

Three: English accent ensures Manhattan access

1978

A chef by day, an anarchic Jackson Pollock artist late at night. I found myself watching Jean-Claude spraying colours at seeming random on a large canvas laid on the floor. He danced too, dressed elegantly in a quasi-Fred Astaire outfit. Maybe chef's hat on.

Pony-tailed and short, he was positively inspired in his energetic creativity. I struggled that evening to summon the same amount. However, most times in those days I often had too much energy if anything. My brain whirred on too late too often when trying to sleep.

Jean-Claude's home was the whole of a top floor in a big warehouse building in Church Street in the south Manhattan Canal Street area. He may have rented it for a peppercorn rent. Its value would be conservatively four million dollars now, with the area having experienced 'a real estate renaissance' (Cuozzo, 2017).

I stayed with Jean-Claude in the apartment, which had spectacular views of the metropolis from its roof, a few nights. He was not homosexual, or bi-sexual. He was initially slightly reserved, but then a very convivial host. I had met him and a female friend the previous summer in the south of France when I was hitchhiking.

Another world now, but Manhattan that summer was often as hot as the Cote d'Azur - and really humid. Sweat would pour off me on the underground from Brooklyn heading north to Manhattan during my short time commuting.

Following my three years at UCL, I lingered in London and then Fleet (tennis and more tennis) a month, but was

determined to travel and explore North America before the world of work started to tie me down. Irene, my girlfriend of two years, had already gone to stay with parents and family in Scandinavia. Her father worked for a multi-national.

I flew to the Big Apple on 16 July where I stayed just over a month before hitching north. I was very lucky to gain entry to the country, being quizzed closely by an immigration official about my finances ... they were precarious. I did not have much money and I could not admit that I intended to gain work to enable me to travel.

I had left it too late to apply for work with, say, the British University North American Association and be a helper in a camp. Somehow, I talked my way in.

I used contacts that I had made on my previous summer two-month European trip to find places to stay (Jean-Claude for one) and worked for some weeks for a suspect company in Manhattan during which I elicited information from central Manhattan firms about their current phone systems.

This later would result in the companies being pestered to buy alternative equipment from my employers.

The firm calculated, accurately, that my Roger Moore-style English accent would ensure some kind of welcome and result in doors opening. Moore played James Bond in the 007 films then.

I made copious notes during my sojourn in North America - both in Manhattan and later when hitchhiking round the United States and Canada. Many of my memories have been sparked by the entries in the 79 cent Scotts Composition book that I bought. When I quote from it, I shall add any necessary clarifying comments in italics.

The first entry is on 5 August, almost three weeks after I arrived. I wanted 'to conjure up a quick resume' of that time:

I arrived on 16 July late in the evening ... The flight was enjoyable enough. Flowing free drink, champagne and

all. Lovely to see scenic cloud panoramas, like dream countries. Reminded me of some children's book that I read years ago where one falls asleep and has dream adventures in pillow land (*namely, a Moomin book by Jove Jansson*). The most weird thing landing is you walk straight off the plane into JFK corridors (*unusual in those distant days*), seemingly endless. Then a coach, after a sweaty wait, to the centre. First sights of bustling, teeming Broadway, smut and glamour. A night at the Royal Manhattan. Went out for a drink and a stroll with some others. A smoke later. One guy paranoid.

The next day I rang Tony, a cab driver that I had met in Corfu the previous year, along with his now maybe former partner Jane. Tony was a determined philistine when it came to art, unlike Jean. When he went to The Louvre in Paris, he was going to march straight up to the 'Mona Lisa', throw it a cursory glance and leave. That was going to be his way of 'doing' the Louvre and Leonardo; he did not want to be a conventional tourist.

I saw him in the afternoon. He was quite friendly, but obviously did not wish me to stay. However, he called friends to see what they could do for me.

In the morning I had a walk round Central Park. A guy Jeff, long-haired and hirsute, drove me round much of the central area. I saw Jane. I stayed at Jeff's apartment on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. I called on Sam Silverman on Wednesday evening; thin, angular, droll.

Sam was a friend of Roy Avant, with whom Tony had put me in touch. Sam obtained for me the canvassing job for his phone company. I went for an interview on Friday and was told to report on Monday.

During the next days I was absorbing Kerouac's *On the Road*, wondering if my experiences hitching might be similar

in any way. On Thursday I wandered round Greenwich Village before exploring the East Side. It was dead socially. Probably at the weekend Roy let me move into his apartment near 18th Avenue in Brooklyn. To get there I used the subway south which featured in the dramatic chase scene in the movie *The French Connection*.

I started work on 23 July in a suit I had brought over from England and very uncomfortable, borrowed boots. My view then of the role:

Canvassing (*phone system information*) for shady telephone company who do consultancy, selling and installation. Illegal I think, so they operate under different company names with different personal names. Naughty, naughty. Business is very pushy. Wandering round different buildings. Socony-Mobil (*42-storey stainless steel construction*), Chanin (*56-storey brick-and-terracotta*), Lorillard (*29-storey*) etc. Chucked out of Texaco (*now luxury apartments*) by the security. Earned 50 dollars for the week.

The card that I carried to show officials had the name Cost Ltd on it with a 42nd Street address. The 'consultants' carried another card with the name Precision Interconnect Corporation on it, with another 42nd Street address.

I saw Jean-Claude on Sunday and again on Tuesday, when I stayed. Quick-talking, friendly Roy and his partner Robin were busy doing up his apartment before they left to tour Europe a few days later - and I consequently had the apartment to myself. Meanwhile, while Roy was still there, I helped painting. But it was still 'very filthy, chaotic, bedlamic (*sic*)' Saturday. Later, I wandered into a gay bar in Greenwich Village by accident.

On the last Sunday of the month, Roy and I travelled out to Rockaway Beach in the borough of Queens where his

parents had a beach house. Burgers sizzled on the BBQ amid the lively hubbub conversation. I went out in a motor boat with a young friend of his. We travelled back to 18th Avenue by subway.

On Monday night a Yugoslav girl stayed with him; so, I saw Jean-Claude for supper and magic-marker painting a second time. I wrote, hopefully very tongue-in-cheek: 'Man, they're psychedelic!'

The following Monday I was 'chucked out' of a building, on Park Avenue this time, which depressed me briefly. I vowed that I 'would chuck it in'.

That week I met, while canvassing, Peter McCabe, a former editor of *Rolling Stone*. McCabe now worked on a country music magazine; I did not realise that he had co-written a recent book about The Beatles. A not so tuned in me! He gave me some tips about journalism. I also met a lawyer.

But it was a hard slog tramping all the way up and down the office skyscrapers. I did not always take lifts. And doors could be slammed in my face. I was young and pompous too reflecting about work:

To have to do something
boring/immoral/undemanding/pushy for a career - oh
God! On Friday I did some 'showrooms' building -
many fashion-conscious, poodle-parlour hair-styled
people, smooching about all la-de-da.

Wednesday night was rock and party night. I travelled in a car with Roy and mates, the car laden with joints, cans of beer and various pills. It was Grateful Dead and The Band night at the Roosevelt Stadium in New Jersey. I indulged slightly in the drugs' menu. Many hold really fond memories of the performances (the site archive.org features many glowing reviews).

However, I had mixed feelings about the crowd and music. Perhaps the drugs affected me adversely in that I became over-sensitive. I wrote:

Seemingly the dregs of society there or many of the crowd anyway ... People were so much so, stoned or blitzed out of their minds. The bands could have played crap and received rapturous applause. The Dead could do no wrong with the steadfast faithful. I thought The Band were very tight, in tune with nice harmonies. The Dead too; tight country- rock based songs, but others with considerable improvisation ... None of the lyrics are stunning or poetry. Down-to-earth American at the ranch stuff: 'lost my woman, Betsy, oh Mary Lou, it hurts me too'.

There were thousands of Dead Heads out of their heads. I wandered round much of the concert and met dark-haired, friendly Arianna, whose parents were of Italian origin and owned a house in New Jersey.

I stayed with Jean-Claude again on Thursday night and decorated a frivolous poem on a piece of paper. On Friday night in the Village for an hour or so and a drink in the 'depressing' Buffalo Roadhouse. On Saturday evening after walk round the Brooklyn area ('very samey, endless, middle-class, dreary blocks'), I saw Arianna again and she had wheels. She picked me up at Port Authority and took me to her female friend's boyfriend's house.

On Sunday, I went shopping in Lower East Village/Orchard Street and bought a rucksack for my journey ahead. Then the Museum of Art with its Rembrandts, Degas, Renoir, van Goghs, Titian, Raphael, Boucher, Tintoretto'.

Then, around sunset, I walked round crowded Coney Island boardwalk and beach. I was not keen; too tacky and packed. I ate at Nathans. I wrote: 'Longing to be out of N.Y.

Just 2 more weeks' work necessary.' Work must have got to me.

The next Monday (6 August) I tramped round 5th Avenue scrapers - finished 500 on the job'. During a break at a sandwich bar, a Frenchman approached me as I read Jung's *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. We 'rapped' Jung, Freud and Bob Dylan. Ara Michel said he was a concert pianist. He was probably trying to impress me, and 'chattered about all the celebrities he's in with (Dylan etc), but still I like him' ...

I conversed with pugnacious Dick in the office about dreams:

He's a psychoanalyst (employs such words as 'individuation', 'shadow', 'feeling' etc) and will analyse one of my dreams. He's very voluble, temperamental ... Frances (*we read English at UCL together*) has just phoned - great.

The psychologist-phone salesman's diminutive size was in inverse correlation to his massive hate emotion for President Nixon at the time of the Watergate Senate Committee hearings. He hated 'Tricky Dicky' Nixon and his associates with a vengeance.

One constant during these days controlled me. I was determined to be an intellectual! Soak up knowledge.

The next day I met a playwright Stromson. I watched Norman Mailer on TV: 'seems slightly unselfsure, edgy, but likeable - nothing stunning said'.

I finished Jung's work: 'Lots of insights - numinosities!' I quoted Alexander Pope, applying it to Jung: 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'.

I next tackled Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium Is The Message* which I found 'hard-going ... high-powered, intellectual, cool, analytical, rational, dispassionate'. A choc-a-bloc array of adjectives!

All this time I was working on poems, predominantly a long, semi-narrative poem featuring various American characters (obviously influenced by T.S.Eliot) titled *Nugget or Nuthin?*

I showed it once back in England to my former UCL lecturer, the poet Stephen Spender, but he was lukewarm and I made no more effort to get it read more widely. I should have realised, from knowing his poetry, that it would not be his cup of words. I should at least have received a thumbs-down from a potential ally.

On 9 August a letter from Irene arrived at Jean-Claude's. An event in those days where phone contact would have been problematical. I saw Arianna the night before; we failed to see *King Lear* for free in Central Park. We resorted to a drink in a bar which I thought was sleazy; she probably did too.

Later, I was pondering what the shrink-salesman in the office talked about:

Psychoanalyst puts MUCH weight on dreams, doesn't allow for just less-than-conscious (versus sub-conscious) disconnected thoughts in process i.e. just normal thoughts, ones you'd have in daytime. Has to be about 'individuation', 'repression', 'instinct versus thought, unconscious, 'shadow' etc.

The intensity and pretentiousness of this 21-year-old shines through the journal: 'I, you can't stop the sun running; by God make him run! Even with 9-5 routine, live the moment - at worst out of work. Don't wish life away ... Let's implode.'

Three days later and Arianna was driving me around; we became quite close friends. On 11 August I went to the fashionable Max's Kansas City:

Interesting, erratic, impressionable place. Many trying so hard to impress, be cool, by trying to act impassive. A 'I couldn't care less' attitude.

But sadly, I went there *nineteen days ... too late*. That was when Bruce Springsteen played the last of a five-day series of concerts there - two shows daily and often hardly anyone there. A band with Garry Tallent, Clarence Clemons, David Sancious, Vini Lopez.

Oh dear, if only one of my friends had been an early fan and told me to go. I could not get in to see Springsteen in London in 1975 either. Had to wait until 1981 for the first show of the man who became by far my favourite performer.

If Bruce had had an argument with bass player Garry, he might have let the earnest Englishman play bass for a night! Before summarily getting rid. Damn, damn, damn. Just to have seen the band once then in its relative infancy.

My last day of work was on Friday; it had been an exhausting, but intriguing three weeks. Since I was reading McLuhan, I was musing about 'the global village', but also felt drained by 'the sprawling subway'. I wanted to get out now to explore a further art of the village and escape the subway.

I was packing the rucksack for my trip on the following Thursday. I took the Staten Island Ferry the previous Monday - 'the first smell of sea for a long time.' I saw Arianna and one of her friends cut my hair. I packed in another museum: the Natural History Museum on Tuesday.

Ara Michel came round to the apartment on Wednesday and we 'rapped' about Jung, Dylan again and ... yes, gayness. Yup, I twigged belatedly that he really fancied me and felt very

awkward as I retreated around Roy's waterbed, protesting that I just wanted to be friends.

I saw Arianna a last time on the Friday, as well as Tony and Jane. I returned books of Roy to the library, bought some maps and left early on Saturday morning, 18 August. First destination: Hanover, New Hampshire.

The first two stanzas of *Nugget or Nuthin'* may be over-the-top and pretentious, but they do capture my feelings about the Big Apple that I was leaving for many weeks. It deliberately references Allen Ginsberg's writing and McLuhan's ideas.

Deluge- chomp chomp - reality sandwiches stale -
Stereotype streets - block block - statis symmetrical -
Towering onyx oblongs - materialist desert -
Absolute unoasis - humping huge hinterland -
Broiling sun brimming - broadcasting bursting -
Shirt collar sticking - sweat streams pouring down neck -
Wet is furiously furrowing all brows -
The land of the scrapers who munch and masticate clouds.

Office echelons all veer down the vestibules -
Hygiene assured - with lifts ice-creamy up-down -
Heels click onto lunch - bosses bolster their ties -
Stocks sadly entrenched in their niches - shares of the game -
Chips from their shoulders ripped right off - treated plastered -
Multi-media adapted electric actors -
Day-shifted armies whose one goal is grab-land -
The land of Hiawatha is begging down on its knees.

