

Ted Lyons has a three day odyssey with an extra terrestrial race.

Beyond The Red Barn

By Ted Lyons

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BEYOND THE RED BARN

Ted Lyons

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Part 1

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1

Winter wasn't far off. You could smell it, taste it. I always enjoyed the change of season smell. It didn't last long. Either that or I just got used to it. The first whiff of either always brought with it a flood of memories. For some reason, the scent of a winter arrival brought me back to Piscataway, NJ. We'd moved to Piscataway from Plainfield, NJ in November of 1966. I was thirteen. Between late afternoon explorations of my new neighborhood and bicycle trips to and from Plainfield I was inhaling a lot of fall and winter. I guess it stuck. Spring struck the olfactory in a similar, yet different way. Maybe the warm breeze and the cold wind landed in different areas of the memory center.

But this was one of those wonderful pre-Thanksgiving nights. After spending the last twelve hours in a Lincoln MKT going back and forth between central Jersey (myth?) and Newark airport, a few minutes observing the universe from the silence of

our modest patio was thoroughly grounding. Linda and I were enjoying our fifth year as residents of Delaware Crossings, a New Jersey community for the over fifty-five. I'm sixty-seven. How and when that happened, I have no idea. In the words of the late great Mickey Mantle, "If I'da known I was gonna live this long I woulda' taken better care of myself." Touché', Mick.

The layout of each Delaware Crossings property was such that as small as they were, each gave a feeling of solitude and serenity. On this night, the moon was full, and the stars were stinging in their brightness. Not as striking as the night time sky my nineteen-year-old self had watched from a perch overlooking the UTEP Sun Bowl, but as a believer in the "it's all relative" school, a clear NJ night could still move and inspire me.

Tonight, seemed different. Something in the sky looked different. The bright star that was just above the bare trees was gone. The space it left was filled by the silhouette of the red barn that lived at the edge of the cornfield a few blocks away. Then the star was back. It changed color slightly and seemed to grow larger. No, it wasn't growing larger. It was gettingcloser. This was getting interesting.

2

My rose-colored glasses reminded me that life in 1950's Plainfield, NJ was close to idyllic. My parents may have differed. We shared a house at 616 Monroe Ave with our landlord, Mrs. Katz, a benevolent dictator. The proximity of my mother's parents certainly enhanced the quality of my young life. They were next door. I spent the first six years of my life at 616 and realized I could enjoy the world around me with pals of all sizes, on my own or with family. I also had an "imaginary" friend named Soupy. He was a large bear, ala a slimmer Smokey. He lived in the large radio in the living room and sported a porkpie hat, short red tie, and would join me whenever I invited him. My parents would indulge me by inviting Soupy to the dinner table, into the car etc. To this day I'm not sure what Soupy was, ET, angel, or maybe a bit of undigested potato. One day Soupy just stopped showing up. Or maybe I forgot how to invite him.

I never thought about if we were rich, poor, middle class or upper or lower. I had three meals a day, clean clothes and a warm bed. My mother would later tell me how she would sneak into my room at night to swipe a few errant pennies or a nickel for a quart of milk. Again, I never noticed.

My brother, John, was eight years older and would allow me into his clubhouse every now and then. A hard

to come by invitation, indeed. The clubhouse was a cool, small backyard structure with a sliding panel on the front door which allowed the occupants to discern entry qualifications. Sometimes I'd pass muster. My sister, Marilyn, four years older than me, usually wouldn't.

The clubhouse lasted till the day after the night my brother and his pals got roused by the South Plainfield police for "froggy giggin" at a South Plainfield lake when they should have been sleeping in their clubhouse. 'Twas a dark day for all observing the board by board dismembering of the beloved shack. A few months later my favorite swing would swing no more after falling victim to a large tree felled by the saws of my father and grandfather. The back yard was weeping.

After commandeering everyone I could to push me on my seventeen-inch bike I finally got it. I was mobile. I could go halfway around the block to join in harmless gang wars or any number of kid's games. The freedom my parents gave me is unthinkable in today's atmosphere. I was riding toward the day's action one morning when a station wagon collided with a milk truck right in front of me. That's the first time I realized the human body contains a lot of blood. Everyone survived but the thought was planted that maybe it's not so safe out here. I got over that.

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I was always ducking next store to Gram and Grandpa's for a game of checkers, cards or just to enjoy the adventure of a getaway complete with cookies, soda and usually a life lesson of some sort.

My grandmother tended to be a worrier. Not a bad thing when you're a five or six-year-old kid with a touch of the wanderlust. There was a small farm, or maybe it was just an oversized back yard, that ran the length of ours and my grandparent's property. A large red barn boldly set the demarcation line between our properties and if Gram saw me headed that way the inevitable "Don't go beyond the red barn" would travel through the air and settle somewhere in my consciousness. I'd usually listen, but not always.

My grandfather had a touch of rogue in him as did his Newfoundland brothers. When Uncle Len and one-armed Uncle Jack showed up things got lively. My grandmother would kick her rosary into high gear.

When life returned to normal my grandfather and I would continue our raspberry picking and hitting lessons. He'd sit in his red metal chair in the driveway and pitch to me. I either had to hit it right at him or chase the ball. He'd let out a grunt and chuckle every time I bounced one off his belly or leg or head. It got to where I was doing less chasing and he was doing more grunting. To this day I can hit to all fields. A

handy skill as I found out later. Then came the first life change.

3

My Aunt Catherine, aka Katrine, helped my parents buy their first house at 915 W Sixth St. It was just around the corner about a quarter of a mile away, but it seemed like a different world. I adapted quickly. My new twenty-inch bike got me places quicker and safer and there was no looking back.

My mother would allow me to walk the half mile or so to kindergarten at Clinton school. I would walk with my across the street neighbor, Susan, on different sides of the street. Weird. I'm not sure if she just didn't like me or that was her way of showing that she did like me. The Scott's were across the street; four girls and one boy. Mike was my pal. Two years younger. Gilly was right across the street. Two years older. Stanley was next door. One year older. There was no one right in my wheelhouse but I was pretty good at crossing ages and genders or just amusing myself. Another talent that came in handy later in life.

Once first grade started it was off to St Mary's and the Sisters of (no) Mercy. Some brutal days but I can still diagram the hell out of a sentence, compound or otherwise. The occasional year when I'd have a lay teacher was the proverbial breath of fresh air. All in

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all, not so bad. Lots of friends, stints as an altar boy and choir boy and duty on the "main corner" as an eighth-grade patrol boy. Cool belt.

The neighborhood years were filled with street games, baseball, bike adventures, boxing, Little Rascals type shows and eventually seeing the girls differently. Katrine's husband died. Grandpa died. Our house was cut in half as we moved downstairs and Katrine and Gram, after some renovations, move into their own apartments upstairs, great escapes for me. I still had a full basement, an attic and a huge garage to get in trouble. My father, brother and I were outnumbered. John and his pals would escape to the Social Hall and on Sundays Dad would escape to The Plainfield Rescue Squad. I'd drop in on both spots occasionally or just hang with the ladies at 915.

Walking home from school was an everyday adventure. The kids from the junior HS and HS would be walking in the opposite direction and they didn't seem to like us Catholic school kids. They were all older, bigger and the confrontations rarely went my or my friend's way. I'd either have to run, fight or talk my way out of situations. I got fairly good at navigating my way home through back yards. Then I only had to deal with the occasional dog. In the middle of all this the times they were a' changin'.

4

In November of 1963 Camelot had come crashing down on a Dallas street. By February of 1964 America was ready to breathe again. Then something extraordinary happened. It was called The British Invasion and The Beatles led the way. I was twelve and only mildly interested in the Beatles appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show that Sunday night. My sister seemed more excited than normal and even Ed and the crowd at the midtown theater seemed different, a little antsy. You'd hear these little squeals coming from the audience every now and then. Something was in the air.

John was in the army in Germany protecting us from the "Red Threat" so it was just the four of us that night. And then it happened. I had my position on the floor. The others were on the couch. I don't know when I moved but between the start of "All My Lovin'" and the end of "All My Lovin'" I wound up plastered against the back wall staring at the TV. My parents and sister were staring at me. We weren't in Kansas anymore.

A few months earlier on a trip to Gregory's, the premier music store in town, the sales guy and I wrangled an eighteen-dollar acoustic guitar, with felt case, out of my mother. Two dollar a week guitar lessons followed. My teacher was a folkie but Tom

Dooley and The MTA weren't really doing it for me. I'd been listening to the Motown Sound, Surf music and the pop hits of the day on AM radio. Dylan was rollin' like a stone but he wasn't quite moving me yet. The lads from Liverpool and the weekly bands that followed did. I wanted to do that!

The day after Beatles the change was all over St Mary's. It was obvious who got it and who didn't. The St Mary's Boys Choir taught me what harmony was all about and I knew enough guitar chords to get through the simple songs of the day. The streets of downtown Plainfield were in the beginning stages of Flower Power and parents were starting to be mildly concerned. TV shows and commercials had a different look. People were talking and dressing differently. At St Mary's we still had uniforms, but our hair was now down instead of up. And the girl's dresses were getting shorter. Ideas of forming bands were afoot and I was ready. Life was getting good. Then came the second life change.

5

Plainfield, NJ, like a lot of cities across the US. was having to come to grips with the issue of race. My neighborhood had changed. Stanley and I were the only originals left and the new residents still didn't seem to like our complexion. There was usually an

uneasy truce but a lot of times not. Things were getting uncomfortable. My pals threw me a wonderful going away surprise party after school one day and we moved about a half hour west to Piscataway, NJ with Gram in tow. Katrine got an apartment near downtown Plainfield. I started school at Conackamack JHS in November of 1965 and adapted quickly. I fell in with a cool crew. Ron was across the street and soon got a set of drums. Rock lived down the street and played guitar. Mike was a few streets over and played bass. Finny lived behind me and became a good friend. Bruce, another former Plainfield native moved in next door and our gang was set. Other guys were scattered through the neighborhood, but this was the core.

I still had a lot of Plainfield connections, singing with the St Mary's Boys Choir and continuing the Saturday morning guitar lessons. Now trying to organize a band of some sort and hustling rides or riding my bike to and from Plainfield became my mission. My Piscataway friends mixed in with my Plainfield friends and things were cool.

At thirteen I played at my first party. It was at Billy's parents' house in Plainfield. His brother Bobby was the singer, Pete was the drummer and I was the guitar player. Girls were invited. We had to really stretch the three or four songs we knew but that didn't matter. The lesson of the night was, listen up,

girls liked guitar players. By this time, I was playing a sixty-dollar Crown electric guitar through a forty-five-dollar Kay amplifier. Mom came through again. "The House of the Rising Sun," "Gloria" and "Hang on Sloopy" elevated me. And after that night I had my first girlfriend. Debbie was also a guitar player. And better than me.

I was fading out of Plainfield and into Piscataway. Junior HS and High School always found me in one kind of band or another; The Plague, Society's Child and The Best of General Milz to name a few. Music had become a nice source of weekend income.

Ron went on to play drums with The Penetrators, one of the premier Jersey bands of the day. I did a lot of gigs with Ronnie for several years in a variety of different bands. He could always be relied on as a last-minute fill in and could play any style, any time. By the mid-eighties he'd given up drumming and wrangling a drum kit for him as needed was par for the musical course. On one gig he was using an old snare drum of mine that was being held together by a shoelace. Every few songs he'd have to stop for a quick spot repair. In his 70's heyday one of his bands opened for Ozzy at the Sunshine Inn in Asbury Park. Ron got me backstage and brought the house down with a killer drum solo. He was a talented guy. I gave him his first drum lesson and he passed me by in about a week and

a half. I gave him his first guitar lesson and after about a year we were neck and neck. Some years later when my band Freewheelin' needed a fill in for our laid-up fiddler, Ronnie filled in on harmonica. He practiced all week and nailed it. He was one of those guys who didn't realize how talented he was. I was the best man at his wedding, and he was one of my best pals in life. He moved to Florida and left this earth in the early nineties. And so, it goes.

Piscataway life hit its stride. Marilyn went to college and soon got married. Johnny came home, got married and started living life. My father had a debilitating stroke when I was seventeen and life got a lot more difficult for mom. Katrine would drive Dad to rehab twice a week and Gram was getting "forgetful." I'd had a pleasant enough life playing music, surfing down the Jersey shore, lots of neighborhood baseball and football games, beer blasts, sneaking into Rutgers frat parties and learning how to deal with the opposite sex. But by my senior year I was ready for a change. Mom bought me a suitcase for graduation, co-signed a thousand-dollar loan and in the fall of 1970 gave me a lift to Newark airport. I was off to UTEP, The University of Texas at El Paso. A week later my neighbor and best pal, Bruce, appeared in my dorm to also begin college life.

There I found that everyone was escaping life in their various homes and, like me, looking for something. The guys I met who were El Paso natives wanted to come to NJ, NY, the east coast..... away from home! That was an interesting year. Lots of psychedelics, hikes around the southwest desert and mountains, concerts, an Easter break in the hills of Laurel Canyon, Calif, sneaking girls into dorm rooms and a Christmas break drive back to NJ in a Toyota with a missing back windshield. We broke down in Harrisburg, PA. Bruce's girlfriend Diane drove out to pick us up. We were a little nervous about the "presents" we were bringing back but all was well, and a good time was had by all. Bruce opted out of a second semester but did come out for an extended visit. An increase in tuition for out of state students the following year made for an easy decision. Back to Jersey.

6

I spent the next year and a half or so at loose ends. I picked up some credits at Trenton State College while picking up some cash working in the cafeteria. The occasional steak sometimes wound up coming home with me. Home was now an apartment across the river in Pennsylvania that I shared with two high school pals, one a former band mate. Then

followed a year at Middlesex County College and working nights at UPS with Mike and Bruce. The boss took a shine to me and I got the plum job of driving the little car around the warehouse picking up package carts over here and dropping them off over there. I made sure to give the boys a beep every time I rode past them as they loaded up the trucks.

The next year I got a full-time job at Brunswick, the sports equipment guys. At lunch we'd grab a football or a baseball and a couple of gloves and while away forty-five minutes. I had a low lottery number and with no college deferment thought there was a good chance I'd be getting drafted. Guys I knew coming back from Vietnam convinced me not to enlist so I decided to leave it up to the fates. The fates decided I wouldn't be going, one of my life's regrets. A few months later brought a week in the hospital with pneumonia That was a wakeup call. Not for long.

I came out of the hospital unemployed but landed a cool gig as a security guard for Wells Fargo. My assignment was at an empty Union Steel warehouse in Piscataway. The little air-conditioned guard house was my home. I worked a lot of hours there, sometimes three shifts in a row. The boys would come visit packing guitars and my former musical life was getting a kick start. Seven years after The Plague rocked Conackamack JHS we were getting the band back

together. I had an epiphany in a music store one night and switched to bass. I was home. Mike switched to guitar and Rock, Ron, Mike and I started The Wichita Straw Band. We added Joe on guitar and Lew on fiddle and had a good time on the local bar scene and college pubs. Mike decided to pursue higher learning and after a few false starts with female singers, Freewheelin' was born.

My girlfriend at the time decided to move to Colorado. I rode out on the back of a buddy's Harley for a visit. It was November and it rained from Jersey to St Louis. He went on to the Snake River Canyon for the Evel Knievel debacle. After a short Denver visit, I flew home and that was that. I was at a crossroads. An old high school friend offered me a job at the company where he was the operations manager. Meanwhile Freewheelin' was hitting its stride. But first Rock and I snuck in a hell ride to Denver in his MG Midget to once again visit the ex-girlfriend. The first gas station we hit west of the Mississippi called for a Coors stop. At that time Coors wasn't available on the East Coast. Our arrival was delayed by about a day.

On our return home from the Colorado hell ride we all went full in with Freewheelin' and had a rather good five-year run. Small concerts, plenty of bar work and free studio time at Tony Camillo's Venture Sounds

to record original music. The Venture Sounds guys worked the door at a club we played regularly and got us in. Gladys Knight had just finished recording *Midnight Train to Georgia* there and now we were up.

We met with Tony in his white shag office. The whole scene was the epitome of struggling band meets record producer. Tony was very generous giving us carte blanche and sending us off with the words, "Just do whatever it takes to get the music rollin'," or something like that. We had free studio time in the nicest studio I've been in before or since, complete with pro engineers. I wish we could have seen the opportunity that was ours for the taking. "The saddest words of voice or pen are those that say, what might have been."

Before we could really get rolling *Freewheelin'* ended its run. No big scene just ran out of steam. Our last gig was at The Red Fox Inn in New Brunswick and I assumed that was probably the end of my music career. At the end of the night Joy approached me and said their band *Caligula* was reforming and needed a bass player. Reality would have to wait.

Jump to some years later and I was once again called upon to be a best man. Rock had a whammer jammer of a wedding. My next book will be about the fall of the marriage, and the fall of Rock, my brother from another mother. His liver finally screamed, "No

mas!" and about a year and a half ago he quietly departed. And so, it goes, again.

The ten years post *Freewheelin'* saw hundreds of gigs with different Jersey bands, some more successful than others; *Caligula*, *Sundown*, *Walking Wounded*, *Freight Line*, *The Wyatt Brothers* and *The Firecreek Band* to name a few. A two-month stint with *The Firecreek Band* in Bermuda, '83 brought the end of full-time music.

7

On our return to Jersey the three of us got day gigs while continuing band gigs at night. On off nights I was attempting to finish that pesky English degree at Rutgers. It was a busy time. The debilitating stroke my father'd had years earlier set the stage for a final stroke on New Year's Eve of '81. He'd had his first one on Easter. I'm always a little nervous around holidays.

My mother had been fighting, and losing, a battle with *Wegners Granular Mytosis*; a circulatory disease that eventually resulted in amputation of both legs. She fought the hell out of it but on New Year's Day 1990 a stroke, then a heart attack a few days later, sent her on her way. She's written up in a few medical journals. She'd have liked that. She had a good ten year run of travel, friends and the discovery of a talent for painting. She always encouraged me but

thought I'd eventually get over my music habit. That never happened. I owe her a lot.

Post Bermuda gig I got a job as a courier for a tape storage facility and was eventually offered an operations manager position at a sister company. After five years it just didn't fit. I didn't, and never would, have the corporate makeup. I continued with a martial arts program that I'd started a few years earlier and earned a first-degree black belt while working at a NJ Tae Kwon Do school. That tenure ended after I moved out to Hunterdon County, NJ with my soon to be wife, Donna. A few years later, after a two-month solo cross-country odyssey, we got married in the summer of '93.

Shortly thereafter I became a limo driver/office guy as well as a Thurs morning DJ at WDVR FM in Sergeantsville, NJ. Band gigs continued, a home recorded cd got released and I embarked on a solo career as a guitar/singer. The band scene was dying out. People that went to see bands weren't staying out late and club owners couldn't afford to pay full bands anymore. What once was a five-piece band evolved into two guys and a drum machine. And so, it goes, and continues to go. I rarely get a chance to play bass anymore but guitar opportunities are plentiful.

I returned to Bermuda twice, went to the Cayman Islands once, walked a marathon in Northern

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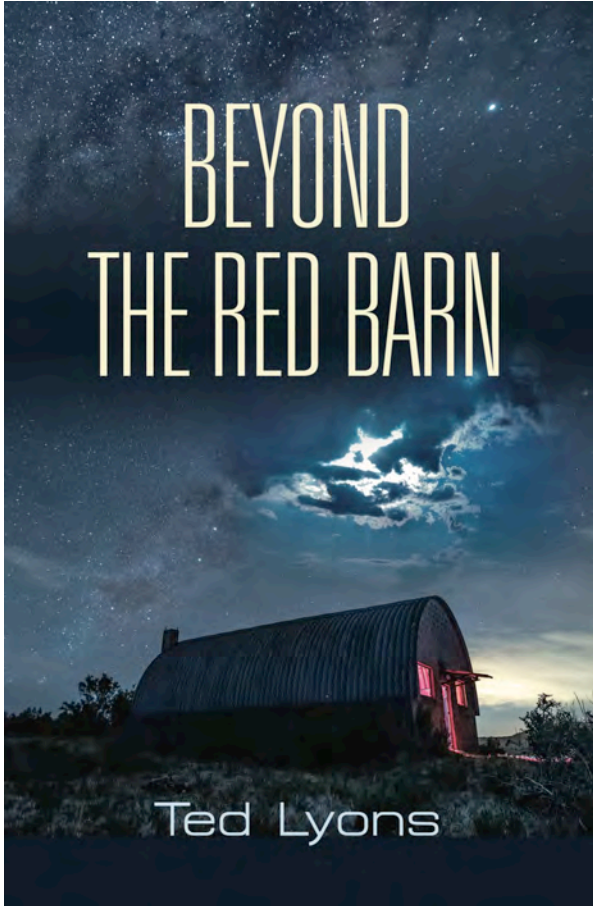
California, skydived (dove?) last year and took a hell ride to Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame with one of my Firecreek/Sundown buddies. Tom was slowly fading from colon cancer and the effects of his "treatments." We did a few more gigs together but this was to be our last hurrah. He left us about a year later but not before we got to see Cleveland rock. Post-divorce I had two serious relationships that just didn't pan out. Lovely, beautiful women both but was not to be. I was lucky to find another beautiful lady with an equally beautiful heart and here we are at Delaware Crossings, a community for the over fifty-five.

Linda's had her own challenges. Her daughter Carrie had complications during childbirth and lost ninety percent of her small intestine. It was an extremely challenging couple of weeks. Funeral arrangements were silently being contemplated. Carrie survived, received and lost another small intestine and as of this writing is doing well as a single mom and lives a few miles away with her two kids. I've inherited four grown children and ten grandchildren and get together for a big kid like me are always a blast. I'm afraid I'm an instigator. I have a second home in "time outs."

On my side I'm an uncle five times over and a great uncle nine times over. Along with the earlier

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mentioned regret of no military service, never having children of my own and falling short of a college degree are two more life regrets. One I'm still determined to fulfill and the other just ain't happenin'. You decide which is which. That's the "Readers Digest" version of life to date. Now things get kinda weird.



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