

A Brief (but full) WHRB Life-History—Nov. 22-Dec. 15, 1963

2 life-changing jazz shows (one recorded)

In the fall of 1963, I returned from a year on the road energized for junior year. Along the way, I'd discovered jazz, flamenco & the New World Symphony, yet back in Cambridge, living over a laundry on Mass. Ave, I lacked even a radio. Being a musical ignoramus, WHRB provided a way for me to open these new worlds further, especially jazz.

First drawn to jazz by poetry & smokey city dives, I'd never played an instrument, but loved what I heard, could snap my fingers, tap my knees, & be moved. A sometime trumpeter friend (Buddy Bloom, whom I'd met near Malaga at the writer Jerry Weil's house, listening to *Sketches of Spain*), brought me to see Miles in NYC that summer. The master was not only hot that night, but particularly so for Buddy's wife, Rudi, a dancer, so we passed on the party after.

That high point notwithstanding, I probably couldn't tell my oboe from my elbow on the listening test administered by the comp director (John Thorndike, as I recall). Despite not being able to carry a tune in a bucket, I'd discovered my speaking voice in high school, covering the ground from debate, drama & mock-convention keynote to humorous sketch & beat poetry with bongos. The studio microphone was most intimate & sweetest of all—I loved it, all the more for the station being so low-key & welcoming.

I never comped the Lampoon, Advocate or Crimson for comparison—though I'd ended up at Harvard thanks to a Crimson workshop for high school editors. Smart money might have predicted I'd head into journalism. Having helped edit *The Yardling*, I even earned a Newspaper Fund Scholarship working at *The Wall Street Journal* in San Francisco, though actually cruising Steinbeck country more than corporate affairs. (Yet here I am, still reporting.) Nevertheless, I left journalism behind on my year off to follow the call of the wild & groovy instead.

WHRB's standards must not have been very high, probably a function of how much air-time needed volunteers. With home close to Central Square, the station was a handy refuge, a place to relax while browsing albums between classes. Often it seemed as if no one else was around, besides a closeted announcer & engineer on the other side of the glass, but my time turned out so limited, maybe it as just that I'd hardly met anyone before I was gone....

Whatever my on-air schedule actually was, I only remember doing *two programs*—but what historic ones these were! The first was morning jazz Nov. 22, reading the news of the presidential plane hopping from Ft. Worth to Dallas at the end, after which I went home for a nap, having stayed up the night before (my way of being sure of being on time). My bell rang a few hours later—a classmate I'd met the year before in Gibraltar, knowing I had no radio, had come by to tell me the news from Dallas, inviting me to his place later.

Gerard (Haase-Dubosc) & I passed each other going in opposite directions in Paris once, without stopping to trace the familiarity (just each looking back & nodding), but when our paths crossed again, in Gibraltar, we did. Besides having gone to rival high schools, the sense of recognition came from being classmates, & assigned to the same house. We'd stood in shared lines & had eaten in the same dining halls for two years. Running into each other again in Cambridge, we picked up our conversation on travel, Asian literature & American politics....

I'd been at JFK's nomination acceptance speech in the L.A. Coliseum, and had watched from my corner room in Matthews freshman year while the student throng surrounded him in a jostling mass below. That fall of 1960, we'd even splashed Nixon's perspiring mug on the cover of *The Yardling* with the famous used-car question (not original to us), a backhanded way of supporting our "favorite son." I point this trivia out to highlight how the shock of what happened that day changed everything tonally, along with personal & national histories.

We were not alone at Harvard in feeling the loss as "*one of our own, a part of us.*" More than fifty years later, that event stands out for having had the most historical impact of any in our era or on our generation. With more assassinations, war, and presidential resignation to follow, the next biggest impact may still be attributed to the Cuban Missile Crisis, ironically for what *didn't happen*, key aspects coming to light only decades later.

Back at the station, I picked up a bit of teletype print-out (UPI, I think) from a pile on the floor, with early adds on the event, later passed along to my NY friends, Buddy & Trudi. Did others pick up bits, I wonder, or were any saved in the station's archives? I'm guessing most teletype runoff went straight to the trash bin in those days, but maybe in this case some pieces were collected—the first barely coherent drafts of a history still incomplete, despite having been seen from so many more angles since (even inside the car from which the reports were called in).

At the intersection of national & personal histories, an unpredictable ricochet of the impact began for me at Gerard's apartment—my first visit, in return for him bringing me the news. There I met a Radcliffe classmate (Virginia "Ginny" Richardson), who had even listened to morning jazz. We may also have passed each other on the streets of Paris & elsewhere, it turns out; then, soon after noticed each other briefly "across a crowded room" at a house dance.

A very special Jazz 'Round Midnight program helped complete the connection, starting Saturday night Dec. 14, finishing early Dec. 15, my 21st birthday! For such an historic occasion, I'd gathered all the jazz that moved &/or intrigued me the most, and though I owned no player, brought a blank tape to record the show. Years later, I copied from reel to cassette, so can still hear that young whippersnapper wishing himself a happy birthday at midnight, as well as Yardbird's "Ornithology," Donald Byrd's "Hello, bright sunflower," & the Audubon All Stars!

I must've known she loved nature (& even had an ornithologist father), but not that she & Gerard would meet me at the station door at the end of the show to extend the celebration. Nor that I'd propose to her in front of Widener in a class-canceling blizzard on Valentine's day, making snow-angels after (Erich Segal noticing, perhaps). Nor that we'd be formally hitched that spring vacation (1964) & still together more than 50 years later. No one could have foreseen the two offspring following their own paths to Harvard, where (both biology majors) they had a favorite course with WHRB alum Gar Allen, once my high school biology teacher (& still friend)!

You can see what tangled webs connect persons & histories—in this case WHRB playing a major part, along with jazz bird calls, Miles, flaming drums & "Love, the mystery of." It's ironic, then, that the most immediate effect of our connection was to put my radio career on a long hiatus. I was no longer so eager to hang out at the station when the alternative was to stay home "in my sweetheart's arms." We bought a radio & listened instead! Then, after graduation, I followed my spouse into teaching, only much later coming back to radio on the periphery—a local world-music program done with university students, and a series of specials for KUNM, a New Mexico public radio station, most notably *Rolling On: words & music of the Santa Fe Trail*.

I was planning to upload excerpts from the 1963 Jazz Round Midnight show onto the reunion site, but listening to the cassette labelled “Copy of 1963 WHRB,” I was surprised to find instead a recording made in November of 1985 in honor of that year’s WHRB anniversary gathering. Although it includes excerpts from the 1963 show, the audio is laughable, the result of recording to a cheap portable while another played the old cassette in the background. Counting when the albums were recorded, there are three different times layered in, with more birds each time.

The biggest surprise, however, was hearing the live (1985) appearance on mike of Charlie Parker himself—in this case Charles Parker Hanson, WHRB 1980, one of my daughter’s pre-Harvard teachers at the United World College in Montezuma. (Ghosts show up in the strangest places.) Charles may have gone to the 1985 dinner. A few years later, he house-sat for us & the resident birds when we went east for our 25th & an offspring’s graduation.

Along those lines, Gita ’90-’91 is now a senior ecologist with The Nature Conservancy in Tucson, while Gus ’89-90 had his bird work featured in *Harvard Magazine* some years ago. [A search for Gustav Bodner at HM’s site should bring the article up.] Although they might still have come to be even if I’d never set foot at WHRB, that’s far from sure. The voice I had then (but have lost with larynx difficulties recently) was an important link—what my wife claims she fell in love with first. Presumably, then, WHRB deserves to be considered match-maker & honorary godparent. How many other ghosts can make that claim? As for WHRB’s involvement in other conceptions, well, we can only imagine.

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[Besides the worthless cassette from 1985, I must still have cassettes copied more directly from the 1963 tape, plus the original reel of tape itself, so if WHRB had use for such, I’d search for them. If & when they turn up, I’ll see about getting them up on our website, along with *Rolling On, Like Water*, & a few other recordings made during a quarter century performing poetry as a “Leaky Bucket” & *Chautauqua* as a NM Humanities Council “Road Scholar.”]