

My Memoirs - Chapter 2.1 - High School

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Here's a picture of me marching for integration with Marlon Brando and CORE

I discovered Blue Grass music after I started Fairfax High School. David Elson and I got wind of a school-night picking party at a laundromat in his neighborhood. I was blown away as kids my age strutted their stuff of banjos, mandolins, guitars and even a dobro. Soon, David and I had teamed up with mandolinist Herb Steiner for form my first band: Herb was a short, chubby, curly-headed guy with a stutter, an angelic smile and a wry sense humor. It was his idea to call ourselves The Pseudo Mountain Boys - a great name of a hillbilly band comprised of three Jewish teenagers from the city. We practiced almost every day after school. Herb, who was a year older, tutored David and me in the history and tradition of Blue Grass and we quickly gained proficiency in the genre. David, a technical genius, quickly learned the banjo, and I spent hundreds of hours honing my guitar skills by playing along with records by Doc Watson and Clarence White. I sang the lead, David added the high harmony and Herb was our emcee, stutter and all. Within a few months were joined by Pete Wise on fiddle and started playing at parties, coffee houses and pizza joints -- five dollars each, an extra-large Canadian bacon pizza, and all the Diet Coke we could drink.

One morning in 1963 Steve Chick rushed up to me the hall between classes with tears running down his eyes. "They shot the president!" he exclaimed, "President Kennedy is dead!" I suppose everyone old enough to remember knows where there were when that heard that horrible news. For us, Kennedy was the president who created the physical fitness program that we followed in junior high. He was the young leader who told us we would "support any friend, fight any foe" in the cause of freedom, and told us to "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for the country." Some of my innocence died that day, along with a whole generation's.

The Kennedy assassination did not dampen my commitment to civil rights and peace. I was elected Southern California president of Student Sane and vice-chair of the Student Congress on Racial Equality. Saturday afternoons found me at Michael Goff's house cranking out flyers on the mimeograph machine or organizing "mailing parties" to get the word out about the next sit-in, peace march or meeting. My political awareness grew as I realized that some of my fellow organizers were actual Communists, while others were socialists or just plain liberals. I counted myself a liberal but had no problem with socialists as long as they weren't into violence. Mike Goff was a card carrying Commie, and from him I learned what made the pro-Soviet types tick. There were also some Christians in the group, mostly Unitarians and Quakers. In CORE, I met Black Christians who were more theologically conservative, but I rarely talked religion with them, still being an agnostic.