



What We Thought

Sometimes it hits me afresh what we actually thought about things on Vendome Place. Little snippets of conversation waft back to me, and I realize how hopeless our undertaking was, given the intellectual underpinnings.

“I have a new theory of the gamut of human expression,” Michael announced over a bowlful. “Boom, then squeak.”

“Boom, squeak,” we all repeated, as if it were handed down on tablets.

“It begins with a boom,” Michael said. “But it concludes with a squeak.”

I don't know what he was trying to say, but one could never be sure what constituted wisdom, or pith, or deep-in-the-hole satire. Either way, it might be profoundly valuable, a remark to repeat for weeks, something shared, a rune scratched on the nighttime sky.

Rennie told us that Brewer & Shipley seemed like real mellow dudes, but when she lived across the hall from them, in Boston, they were speedfreaks who boarded themselves in a closet and composed until their first album was set.

We all nodded like that was a really useful insight.

We knew that speed killed, but was death really so bad? Not if it was your ego that did the dying. Ego was bad. Love was good. It was a disadvantage to be old, unless you were like an Indian. Politics was a bad vibe, unless you were for revolution. Clapton was God, who was also dead, which was maybe not bad. Things materialized, and took shape, and they were almost utterable, on the tip of your tongue – but when you tried to utter them, it was all gibberish. The beauty of the world turned into Mickey Mouse chomping a stogie. Keep on truckin'. All is bliss.

It was hard to synthesize it all into one solid thing, so instead we tended to fragment into different kinds of hippies. Different faces of the truth. Broken pieces of the whole.

I believed that dropping out of college was a total plus for me, that there was zero downside to running away and playing house with friends. I truly and really believed that the Age of Aquarius was upon us, that the world was forever changing, that it was on the brink of being vastly for the better, and that liberal arts educations would be consummate hindrances, not helps, in the years ahead of us.

Back at college, on my occasional sober days, I had been a budding Kierkegaard scholar. I still had an Incomplete in a Kierkegaard course to work through -- if I could only bring myself to finish the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, or *The Sickness Unto Death*, and write a report.

But I could not do it. You can't read Kierkegaard if you are high. It is not possible. Kierkegaard is too hard, and too much of his time, Denmark, which was battling through its own peculiar Victorian Lutheran madness. Kierkegaard was Loki, a shape-shifter, hiding behind a dozen laughing personae.

Instead of digging into him you got high and agonized at the uncompletable tasks piling up in an imaginary closet, books unread, notes untaken, languages unmastered. And you smiled and pretended to be post-intellectual, and all that stuff was behind you now, fluttering away in the rearview mirror of life, But in your guilty heart you've just slid a few rungs lower on the ladder of being. You've just tossed a few more books in the bonfire.

We believed the political system was doomed, that it would wither and die more or less like Marx predicted. Only we thought it would happen worldwide, to communist countries as well. The hippies were taking over the world with flowers, and if you didn't take our flowers, we would blow your ass up with a bomb, we would blow your university up, we would make retreat impossible by burning the libraries until black smoke ushered in the new age. People we respected, like John Lennon, were calling for world revolution. At least, he did on Monday; by Tuesday he was saying something else.

The fact that our ostensible leaders didn't agree on much of anything – what did Led Zeppelin even believe, for that matter? – was no matter for concern. The fact that they relied entirely upon our begged or borrowed spare change to plug in their amps and buy smoke-tinted windows for their superstar Rollsies meant nothing. Never mind that they sounded no less confused or incomplete or unauthoritative than the stoniest, most full-of-shit knucklehead sucking on last night's pipe, who tried to say something to the point, something worth passing on in the oral fireside tradition that was still forming, still gelatinous in our generation, but busted down giggling and rolling on the carpet instead.

I had been to demonstrations, and I had cursed, and I had talked myself into hating the pigs -- I got my foot broken once at a Free Press concert at Mussel Beach, where the police walked right into us. But deep down I surely knew that all this talk of the power structure would melt away once a few of us acquired any meaningful power. The pigs would melt away like bacon. The new age would dawn and all those old

encumbrances would slide off like discarded skin.

If everyone sat around and got stoned and got the munchies every day of their lives, who would be our doctors, architects, lawyers, etc.? Surely the people who stayed in school and got their degrees, and only smoked the pipe occasionally would have a tremendous leg up on the rest of us. But I couldn't think it through that way -- I imagined that a wave of benighted medievalism was overtaking our society and we would momentarily rid ourselves of all the awful technology, the ugly clothes, the color television, and over-the-counter prescriptions, and every family or commune would grow its own herbal medicines, and even those of us who had forsaken traditional dental care would not be asked to pay the price, bad teeth would be healed with eucalyptus and clove, and cancer spirited away by hot stones, banked against the flesh.

We believed that we were the first wave, the avant garde, the stormtroopers of an irresistible change, away from centralized, bureaucratized manipulation, and towards openness, simplicity and love.

And we honestly believed we were helping one another, when in truth I think I had but one friend through all of 1969, Robert, who would have walked through fire for me. No one of us cared enough to stop another of us in the tracks of his excess and say, hold on, friend, it's all right, or I'm worried about you, or I know that you're hurting, and I'm hurting, too.

We dreamed that we were shiny and new, that we were children of love, with no histories, no families, no baggage from the ugliness that used to be real, but which was now no more real than the haunting geometric shapes that swam before our eyes.

We believed that the whole world that was described for us by eyewitnesses was a lie, and that all that existed was the visions that made us gasp, and grasp for, and then collapsed in our fingers the moment we tried to put them to words.

What can I say? We were young, and determined to have our

good time in our own way, and we would brook no argument, and we had the power to make good on this leap off the cliff, until the year wore down, and we had splattered ourselves on the walls of the world.

Kierkegaard, I let you down, and I'm sorry.