

What it's all about

by Geri Sullivan

Thanks to Emma Bull, Fred Levy Haskell, Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Walter Willis, Don Fitch, the sensibilities of Bruce Pelz and Robbie Cantor, and countless magical moments along the way, I wound up running the fan lounge at L.A.con III in 1996.

On Saturday afternoon of that Worldcon, Doug Faunt and I went on a remarkable shopping trip. We spent nearly \$500 donated by Tor Books and another couple of hundred from the fan lounge budget stocking up for the rest of the weekend. In specific, we were shopping for alien food to serve at the book release party for **The White Papers** by Worldcon Guest of Honor James White, which was scheduled for the next afternoon.

Doug and I soon had three carts full of food and drink, but a stand-alone display of hazelnut beer caught my eye. Now, I don't usually care for flavored beers, and nut brown ales don't do a thing for me. But the concept caught my fancy. I was short enough on sleep that I made room for not one 6-pack, but two.

Doug and I did the shopping; Tor, NESFA, and L.A.con III were the party hosts. The sushi intermixed with gummi worms was...memorable, as were the many other platters of alien foodstuffs Claire Eddy, Teresa Nielsen Hayden, and Ulrika O'Brien created Sunday morning.

That night in the fan lounge, Randy Byers found the remaining hazelnut brew. I remember the smile of happy astonishment on his face. He was soon searching through the filled, iced serving tureens for another bottle. I snagged one myself. Damn, that hazelnut beer was good.

Later in the weekend, I tagged along with a group heading back to Frank Lunney's room for a break from the party downstairs. My voice was gone, exhaustion was but a state I aspired to. But I remember Randy sitting over on the other bed. He added to the good company there.

2 • What it's all about

Months later, Randy sent me a copy of *Travels with the Wild Child*. It knocked my socks off. Randy's standalone fanzine bore witness and tribute to his friendship with Tami Vining and an intense journey they shared. *Travels with the Wild Child* inspired me; it intimidated me. I wanted to write a similar tale of a far different intense trip I'd taken with Jack Targonski the previous June. I'd been uncertain it could even be done, or if I could do it justice. Randy's fanzine showed me how while setting the achievement bar incredibly high.

So I sent him an electronic letter of comment. Another letter of comment I wrote, to Walt Willis back in 1987, led to wondrous things. Randy's reaction to my letter in the early months of 1997 looked like it might be setting us on a similar path of lifelong friendship.

Randy's fanzine, and our subsequent conversation, also prompted me to get off my butt and write "Ashes. Dust. 9 Electric Razors," the account of my trip to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to help Jack after his father died. I later published it in *Idea* #11. It's a matter of personal judgment whether my tale measured up to the level Randy achieved; I like to think it did. One thing's absolutely clear: our friendship took root and flourished in the conversations Randy and I had via email throughout the writing and editing process.

Fast forward to Wednesday, October 8, 1997. My busy season had been going full force for months. Sleep deprivation had become a way of life and any hypothetical spare moment was devoted to the well-being and future of Minicon and the Minnesota Science Fiction Society. I was a member of the Revolutionary Council that offered up the High Resolution Minicon proposal to address and hopefully fix the severe problems of size, complexity, and sustainability that Minicon had struggled with for years. I was also on the Minn-stf Board of Directors, the group responsible for appointing the leadership for Minicon 34 and for directing the future of Minicon.

Arrgh. The last few months of working on the future of Minicon had been enormously wondrous, difficult, exciting, and intimidating. Kind of like it was when I was writing *Ashes/Dust*, although the stakes were far higher.

In the midst of all this work, sleep deprivation, and fannish concern, I opened an email query from Randy. He had 2.5 hours between flights at the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport; would I like to kill the time with him over a beer?

I jumped at the opportunity. Randy's layover offered a few hours of fun to break up yet another Lucrative Week from Hell on the work front. It also offered welcome time with someone whose fannish interests and concerns didn't revolve around Minicon. That sounded like a win all around.

Driving to the airport, a few flashes of anxiety flitted their way through my sleep-deprived brain: what if he'd grown hair? I wouldn't recognize him. Our email had been direct and intimate in all the good ways letters can be, but we had little experience with each other in person. This could be awkward. Until that point, I'd assumed we'd next run into each other at a convention, with lots of other friends around to help us easily build a conversation. Things don't work that way at an airport. (Unless you're Jon Singer, of course.)

Randy's face was familiar, his scalp still smooth, and we fell into easy conversation over a Brit-sized pint of Leinenkugel's Red lager. The Leinie's was okay, but nowhere as interesting as that hazelnut beer in Anaheim. We talked about our jobs and the training session Randy had been at in Ohio. Then there were the fannish parts of our lives: the programming I'd be doing at Loscon, a brief discussion of Minicon and what Randy had heard about it, and how we both planned to be at Potlatch in January. We gossiped about mutual friends. (Gasp! Fans do that?) There was plenty of time left when we'd finished the beers, so I suggested driving over to Minnehaha Falls while we listened to the Dan Bern CD I'd brought along in the hope of playing a song or three I wanted Randy to hear.

Where's Dan Bern come into this story? In July of '97, Dan performed at the Winnipeg Folk Festival. He delighted the fannish Baggiecon contingent with his lyrics about evolution and how Darwin was wrong. Fifteen thousand people at the festival's main stage sang along with the chorus: "Aliens came...and fucked the monkey; they fucked the monkey." Oh, yeah.

After Baggiecon, I wrote to Randy:

"We're home, a tad sunburned, mosquito-bitten, and blistered, but mostly exhausted. The Winnipeg Folk Festival was a bit more of an endurance ordeal than usual, with brutal sun, strong winds, and a few too many hours of rain. But there were good times, too, and new artists to discover. One in particular reminded me of you, and I don't know exactly why. I think it's 'cause he said things in an interesting, entertaining way, and seemed to be really getting off on the same thing while also broadcasting his own uncertainties and

4 • What it's all about

vulnerability. (Or maybe it was his facial features, overall body build, and mostly-shaved head with the orange streaks. Actually, Dan Bern's head wasn't shaved, but his light blonde hair was so closely cropped that you couldn't tell from main stage, where I first saw him.) He conveys a stronger sense of the absurd than you do, so there's enough of a difference to keep me wondering why he made me keep thinking of you.

"Dan's voice and performance style is very Dylanesque (as in Bobby Zimmerman).

"I hope he enjoys enough success to stick around for awhile and gain a national audience. (Or maybe he already has one, and I'm just behind the times.)

Meanwhile, here are the lyrics to the first song I heard him perform:"

Jerusalem by Dan Bern

When I tell you that I love you, don't test my love,
Accept my love
Don't test my love
'Cause maybe I don't love you all that much

Don't ask what kind of music I'm going to play tonight
Just stay awhile
Hear for yourself awhile
And if you must put me in a box make sure it's a big box
with lots of windows
and a door to walk through
and a nice, high chimney
So we can burn, burn, burn everything that we don't like
and watch the ashes
fly up to heaven
maybe all the way to India
I'd like that.

All the ancient kings came to my door
They said, 'You wanna be an ancient king, too?'
I said, 'Oh yes, very much
But I think my timing's wrong'
They said, 'Time is relative
Or did you misread Einstein?'
I said, 'Do you really mean it?'
They said, 'What do you think we come here for?
Our goddamned health or something?'

Everybody's waiting for the Messiah
The Jews are waiting
Christians are waiting
Also the Muslims
It's like everybody's waiting
They've been waiting a long time
I know how I hate to wait
Like even for a bus or something
An important phone call
So I can just imagine
How darned impatient
Everybody must be getting
So I think it's time now
Time to reveal myself
I am the Messiah
I am the Messiah

Yes, I think you heard me right
I am the Messiah
I was going to wait 'til next year
Build up the suspense a little
Make it a really big surprise
But I could not resist
It's like when you've got a really big secret,
You're just bursting to tell someone.
It was sort of like that with this,
and now that I've told you
I feel this great weight lifted
Dr. Nussbaum was right...
He's my therapist
He said 'Get it out in the open.'

I spent ten long days in Jerusalem
Mmmm, Jerusalem, sweet Jerusalem
And all I ate was olives
Nothing but olives
Mountains of olives
It was a good ten days
I like olives
I like you, too,
So when I tell you that I love you, don't test my love,
Accept my love
Don't test my love
'Cause maybe I don't love you all that much

“Jerusalem” was the first song on the CD and Randy’s response to it was everything I’d hoped for and more. I’m cautious about inflicting favorite musicians and tunes on friends, especially friends whose musical tastes overlap with my own only around the edges. Not to mention friends whose record collection I haven’t seen, or until we’ve shared one or more musical events. *Travels with the Wild Child* told me a lot about Randy and music. I knew it was a connection point between us, but more for what music does and what people do with music rather than because of any given musician or song.

We arrived at Minnehaha Park and sat in the car, listening to another song or two. When I wasn’t watching Randy’s reactions to my favorite album cuts, I closed my eyes and remembered all the joys of Baggiecon, remembered seeing Dan Bern perform. And I finally understood why that experience had made me think so much of this friend I hardly knew: both of these men had 10,000 watt smiles. Dan’s enjoyment while performing on the Manitoba prairie was just like Randy’s enjoyment of that hazelnut beer, just like the companionship of friends in Frank’s room – even friends he didn’t know yet. Randy grinned at each of Dan’s lyric twists, just like Dan grinned when he performed them.

Minnehaha Park was under construction, but we walked through the rubble for a look at the falls and found the geological site marker that explained a bit about how they were formed. I told Randy about the first time I ever saw the Flying Karamazovs, not in a show but in that very park back in 1980. They were filming a friend’s wedding, and I watched them run up a couple hundred steps while carrying heavy, professional camera equipment. I could see they were in stunning physical condition and found myself wondering if they were acrobats. Then they started juggling and everything went “click.” I still don’t know whose wedding it was, but I bet someone in fandom does.

We talked about this, we talked about that, and we listened to more Dan Bern tunes on the way back to the airport. There was time for one more beer and Randy’s departure gate was conveniently next to the airport’s Samuel Adams ersatz brew pub. (Real Sam Adams, but certainly not brewed there. And, yes, this was back in the day when anyone could go out to the gates and to the bars next to them.) We talked still more over tall, tasty Honey Porters. Our conversation turned heavy as we touched on our experiences with people who had attempted or committed suicide.

May 2018 · 7

It wasn't your usual airport bar conversation. Or maybe it was; I don't have a lot of experience in the genre. But I do have a fair amount of experience in fandom, and with the unexpected riches it offers. Where else does one small connection lead to a conversation and then a friendship, moment by moment, time after time, until you have a richly-colored, tightly-woven cloth made up of shared stories and experiences? Where else do people carve out an hour or two from an impossible schedule to share a beer or two in an airport bar? Where else do such small actions turn out to be just the thing to re-establish the equilibrium and perspective needed to guide us through times of intense stress?

The beer helped, the music helped, but neither was the defining factor of our time together that Wednesday afternoon. It was the fan from Seattle reaching out with a question, "I'll be in your airport for a couple of hours. Can we get together?" It was the fan from Minneapolis responding, "Oh, yes. That will be a delight" and carving the time out of a day when it simply didn't exist. It was a friendship making the jump from written words to face-to-face conversation, with all of the smiles and knowing looks that come when people click. It was a friendship started over Randy's appreciation of the personal touch I brought to the L.A. con III fan lounge, a friendship that began to develop when I expressed my appreciation of him writing *Travels with the Wild Child* and sending a copy my way. The correspondence that followed suggested it was likely to be the sort of friendship to last a lifetime. And so it was. The next twenty years brought remarkable and thoroughly unexpected adventures, road trips, beer tastings, fanzines, amusements, and joys our way, and many more of those 10,000 watt smiles, too. I give thanks for each and every one.

This is fandom. This is friendship.
This is what it's all about.

A SMOTHRA publication by Geri Sullivan, fwa

Originally written October 1997 and sent to Randy via email. He gave permission for its publication, which was then delayed 20+ years because reasons.

A draft was published for Randy's family and friends as we gathered in La Push, WA, March 1-4, 2018, to hike, reminisce, be together, and spread his ashes as well as for friends in Seattle who came to memorial pub gatherings held at Elysian in Tangleton before and Brouwer's in Fremont following the trip to La Push.

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