is usually so thick that people have been known to get stoned just breathing. The Cockettes generally make their appearance around 3 A.M., between Flash Gordon serials and revivals of such gems as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." They fit in perfectly. No one who hasn't seen a chunky youth attired in little more than a feather boa belting out "Old Man River" in falsetto is even qualified to discuss Camp.

The Cockettes, who used to perform gratis, are now reportedly paid \$1,000 a night and there are rumors of a forthcoming tour. They represent one of the more successful manifestations of San Francisco's new porn scene and they are taken quite seriously indeed by the underground critics. "If the Cockettes are political," wrote an observer in *The Organ*, "they are political in the way that every public act is a political act. Their politics are contained and expressed within their rampant sexuality."

The rampant sexuality of the Cockettes and dozens of other local phenomena is consistently and furiously championed by San Francisco's underground press, the country's liveliest and itself most unashamedly pornographic. Even such relatively respectable and established publications as *Ramparts*, *Rolling Stone*, *Good Times*, *Scanlan's* and *Rags*, all papers with divergent interests and impulses, often use words and/or illustrations considered unprintable in the establishment press. *San Francisco Ball* is a pure sex sheet, unbelievably coarse and graphic. Also on the scene are *The Berkeley Barb*, *Tribe*, *The Organ*, *Aquarian Age*, *Freedom News*, *Body Politic*, *Psychic*, *Not Man Apart* and a new one still in the planning stage called *Flash Earth*, a slick and well-capitalized magazine edited by a former *Playboy* staffer, made its debut in October and was promptly put down by a local underground critic as "a sort of Reader's Digest of the hip culture." And there are others either in the planning stage, struggling along irregularly from issue to issue, or in the process of disappearing. "It seems barely a month creeps by without some new rag slithering off the press," wrote one observer in *Aquarian Age*.

What all these publications have in common is the youthfulness of their editorial staffs (almost everyone is under 30)

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and their conviction that porn, even at its sleaziest and most bizarre, is an important and healthily revolutionary ingredient of the new culture. To get this message across and publish only what they like, the underground staffers are prepared to make material sacrifices and, if necessary, live like incontinent monks.

Take *The Organ*, put out by a staff of young people who each survive on less than \$150 a month. "We just pay our parking tickets and eat every now and then," says Christopher Weills, the publisher, who was raised in San Francisco and holds a college degree in sociology. He worked on Ramparts and in the Berkeley post office before persuading a rich acquaintance to put up \$14,000 to start a newspaper. Gerard van der Leun, who was raised in a California mining town, had been making experimental films at the University of Southern California and came to San Francisco when he heard that somebody was starting a new publication up there. He brought Stevie Lipney, a pretty redhead, with him. She had been living with her family in Los Angeles, having fought through the campus wars in San Francisco State after which "this incredible boredom set in." She heard about *The Organ* through Gerard, whom she had met in L. A. on "a crazy weekend." A fourth staffer, Jon Stewart, bearded and intensely serious, grew up in Michigan and New York and is currently working toward a Ph.D. in theater arts at Berkeley. He showed up one day with a knapsack on his back, sat down and went to work.

THE first issue of *The Organ*, which is put together in the basement of an ex-firehouse that also shelters Scanlan's, appeared last July. Elegantly designed and printed in a fold-over tabloid format, its articles and illustrations dealt heavily in pure porn.

Two subsequent issues have tackled other cultural areas, but always with a freedom of language not permitted the establishment press. "The original idea was to put out a sophisticated sex rag," Stewart said recently, "but now we're concentrating our energies on all aspects of the hip culture." One of *The Organ's* most interesting recent cultural explorations was into the history and current proliferation of pornographic comic books, most of which have titles unmentionable in a family newspaper and emanate mostly from Berkeley. Van der Leun, who wrote the piece, made the point, in some cases a possibly valid one, that obscene comic books criticize our society in a healthy way by exposing its hypocrisies and myths through distortion and enlargement.

Another aspect of hip culture is the dirty movie, which, more than any other local manifestation, has enshrined San Francisco as the country's porn capital. A lot of dirty movies, perhaps the majority, get made elsewhere, especially in Los Angeles, but most of the young film-makers who are using porn either to make a statement or simply as a means of getting distribution are working in the Bay Area. It's impossible to make an exact count, but a good estimate would be that about a hundred people are making movies locally, ranging from full-length color epics costing many thousands of dollars to silent quickies, usually shot in a single afternoon in somebody's bedroom. If the film is dirty enough, and most of them are, it is certain to be shown in one of the city's porn houses. "What the hell," a leading practitioner of the art form said recently, "stag films are as American as apple pie."

The Jean-Luc Godard of the *nouvelle vague* in porn is unquestionably Alex de Renzy, whose clumsy "Pornography in Denmark," shot last year in Copenhagen, cost \$15,000 to make and has already earned well over a million and a half. Today de Renzy, who is in his mid-thirties and used to work as a stickman at a Reno crap table, lives with two women and several of his and their children in a hilltop mansion north of the city with a magnificent view of the Bay. The house is completely equipped as a movie studio and from there de Renzy, whose face is scarred and who limps from a recent motorcycle accident, turns out half a dozen films a year, all hard-core.

"I'm on a work trip," he said recently. Self-trained as



a movie-maker, de Renzy couldn't get anybody to give him a job before he made his killing with "Pornography in Denmark." Now he finances all of his own projects and he takes himself with the utmost seriousness. "I just want to make movies," he says. "You have to show something people haven't seen before and sex is what people want to see now. I'd never make a movie that didn't have sex in it. It's got more punch than the chase scene."

Only slightly less successful than de Renzy—who considers himself in another class and doesn't really like to be lumped in with the other porn movie-makers—are people like brothers Jim and Art Mitchell, who have made about 300 movies between them since they started shooting two years ago with a borrowed camera; and Lowell Pickett, a 36-year-old bearded ex-art student and would-be writer whose latest full-length feature, *Straight Banana*, cost \$4,500 to make and recouped its investment during the first five days of its screening at one local theater. His attitude is typical of San Francisco's young crop of porn producers. "This was a way of getting into film-making, literally through the back door," he said not long ago. "But there will probably always be sex in my movies because sex is a part of life."

ONE nice aspect of the porn movie boom in San Francisco is that it is becoming pleasant and respectable to attend them. Despite the continued use of the lurid advertising come-on ("You will not be deprived of your constitutional right to see this fabulous presentation of lust and fulfillment in all its infamous



Porn Publishers. *The staff of The Organ, an underground erotic newspaper, meets. From left, art director Stevie Lipney, editor Gerard van der Leun, associate editor Jon Stewart, publisher Christopher Weills, associate editor Howard Pearlstein.*

glory"), some of the theaters, especially those either owned or managed by the younger crowd, are clean, comfortable and staffed by attractive girls in miniskirts and polite, well-groomed young men in business suits. Les Natali, a 29-year-old who manages six of the better porn houses in town, quit college, where he was majoring in psychology, to devote his full time to what was then merely a sideline, primarily because he was making so much money already that he couldn't keep his mind on what the professors were telling him. "The stereotype of the dirty-old-man exhibitor is still valid, I suppose," he once told an interviewer, "but we're trying to get rid of it. This is a business like any other." The image he conveys is a far cry from the one associated with porn in New York and Los Angeles, where the theater owners and their employees all seem to be paunchy hoodlums with single temple-to-temple eyebrows.

The least likely manager of any porn shop anywhere is Arlene Elster, a very attractive brunette in her late twenties who runs the Sutter Cinema, an ex-Chinese cabaret a few blocks from Union Square. Miss Elster grew up in Texas and came to San Francisco six years ago. She has a B.S. degree from the University of Texas and she worked for several years as a medical researcher, studying, among other things, the clotting properties of blood cells. "Then I got this urge to make films," she recalls. In partnership with Lowell Pickett she began turning out the sort of nudie movies called beavers; then, as the Supreme Court struck down one obscenity indictment after another, she

graduated, like everybody else, to pure porn.

Last May she opened her own theater, primarily so that she and Pickett could show their own films. The place is clean and thickly carpeted, with handsome erotic drawings mounted on its gold-painted walls and a large tank of tropical fish in the lobby; free coffee and doughnuts are dispensed during viewing hours, from 8 A.M. to midnight. Admission costs \$5, but couples and senior citizens get discount rates. Miss Elster is proud of the fact that more couples and younger people are attending her showings and that about half of her audience, according to a survey she's been taking, consists of new patrons. But what interests her primarily is making her kind of movies. "It's always been assumed that smut was sold only for money," she said recently. "But younger people today want things out in the open. I like to make money, but I also like to make films that happen to be about sex. Running this theater means nothing to me unless what plays in it pleases me."

In line with this idealistic viewpoint, Miss Elster and Pickett sponsored, during the first week in December, San Francisco's First International Erotic Film Festival. They managed to screen 45 of the hundred entries they received from all over the country, and the opening night was reminiscent of a Hollywood premiere, with producers, directors and stars being ushered over a red carpet into the elegant 800-seat Presidio Theater. The place was packed and the event was well-covered by the local press. On the jury, which was in charge of dispensing \$4,000 in prizes,

were Bruce Conner, one of the better-known underground film-makers and a Ford Foundation grant recipient, Maurice Girodias of the Olympia Press, and Arthur Knight, the ubiquitous film critic of The Saturday Review. One of the top prizes they awarded went to a three-minute movie that depicted a girl peeling an orange, though most of the other films on display were a lot rougher than that.

In fact, some of the films currently being shown in San Francisco are so rough (two theaters deal exclusively in bestiality) that a lot of other people besides Mrs. Feinstein would like to regulate the porn shops and, if possible, shut them down entirely. "It's so open," a veteran observer of the local scene commented recently, "that you could now have live animal acts legally here, so long as the animal is a consenting adult." This state of affairs outrages a lot of politicians and respectable types, especially the sort of white middle-class citizens who live in the suburbs and are often referred to by more sophisticated San Franciscans as "those people from the Peninsula."

Leading the current crop of crusaders, reformers and blue-movie battlers, in addition to Mrs. Feinstein, are Assistant District Attorney Jerome T. Benson, a Mormon; Supervisor

Peter Tamaras, who recently maintained during a public debate on the subject that "the next thing we'll see is sexual intercourse right out in the parks, the way they do in Denmark"; and two private citizens, James A. Scatena and Leo Musso, who head the newly-formed Citizens Committee on Social Order. Also shoulder to shoulder in the good cause is Police Lieutenant Gerald Shaughnessy, the 43-year-old head of the city's vice squad, an absolutely dedicated professional with pale blue eyes and a somewhat jittery manner who has been doing his very energetic best to crack down wherever he can.

THE reform efforts have so far failed, primarily because the courts have consistently championed freedom. Or, as Les Natali once put it, "any exhibitor who gets a conviction hasn't got a good attorney." The legal maneuvers have prevented almost all cases from even reaching the trial stage, though last November Jim Mitchell, who along with his brother had been arrested more than a dozen times, did actually find himself being prosecuted before a judge and jury. The trial seemed sure to drag along for weeks and a conviction would, of course, be appealed. Meanwhile the

movie houses continue to flourish.

But whatever the courts may eventually rule in the case of dirty movies, San Francisco seems certain to survive as the country's most tolerant metropolis or, if you wish, porn capital. The crusaders are already under attack and being ridiculed in the press and one influential columnist, Charles McCabe in the Chronicle, took Mrs. Feinstein to task for her educational tour of the porn shops. "The way to solve the problem of pornography is simple, and like all things simple, quite difficult," he wrote. "The way to solve the problem of pornography, and other behavior which offends others but does them no harm, is just to forget it." A friend of mine who has lived in the city for 20 years and now thinks of himself as a native put it another way. "In a town with as much live private action as San Francisco, who needs to go to a hooker or see a blue movie?" he said. "And who cares?"

Both statements are in the highest tradition of San Francisco history. A reporter for The New York Evening Post, who visited the city in 1849 and made a survey of the amazing sights then on display, wrote in his journal that "the people of San Francisco are mad, stark mad." ■

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