

## FOREWORD

**T**elegraph Avenue, Berkeley, late October, 1971, already late in the day, and still time passes, Berkeley mean time, hard and fast time, sidereal time, time for the sidewalk stars and bizarres, wonder-where-they-are-now time, and think what has come down, think what it has come down to, think that it has come down to this.

Nightfall approaches, street lights switch on to dispel the early gloom, and at this lost hour the Avenue is a concrete stage diminished for want of players. Viewed from the window of a second floor apartment across from the Caffé Mediterraneo, little in the deserted block below indicates the turmoil of its history, the lives that have peopled, the people who have lived, this street.

Only ten years ago, Telegraph Avenue was no more than a thoroughfare running in from Oakland to terminate at the University of California. Near campus it was lined with service industries for students—restaurants, clothing stores, cafés, stationers, an art film house. As if to insist that change is illusory, the campus-town cast of Telegraph Avenue persists today, flourishing primarily in the first three blocks south from campus back (down) toward Oakland. Concessions have been remodeled, products updated, but the essence persists, business as usual. Developing habits for the future, students queue at the counters of the Bank of America.

Notwithstanding these time-worn transactions, one notices the bricked-over windowless facade of the bank building, and one remembers. In 1968, businesses on the Avenue were repeatedly trashed in the wake of the Chicago Democratic Convention. And in 1969, during the struggle for what became known as People's Park, hundreds of sheriff's deputies occupied the Avenue, dispersed demonstrators with pepper fog, fired buckshot, killed one bystander, and blinded another.

If the first three blocks of the Avenue running south from campus give only occasional clues to the tumult which has marked Berkeley's history since the early sixties, one need

only walk one more block to be in another realm, to be “on the Ave.” Most weekend afternoons this block teems with bikers, junkies, hustlers, runaways, panhandlers, musicians, politicians getting down with the “lumpenproletariat,” tourists, and police. Though for many the block is no more than a freak show, there are some for whom it is home.

Of those who find the Avenue a refuge or simply a good place to bottom out, most, whatever their backgrounds, are beneficiaries and casualties of dreams and nightmares peculiar—at least in degree—to Berkeley life. One habitué of the Caffé Mediterraneo, for example, a professed revolutionary, is supported by the State of California’s Aid to the Totally Disabled. In flusher times, having angled hard to win the monthly payments, he believed he was ripping off the system. Now, revolution apparently ever more remote, he fears he was bought off for a paltry two hundred dollars a month. Or, worse, that A.T.D. was designed for, among other lunatics, beneficiaries imagining themselves to be leftists waiting for an imminent revolution.

He’s not the only regular on the Avenue to have banked on quick and cataclysmic transformation, then to learn (depending on the degree of faith) that it wouldn’t happen or that the struggle would be long and grim. Even for those never possessed by such visions, this block does, after all, adjoin the vacant lot that was to have been People’s Park, and though the takeover of a piece of University property by “the people” would hardly have been tantamount to seizure of political power, by 1969 the lesser would have been allowed to stand for the greater. And in any case, the plan had enormous appeal, incorporating as it did direct political action, care for the immediate community, and ecological concern. Hell, the energy was high, everyone was up for it, but when the shooting stopped there was no park at all.

Even as the 50,000 marchers went home, other visions of transformation were also proving hard to realize. Those who had given their all to, for instance, psychedelics, were forced to regroup, wait, or seek another Way.

Confronting the denial of aspirations shared and energized by so many, aspirations often given first vitality in Berkeley, those who remain on the block stand in the shadow of the past. The counterculture now is more diffuse, Berkeley itself no longer avant-garde. Frequenters of the Avenue suffer the confusion of those whom a promise has failed. The circle turns. The burst of innovation, exhilaration, and discovery is gone almost faster than it appeared. Another cycle—or curve, or straight line—begins.

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Of the regulars now on the block, two groups catch the eye and frame the spectrum of possibilities. At the nether boundary the junkies make their death rounds, hustling rations daily in this public place. For years the Avenue has hosted the junkie convention,



and while their stylized suicide has often seemed both needlessly pessimistic and inexcusably private, in these new hard times their way only resembles other modes gone wrong. In any season, however, the junkies are blessed in being able to distinguish pleasure from pain, and their days do have an accessible pattern. They have a handle, and if it is only the handle on death's door, still and all, they have a handle. In the range of life on the street they speak for what is closed, having opted for the only certainty.

Jesus freaks to the contrary, little promise of redemption manifests itself on the Avenue, and there is no intimation that the last shall be first. Here salvation is momentary if at all, and though many regulars maintain their hustles, the ease is gone. A collective power has vanished. All the many fragments cannot and do not recreate the whole.

On days marked by long shots and hedged bets, when the prevailing myths are clearly too frail to offer further sustenance, when denizens of the Mediterranean seem no more than exiles from the larger culture, then the junkies are all too visible a portent of what's to come. One looks for anything to counterbalance them, if only for the small pleasure of a conceptual alternative. Ah, sure, the children. Hope of the future. Vindication of the past. Those for whom life is still open, those who are sure to turn a profit on our losses.

In fact there are children who take their place as regulars on the block. Some abandoned by their families, some unable to coexist with their parents and so on their own by mutual agreement or exhaustion, these twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds gather daily, have their own turf and routine, and are both sheltered and exploited by those for whom the street is also the center of life.

They startle the eye, these kids, just by the intrusion of their energy on the general lassitude of the block in such in-between times. They tease each other, dance around, pull off daredevil bicycle stunts, play up to older friends, bait the adults who patronize them, they hustle spare change, smoke some dope, sit on the curb appraising the action, they zip in and out of the fray. Quick with words, exposed but trying to be cool, full of the braggadocio of the insecure, restlessly searching for firm ground, they cross and recross the street, just a step ahead of what threatens to bring them down.

Many of the kids have no permanent place to live, no means of support, and couldn't attend Berkeley schools if they wanted (for lack of a parent with a Berkeley residence). Cut off from their peers save for an occasional sally through school to scream "jailbreak, jailbreak," they stick together on the street. Construing their difficulties as typical of the lives of the young, off the conveyor belt which might have advanced them to the rewards of a larger world, they piece together the dreams and myths of the block and make them their own.

Subject to a wide range of come-ons, committed to the hip ideal of laissez-faire yet with no choice but to tolerate the eccentricities of those around them, the children are

driven, and keep a performance going to keep themselves going. Iconoclastic, intolerant of pretense, anxiously aware of the limits of their capacity to care for each other, willy-nilly they try to carry it all off.

Sometimes, wanting get-back at a world which has allowed them such “liberation,” they make scapegoats of those who come to gawk. Though the sheer presence and pathetically commercial hipness of the straights signifies to Avenue regulars that their way is envied, and though the straights do hunger for what they imagine to be the freedoms of those on the block, the children have no place else. Putting the straights down, hard, but unable to go home with them, they stay to live the life.

Struggling with the fear that they are losing something, the children are backed by those who, having seen the revolution recede just as it promised to arrive, continue to wait for the day, who read in the children’s lives all the freedom they, as adults, imagine they would have wanted for themselves when they were younger. One of the girls takes a lover, one of the boys lives with a homosexual, whatever, this is seen as free, experimental, even revolutionary. That the girl takes the lover who will do her the least harm, that the boy is starved for affection of any kind, none of this is articulated. No one wants to be brought down.

The perils of street life notwithstanding, the children have an apparently infinite capacity for reprieve. They play to an image of themselves as the Dead End Kids, and are in fact skilled survivalists, steadily avoiding the most dangerous regulars on the street, locating meals, shelter, and even a few adults they can trust.

Sometimes, between the dance routines and bursts of song, the pace of performing relents, they ease up on the teasing, and for an instant one catches them in scale. How small they are, how much sustenance they need. There can be no condescension, they will not allow it, they are remarkable to hold it all together. But even so, even so, they have a very long way ahead of them.

For a moment there is no motion, no commotion. The children sit on the curb, pensive, fragile in such calm, close to some street dogs, strays with strays. And then, in a flash, they’re up and back in action, parodying the cop who parades the block. “Help, help, Mister Policeman,” they cry, “save us, please, save us.” Believing that they only need saving from themselves, he wouldn’t if he could.

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As the day ends, regulars on the block prepare to celebrate Halloween, and it is clearly one of their holidays, as Thanksgiving, say, could never be. Momentarily out of sight, the children rematerialize in full costume, faces painted, eyes done up with glitter to imitate Mick Jagger’s androgynous teases, pushing the sexual borderlines to see if there’s any resistance anywhere. One boy appears carrying a handbag, dressed in black cape,

gold tights, ballet slippers, and red satin shorts, fingers thick with massive celluloid rings. His grin, forever beyond control, spreads to expose the rubber bands on his braces.

And then, off to their witches' sabbaths, he and the other children are gone. A moment later night falls, and the street is soon empty. So many lives out of sight, a seeming universe that suddenly is no more?

Nacio Jan Brown's photographs stop time and record this circle of life he knows so well, saving it from the too-quick and too-dead past for us to view with new eyes. Yet even as, through the grace of his commitment to this block, we take in what is already long gone, surely the lives continue, and, though nothing remains the same, surely right now, at this very moment, the block is alive, hustlers running their games, dogs darting through traffic, junkies yearning to score, regulars at their appointed tables in the *Mediterraneum* taking in the endless changes while waiting for the apocalypse, and the children dancing by, bantering, teasing, mimicking, testing, testing, looking over their shoulders to see if anyone is watching, to see if anyone is there.

THOMAS FARBER



# Rag Theater

The 2400 block of Telegraph Avenue  
1969-1973

Photographs and Notes by  
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