

From the commotion of a college campus to hitchhiking on the open road and treating young heroin users in Vietnam...Phoenix to LA is a piece of living history for children of the 1960's, their children, and their children's children.

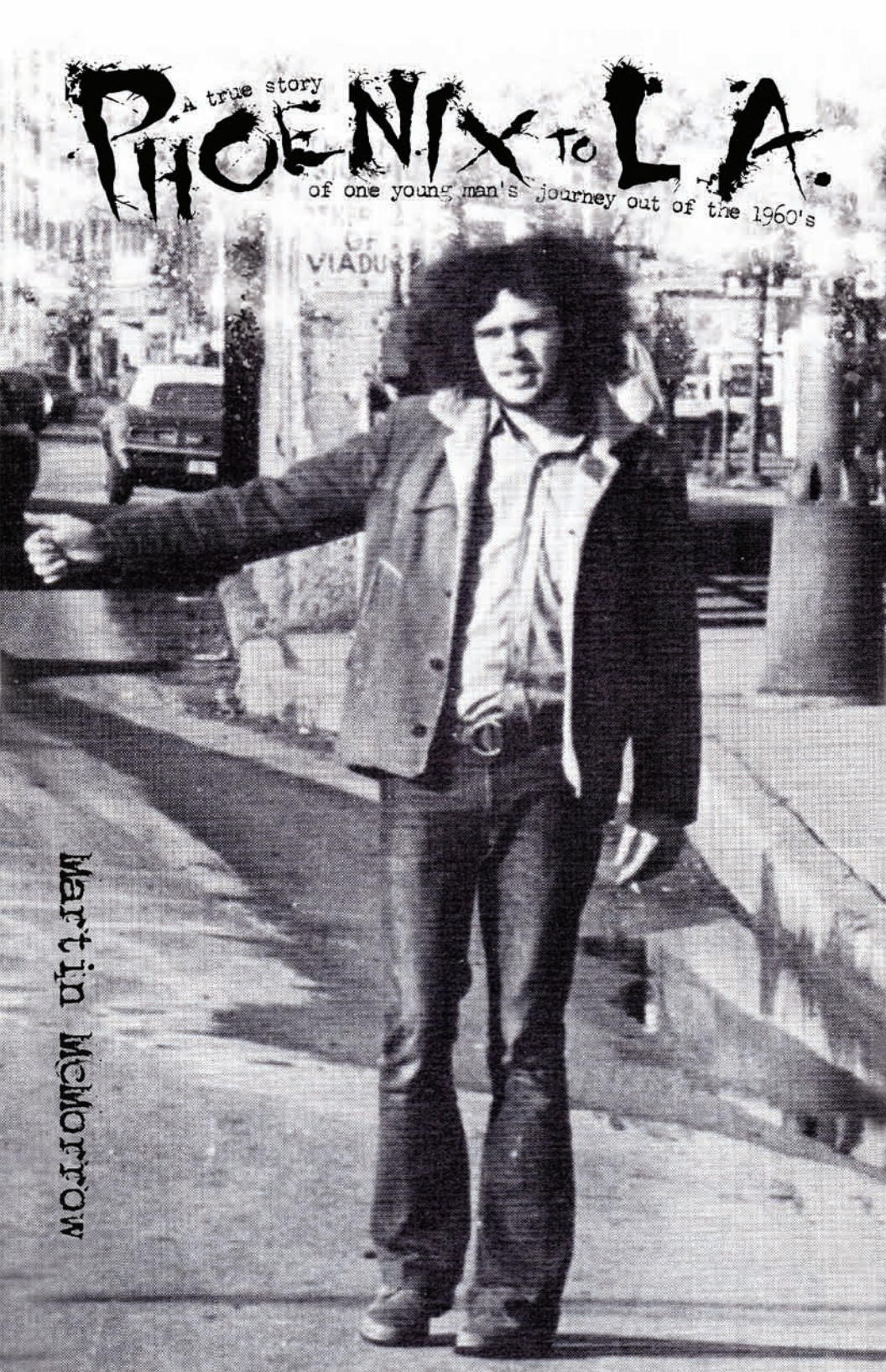
Phoenix to LA

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A true story
PHOENIX TO L.A.
of one young man's journey out of the 1960's

Martin McMorrow



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Paint it Black
(The Rolling Stones)

By late April there was increasing talk about demilitarization and Vietnamization around the base at Bien Hoa. We heard the first of rumors that, as the ARVN soldiers got better trained and assumed more of the responsibility for fighting what had now somewhat arbitrarily become *their* War; the 1st Cavalry would be gradually pulling out of the country. Of course, that meant that High Hopes would be shutting down along with it. Perhaps as an effect of these rumors, fewer guys were showing up for rehab. Suddenly, there was a lot of sitting around going on.

Since there wasn't much to do and we had not been instructed to do anything else, several of us had the idea to take an "in-country R&R" over a long weekend. Our fourth refugee Jeep driver, Ollie, said he had heard that the 1st Cavalry could utilize a place on the ocean near the village of Vung Tau. In fact, he actually got official approval from the Doc to use the Center's Jeep to transport Pete, Lowery, and myself down there for our spontaneous getaway.

Vung Tau was about eighty-five miles southeast of Saigon, which was about twenty-five miles southwest of Bien Hoa. Ollie said he had received an okay to bypass Saigon and head on a more direct route to the coast which we figured would be somewhere around a hundred miles. The rest of us trusted that Ollie knew where he was going, though it was pretty strange riding around South Vietnam with four guys out on a weekend in an Army Jeep. The farthest I had been in the country since my arrival at Cam Ranh Bay were quick trips to Saigon, Long Binh, and the Air Force Base.

Some of the countryside in the southeast part of the Vietnam was beautiful and as before, my attention was captured

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by the sights of people working the fields in the rural areas. Even so, we got a little uncomfortable when Ollie began making jokes about the possible presence of Viet Cong around the more populated villages we passed along the way. After all, regardless of the local politics everyone dressed pretty much alike. I had never understood the attraction to black clothing in such a tropical climate.

When we reached the “resort” at Vung Tau, it turned out that there were no other guests there. In fact, it was deserted but for one ARVN Special Services guy who appeared to be in charge the place. He pointed us toward one of several non-sandbagged, open air buildings with cots where we could sleep. He also gave us a few simple instructions about what we could and could not do around the resort and the village that was just a short stroll back up the road. There wasn’t much said about what we shouldn’t do, although Ollie seemed particularly interested in these parts and was definitely in a hurry to get it all in before Monday morning.

The four of us dropped off our things, left the Jeep, and immediately headed into the village on foot. The place was heavily overgrown by tall trees, hanging foliage, and beautiful flowering bushes so that it was impossible to see the ocean which was just a few steps away. Like almost everywhere else I had seen, most of the dwellings were very small and partially built from War leftovers. However, others were much statelier with stucco exterior walls, evidence of old landscaping, courtyards where various sorts of commerce might be conducted, and multi-story living quarters off the back. Ollie led our little squad into one of the first such structures we came upon. We sat down at a brightly-painted metal table in the courtyard.

Before we knew it, members of the family who apparently lived and worked at the place were catering to our every desire.

Apparently, we attracted all of their attention because we were the only customers there. Of course we would have an ice-cold bottled beer as we basked in the soft ocean air. Of course we would have a tray of freshly prepared South Vietnamese snacks. Of course we would have one of the women who had begun to parade seductively around our table. Really? We were being swept away with the hospitality.

Before long I found myself sitting at the table in the hot sun finishing my beer alone. Ollie, Pete, and Lowery had each been snatched up by one of the women and taken away through one of the many doorways that emptied onto the courtyard. Finally, I allowed myself to be gathered up by a young girl dressed in a loose floral smock and black pants. She took my hand and guided me through one of the entranceways, down a short corridor, up some steps, around a corner, and into a small room that was obviously her home. As we entered the door to the room she gestured for two young children to go away. I was fascinated by the kids. It had been a long time since I had seen any.

Once we got inside the room, I asked for the girl's name and she mumbled something, but I didn't understand what she said. Apparently, she didn't care to ask my name. She just called me, "G.I." As Ms. X pattered around the room picking things up, she asked, "What G.I. want?" At that moment I pictured each of my friends off in their little rooms with their girls carrying on in all sorts of barely imaginable ways that most might think were characteristic of horny G.I.'s out on a weekend. Even so, I couldn't muster any interest in my girl with no name. She was not only very young; she had kids hanging around right outside her door. I was sure she thought it strange when I informed her that I didn't want anything from her.

I was still standing in the doorway. After my first refusal, she attempted to entice me by showing me her tiny breasts and

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playfully grabbing at my crotch. I waved my hands in front of her face and said, “No, no thank you, I no want sex.” Then she started to undo my pants, and asked, “G.I. want blow job?” Again I let her know that I didn’t care for one. After my third or fourth refusal from her sexual menu, she began to appear a little sad, bewildered, or possibly insulted by my lack of interest in her. She sat down on the bed looking disappointed. I thought for a moment that maybe she thought I was cute or that it was somehow important to her to be able to comfort a tired soldier fighting for a cause that she may have believed in. Then I came to my senses.

She didn’t care about what kind of sex we had or whether we actually had any sex at all. She cared about dollars and cents. She and the rest of her family were hard at work making a living the best they could and perhaps the only way they knew how. This was just another day for her. She knew that she needed some of my money and I finally realized I needed to find a way for her to have some. Otherwise, I began to think that the situation might actually turn ugly. I was cut off from communicating with my friends. She was already looking a little upset with me. It crossed my mind that some of the men might barge into the room and rob me. So, I decided to quell the situation by making a few requests for which I could pay.

I asked for another cold beer. As if the cash register had just been plugged back in, the girl immediately jumped up, rushed to the door, and sent one of the kids to retrieve it. When it came, I gave her twice what the beer was worth and said, “Thank you, I sit.” But our transaction was not complete. She said, “What else G.I. want, you like pot?” Although I really didn’t need any because it was always available for free at High Hopes, this offer sounded reasonable, so I said, “Yes, I want pot.” Once again, she scooted to the door and instructed one of the kids to run off and get me some pot. The little guy returned

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to the room with a plastic bag of pot that was as big around as the fat end of a baseball bat. I thought I was about to get skinned out of a lot of money. Then, looking quite proud of herself for pleasing me, the girl placed the bag in my hands. I said, "How much?" She said, "Ten dolla," even though we both knew that meant ten piastres, which were worth less than American dollars. While I might still have overpaid, it was the biggest bag of pot I had ever had and well worth my ticket out of the situation I had found myself in.

After our pot transaction, the girl must have decided that she wasn't going to get much more money from me because she stopped asking me what I wanted. We returned to the courtyard, hand in hand, having completed our business together. I was sure she was pleased because she had produced some income and we were both able to have smiles on our faces as if we had enjoyed a wonderful time together. On top of all this, I now had a huge lump in my pants.

Before long, everyone had returned to the courtyard from their little escapades. As we sat at our table, I found it interesting that no one talked about what they had just done at that time, or at any other time for that matter. Maybe that was because each of us was supposed to have been committed to a relationship back home, but I wondered if it was also because their experiences had been similar to mine. I was particularly sure it had probably turned out that way for Pete, though I didn't notice any potentially intoxicating protrusions in his boonie pants.

Perhaps there was some value to having added the experience of congregating with the Vietnamese people in this way, but for me it was mostly just depressing. I viewed it as one more lousy outcome of American involvement in South Vietnam. At least part of a generation of young Vietnamese people grew up serving our troops as hootch maids, shit

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burners, or prostitutes. I found myself wishing that they could have found something else to do.

Over the next forty-eight hours, we shuffled back and forth between the relaxation center and the courtyard. To my knowledge, there were no more secret visits with the girls, and for the most part the family seemed satisfied with having us spend our money on beers, snacks, and generous tips. In between those visits, we slept a lot. The fresh ocean air and the isolation of the place made me feel far away from everything in both good and bad ways. Although I was apprehensive about being so disconnected from the military in a place that could have easily left us prey to anyone who would have wanted to harm us, it was also nice to consider what that place could have been like in peacetime. I know I would have enjoyed it much more.

The last night at the Vung Tau R & R Center I went down to sleep in one of the pole buildings closest to the water where I could hear the ocean and get a better breeze. Without telling anyone I took my things and moved about fifty yards from where the others had set up camp. I didn't think my move was any big deal until early the next morning when I strolled back up to the building where the guys had been and discovered that they were already packed up and gone.

I went into the main building to see the Special Services person who was in charge of the place. He informed me that my friends had been in there about a half-hour earlier looking for me, but figured I must have come up with another way back to Bien Hoa and left. Another way back to Bien Hoa? What other way back to Bien Hoa? According to the clerk the only other way back to Bien Hoa would be to walk into the village and see if I could hitch a ride in some other Army vehicle headed that way. Really? I was going to go hitchhiking in Vietnam in the middle of the so-called Easter Offensive?

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As it turned out, hitchhiking really was the only way I was going to get back to Bien Hoa. Yet, as I discovered when I got to the center of the village, there were virtually no military vehicles on the road that morning. All I saw were mopeds, three-wheelers, and bicycles. Vung Tau was at the end of a road by the Ocean. I assumed that very few Army guys would have any sanctioned business there on a Monday morning. And on top of that I suspected that I looked very much the part of someone who had been left behind after a long weekend at the beach. There I was, considering my appearance again on a dirt road hitchhiking out of a small Southeast Asian village in a War zone.

There was nothing else to do. I just sat there by the road pretending like I knew what I was doing...waiting for a ride. Finally, I spotted a solo driver in a small blue Air Force truck coming in my direction from the village. I didn't actually hold out my thumb. I stepped into the road and waved him down. Fortunately, he stopped. Looking in the passenger side window, I explained my situation to the driver and didn't give him much room to turn me down. I needed to get moving.

The good news was that he was willing to give me a ride. But unfortunately, he explained that he could only get me as far as Phu My because that was his official destination. Actually thinking ahead, I asked what it would be like hitching a ride out of Phu My. He told me that it would be, "A hell of a lot better than your chances sitting here." I hopped in the front seat of the Air Force truck for Phu My.

The Air Force guy seemed as surprised to find me hitchhiking in Vietnam as I was. Although his reaction heightened my concern, I still didn't see any other way to get myself back to Bien Hoa. I had to rely on my military counterparts to get me up the road. I couldn't envision hopping

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a moped with one of the Vietnamese civilians who always seemed to be packed up and headed somewhere.

We got to Phu My more quickly than I'd thought we would. This village was a bit larger than Vung Tau and I immediately spotted several military vehicles rumbling up and down the paved road, some going toward my destination. I thanked the driver, jumped out of his truck at a busy intersection, and quickly thumbed down the next faded green truck headed northwest. The Army driver of this truck told me he was making a supply run to the stockade at Long Binh. This was especially good news because I had been to Long Binh. It had a large Army base, it was just a few miles from Bien Hoa, and I had heard that my old buddy, Kool, had ended up there after his stint with the 101st Airborne up north. I figured I could drop in on him when I got there and maybe he could help me find a ride back to High Hopes. Things were looking up.

I rode in the back of a deuce and a half from Phu My to Long Binh. This one was covered with a canvas top which was strangely comforting. For the moment at least, I had seen enough of the Vietnamese countryside and I figured the cover would spare others from having to wonder about what I was doing out there on my own.

I never expected that it could feel so good to get dropped off at the front door of a military stockade. I had certainly imagined winding up in a place like that, but more likely as a result of military noncompliance than from hitchhiking. When the driver stopped and said, "Here we are," I happily leaped out of the back of the truck, thanked him several times, and headed for the main entrance of the prison.

I walked inside to a reception window and asked where I could locate Private First Class Kool. The Military Policeman behind the desk asked what my purpose was and I just said I was there to visit, if he was available. He used an intercom to

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contact Kool and I heard him say from the other end, “He’s good, send him in.” To that moment, I had not anticipated that Kool’s station would be inside the secure entrance to the stockade. So, when the MP came from behind the window and began to escort me to clearance area, I nearly panicked. I still had the huge sack of pot in the side flap pocket of my fatigue pants.

But there was no turning back. I thought that if I excused myself or said, “Oh, never mind,” the MP would have suspected me of something. And I wasn’t sure what was actually going to happen at the clearance area. Perhaps since Kool had cleared me, they would just walk me through. I had to act naturally.

I was led through a set of solid glass doors into a small, empty holding area with another set of glass doors leading out the other side. The MP told me to wait as he exited the room the way we had come. I stood there alone in a glass cubicle like a maraschino cherry in a clear pitcher of lime Kool-Aid. Two other MPs entered the room a few moments later. They appeared to be engaged in a hot discussion about something that had happened that morning and seemed a little distracted by it. They barely greeted me. They asked who I was there to see and I told them. I stood spread eagle style as instructed. Then one of them tapped me down: arms, chest, belt line, and...just my left leg! He completely skipped my right leg where the bag of pot was jammed in the side pocket. A person could have seen it just by looking at my leg, but apparently neither one of these guys did.

After getting partially frisked, I signed in on the Visitor’s Log, passed through the second set of glass doors, and got a police escort down a couple of long hallways to Kool’s station. After the MP’s left, I told him what had just happened and what was still in my pocket. Kool nearly crapped in his pants from laughing so hard. He found it especially funny how I’d wound

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up with it when I didn't even need it in the first place. That was easy for him to say. Supporting the local economy had almost put me in his care.

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