

THE ROOTS OF THE SIXTIES: BERKELEY IN 1964

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I am still putting the pieces of time into various order covering the transition from the beat era to the hippie era, so bear with me. One of the things I did during that transition was live in Berkeley, California. Here is a little about that time. Back in 1964, when I lived there for a year, Berkeley was a college town like Ann Arbor was, but not like Ann Arbor. Moving there was like leaping into the future, because Berkeley was years ahead of Ann Arbor in most things. It gave me a real jolt relating to time, i.e., that time really is relative. Driving out there with all my things was also like driving from winter into perpetual summer. That was so different, at least for a while.

With what little money I had, I rented a small place off Telegraph Avenue on Haste Street. It was a one-room apartment with something like a mini-kitchen on the way to the bathroom, which was on the way to the alley behind. It was more like a Pullman Car than a box house and it was set back from the street through an arbor of ever-blooming fuchsia plants which always seemed to beckon to me from all sides. It was great. And so much happened there and then. I will give here just a taste.

I managed to find a part-time job clearing tables and washing dishes at the Café Mediterraneo at 2475 Telegraph Ave, less than a block from where I lived, and only three blocks from the Berkeley campus. It was hot sweaty work, but it at least put me within talking distance with the many Berkeley professors and hanger-outers who frequented the place. Best of all was the tiny Italian kitchen embedded in an alcove at the back of the coffee house. That was real food.

Run by a family of actual Italians, they made authentic Italian cuisine and inexpensively. I especially remember the ceramic oval baking dishes, little petite au gratins bakers in which they served lasagna. I loved that stuff and it was better than anything I have had since. What I didn't love so much was the son of the chef who thought he was an actor and was sure I was a dishwasher. We ended up in a fistfight wrestling in the dust of the alley behind the café, while his father tried to hit both of us on the head with a frying pan. It was time to move on from that job.

Then there was the long walk from campus way down to the marina by the bay to work the late shift at a seafood restaurant. I was there to degrease the kitchen, a job called the "closer," the worse work at any restaurant. I was the closer. I could hear them singing "Auld Lang Syne" every night through the walls of the kitchen, while I was up to by elbows in buckets of grease. I got out around 2 AM (or something like that) after having mopped the grease off the floor (twice!) and slowly made my way back up through Berkeley to my apartment and collapsed.

A little better was when I worked at Lucas Books on Bancroft Way and spent much of my time with my girlfriend Toby at her apartment nearby. Bookstores were more my speed. But the best job of all was as assistant manager of Discount Records on Telegraph Avenue. I had worked at the same chain back in Ann Arbor and knew a fair amount about music, so I kind of just fell into that job. Back then vinyl was still king, and I endlessly moved and removed armloads of records from place to place around the store. And of course, I was listening to more and more music, at that time mostly classical, which brings me to my next little story.

In Berkeley, along with all that was going on I met Jim Dixon, I don't remember exactly where or when. Things are a little blurry almost fifty years out. Dixon taught me about classical music. Not that I did not know any classical music already, I did, but he became a guide to a deeper knowledge than I could have imagined. Dixon lived in a small apartment down Telegraph, south of the campus. I don't remember what he did for a living, but I seem to remember he was connected to Discount Records where I worked, but perhaps in the San Francisco branch. He still lived in Berkeley. Something like that.

And I also had to be somewhat careful, because Dixon was gay and not shy about it. He, like me, had set about to educate himself and he was a prodigious reader, far beyond what I would undertake, and I was quite the reader. It was not his reading that interested me; I was reader enough. It was his knowledge of classical music and most of all his approach that I found fascinating. It was profound, to say the least, and he was willing to share this knowledge.

What Dixon knew went way beyond facts, history, scores, and recordings. He never knew just one performance; it seemed that he knew them all, and intimately. There was not just one recording of a Beethoven's 9th Symphony, there were dozens to be known, and he knew them in such detail that I was initiated just listening to him expound. Most important of all, he did not just listen to music; he 'listened' to music actively. Sitting through a performance with Dixon was something to remember.

I must confess that before Dixon I listened to classical music somewhat passively. After all, my whole generation was quite passive if you stop and think about it. We listened to music, read books, looked at art, watched movies, etc., all quite passive activities. Dixon listened actively, meaning he more or less physically conducted each piece with fierce energy. It was eyeball to eyeball if you were in the same room with him, and there was no distraction. You had to be there 100% of the time. There was no avoiding being present. It just had never occurred to me to 'interact' with music to this degree.

We became good friends. As for his gayness, I had to be very careful not to give him any encouragement, and he was gentleman enough never to cross the line, but this too kept me on my toes when I was with him. We began to listen actively together and Dixon gradually led me through the major catalog of recorded music, composer by composer, and within a composer, piece by piece, and within each piece, it was about orchestras and then conductors and soloists. This went on for many months. He taught me how to do it myself.

To a great degree, what Jim Dixon liked in classical music, I came to like. He just knew what was good and I could find no fault with his knowledge. As a critic, you know I tried. And I am not going to take up time here to go into all of the many composers and periods of music that we worked through. But I owe it to you to make sure you understand how granular this can be. I will take one composer as an example, and even then tread lightly with you on the details. Let's take Bach.

Johann Sebastian Bach is without a doubt my favorite composer. Mozart is a close second, but still trails the master to my ear. I find the music of Bach, especially his later works, simply profound. With Dixon, I worked through almost all of Bach and there are at least 1000 known works of Johann Sebastian. Let's start with a few of the vocal pieces.

Of his four passions (the four gospels), it was the St. John Passion that struck me, and I was captivated from the very first notes of the 36 bars before the chorus explodes with "Her, unser Herrscher..." It puts even the Catholic "Dies Irae" (Day of Wrath, Day of Mourning...) with its

hypnotic theme to shame, and I was raised with that. And of course the oratorios and masses, in particular the "Mass in B Minor" and "Magnificat in D Major."

And the Bach cantatas: There are hundreds of Bach cantatas and at one time I owned them all. My most favorite is Cantata #110 "Unser Mund sei voll Lachens" (May our mouth be full of laughter), and in that cantata the aria "Was ist ein Menschenkind (What is a child of man?). I could go on. And years ago I made a point of giving a copy (often of different performances) of Bach's six "Suites for Solo Cello" to each of my kids. These are perhaps the most approachable Bach pieces I know, and they are above reproach. The six "Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin" are not far behind in my experience.

But beyond the incredible vocal and orchestral music of Bach, it is the keyboard works that I hold in highest esteem, and there are so many of them that are sheer perfection. Starting with the "Well-Tempered Clavier," pieces anyone can listen to, they proceed from there. There are the "Inventions and Sinfonias," the "Goldberg Variations," the "French Suites" and the "English Suites," and so on. And of course, the works for keyboard and instruments, my most very favorite being the four "Sonatas for viola da gamba (small cello) and Keyboard." And we have not touched on the many, many preludes and fugues, especially the "Schubler Chorales." They are devastating.

But my highest praise and deepest infatuation is reserved for a few works Bach did toward the end of his life, in particular the "Canonic Variations on 'Vom Himmel Hoch,'" the "Musical Offering," the "Trio Sonatas, and finally, and in my opinion his best work, "Kunst der Fuge," "The Art of the Fugue." If I could take only one classical piece of music to the desert island, it would be "The Art of the Fugue," about the last piece Bach ever wrote, and I would be hard pressed to decide whether I wanted to hear it on the organ, harpsichord, or string quartet. I probably would want it on the organ, and the incredible performance by Helmut Walcha.

"The Art of the Fugue" is, bar none, for me the most deeply satisfying classical music I have ever found. Although unfinished at Bach's death, it contains 14 fugues and 4 canons. The work ends with a fugue that just stops in midair, unfinished. All kinds of white papers have been written on what this piece is all about, including that it was written as an intellectual exercise, not to actually to be played, but to express various deep Pythagorean philosophies. Of course it was written to be played, and for the keyboard, IMO, and the organ is where I like to hear it most.

There you have a taste of the kind of detail I absorbed while listening to classical music with James Dixon. I came to have a taste for very strong performances, and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, back in the day, was about as good as it gets for me. Conductors like Ferenc Fricsay, Karl Bohm, some Herbert von Karajan, and even a few by Wilhelm Furtwängler had the proper "Sturm und Drang" (storm and urge) for my taste.

I won't go on in this vein, but I wanted to give you chapter and verse here enough for you to at least know there is a world of classical music out there that sadly is mostly forgotten today. None of my four children know classical music to any marked degree, and of course I would not 'make' them listen. It is up to them and up to you. But there are deep life lessons coded in those scores, if you can bring them to life in your mind.

And James Dixon was able to do that for me, way back then, and I am forever indebted to him for that.. It took an enormous amount of listening and listening, but it was joyous and deep. I have no idea where Dixon is today, and if anyone out there knows, please let me know how to

reach him.

I am still thinking through the Sixties and its prologue. What about you? Do you want more about this personal history?

