

My Memoirs - Chapter 1.5 - Junior High

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February 25, 2022



On the East Coast they call it Middle School, but in L.A. in the 60s it was Bancroft Junior High. This is where I started to bloom -- puberty, pimples, peace-marches, pin-ups, performing, and protests. Bancroft was located between Melrose and Santa Monica just off of Highland Avenue. That placed it just a block or two from the backlots of Paramount Studios, but that meant nothing to us kids. One of my buddies was a successful child actor, Charles Herbert [Please Don't Eat the Daisies, Gunfight at the OK Corral, Houseboat, 13 Ghosts]. To me he was just Charlie Saperstein, whose main claim to fame was being so little and quick that he was super-hard to catch in touch football.

Like most boys, sports figured prominently in my adolescent development. Still relegated to right field or catcher I gradually lost interest in playing baseball. But hey, the Dodgers were in town now! My dad had taken me several times to see the Hollywood Stars or the minor-league L.A. angels, but this was the Big League now. For the first two years the Dodgers played at the Colosseum. There were famous players like Maury Wills, Gil Hodges and Roy Campanella, but the guy I remember best was Wally Moon, famous for his "Moon-shot," essentially a pop fly golfed over the high screen meant to protect the left-field limit, just 250 feet away. The Dodgers won the World Series in their second season there, in 1959.

I was a chubby-bordering-on-fat kid, but I got my growth spurt in ninth grade, and soon discovered I had some basketball potential. I enjoyed touch football, but the Pop Warner coach turned me off by scolding me for my lack of passion. "You've got to want to hurt the guy," he insisted. No thanks, I thought, I'll just play touch and have fun. I definitely enjoyed going to the Rams' games. Sadly, my main memory is watching Jim Brown dragging three Rams' defensemen all around the field. My cousin Mark and I used to take the bus to the Colosseum to see them. When we went to see the Dodgers we sat in the cheap seats behind the left field screen. They weren't that far away and you had a chance of catching one of Wally's

Moon Shots. Mark's family had moved to the Fairfax district a couple of years prior to mine. Later we also took the bus together to see the Dodgers when they started playing in our old neighborhood.

Meanwhile I devoted serious study to the guitar and folk music. I learned the rudimentary stuff from Lenny Potash, a well know teacher in the folk crowd. That served me well, and I was soon leading the marchers in "We Shall Overcome" and "We Shall Not Be Moved," ala Pete Seeger. Then I discovered Bob Dylan, even before Peter Paul and Mary released Blowin' in the Wind. He became a major influence.

Less than two miles from my house, the Ash Grove had become California's folk music Mecca. I got to see some of the true greats, up close and personal: Doc Watson, Mississippi, John Hurt, Rev. Gary Davis, Lightnin' Hopkins, Buffy Saint-Marie and Howlin' Wolf, to name a few early on. At the same time, David Elson and I were working up versions of pop songs from the Beach Boys to the Coasters, Mariachi favorites or Marty Robbins. I expanded my album collection from Elvis and Harry Belafonte to include all of the above-named artists plus others such Segovia, Carlos Montoya [both great Spanish guitarists]. This led to formal lessons in classical and flamenco. By the age of 14, I had reached a decent level of proficiency.

I credit my sister for getting me involved in politics. I was outraged seeing the pictures of the dogs and firehoses used against "Negroes" in the South. This goes back to my feelings for Elsie and her Lewis back when I was "just a kid." Susie, who was now in her late teens, told me about Martin Luther King and let me know there was something I could do about the injustice. I soon joined the sit-ins and protests held in sympathy with the Freedom Riders. I also became a member of the youth versions of the Society Against Nuclear Explosions [SANE] and the Congress on Racial Equality [CORE].

Some minor spiritual stirrings arose around this time, as I heard artists like Rev. Gary Davis sing "Twelve Gates to the City" or Son House perform "John the Revelator" at the Ash Grove. Nevertheless, I was still pretty much a confirmed agnostic. On the other hand my identity as a non-religious Jew grew stronger through Camp JCA and folk dancing at the local chapter of Israeli labor group, Habonim. All of my friends were still Jewish, as were more than 50 percent of the kids at my school.

In the eighth grade my experience as an activist combined with my agnosticism to move me to protest being forced to say the Pledge of Allegiance each morning. I had always loved America and had no problem with "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." This was an wonderful ideal and I was glad to affirm it. But the "under God" part stuck in my craw. I didn't believe in God, so how could I pledge to "liberty and justice" in one breath when I had just been forced to affirm what I did not believe with the other? I soon found myself in the dreaded Boys' Vice Principal's office where I received one of Mr. Anderson's dreaded swats on the ass with infamous paddle. He should have known that wouldn't solved the problem. I could accept swats for mouthing off or bad language, but this was a matter of principle. I refused to comply. As I recall the word "suspension" was mentioned. That evening I discussed it with my mother. That wise, wonderful lady didn't blink an eye. She backed me up and we went together to Anderson's office to negotiate. The upshot was that he agreed I didn't have to say "under God" if I would agree to say the rest of the Pledge. To this day, even though I myself am now proud to say, "Under God," I steadfastly stand up for the rights of those who believe they shouldn't be forced to do so.

My senior yearbook predicted I would become the nation's head peace-marcher in 1984. Next to each graduate's name there was a column for "likes" and "favorite." Mine were Ray Charles and Bob Dylan. Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys were just over the horizon.

High School, here I come.