

An underground reporter's personal journey through
countercultural history.

**Berkeley Days: The Uncensored Memoirs of an
Underground Journalist**

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The Setting: JERUSALEM

Originally I wanted to be a layout artist. Two months in town, revolution a dream of the past, and one day I heard about the Berkeley BARB.

The fact was they weren't looking for layout artists.

But I didn't know that then.

Then all I knew was that a job is a job, Berkeley the center of the universe, and I a straddler of epochs. So I got up, packed some samples of my work into a shoulder bag, and left the house early.

The BARB office lay across town and in order to get there I had to walk down Telegraph Avenue. Telegraph: the place where it all happened, the circus. But this morning the sun was barely up and as I shuffled along the deserted sidewalk, I shoved my hands into my pocket to keep them warm and let my mind wander over the things minds tend to wander over on such twilight barely-mornings.

The color blue, for instance. Blue made you feel peaceful, calmed you down, cosmically connected you. But on mornings like this, blue had a frightening quality to it. On mornings like this, blue meant lost and it overwhelmed me, made me feel drowned and overpowered. On mornings like this I felt an unutterable loneliness and unless I fought it, unless I screeched and hollered and flayed my arms about, it descended on me like a falling sky and flung me into a dark abyss from which I could emerge only in time.

As I walked down Telegraph Avenue, I kept my hands in my pockets and my eyes to the ground. Everywhere lay bits of broken glass and debris.

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In an hour, Telegraph would be waking up and on the glass would sit longhaired skinny young men with their hands out. Tourists would take their pictures, then hand them quarters. By afternoon, the dirty-faced young men would be holding slender bottles of wine with which they would wash down varicolored pills. And by evening, the wine bottles would have become broken bits of glass again.

In the coffee shops, intense-looking men with beards would soon be ordering their breakfasts and unfolding newspapers. And as the morning progressed, other intense-looking men with beards would join them, lay books on the table, offer smokes, and begin passionate discussions that would last all day. By evening the smoke of their pipes would fill the coffee shops, making them impossible to enter without coughing.

As I walked down Telegraph Avenue I kept my hands in my pockets and my eyes to the ground, but a bit of red stopped me. It was an old poster, slapped on a wall amidst a million other mushy posters. It was half gone, tight as chipped paint and dimmed by rain, but I recognized it. It was a poster I might have put there myself, a revolutionary poster bearing the face of the famous Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara and the word "Venceremos!" Now half of it was gone, but I could outline the missing parts with my finger, outline the face and Spanish word meaning "We Shall Triumph!" And as I stood there in the half-light of a Berkeley morning staring at the face of this poster, familiar to me as the face of an old friend, I couldn't help but feel a stirring, the same stirring I had felt so many times before: that day in Washington, that day in New York, that day in Paris, that day in Berkeley.

But today a new poster overlapped the old. In place of Che Guevara's face grinned the face of a fat kid with dark skin. And in place of "Venceremos," the words "Who is Maharaj-Ji?"

Suddenly someone touched my shoulder and I whipped around. It was a blind man. I had seen him before. A man clearly in his 70s, he

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seemed to be Berkeley's oldest panhandler. Though I had passed him at this spot many times as he rattled his cup, we had never spoken before.

"Hello," I said now, involuntarily leaning backwards.

"Hello."

His face looked like a pinched marshmallow. As he spoke, little bubbles appeared around the edges of his mouth, popped, and almost as I watched, hardened on his chin. There was a white crust there that seemed to have been accumulating for years. The old man stank. I struggled hard to contain the nausea I felt rising within me.

"Who do *you* think Maharaj-Ji is?" I asked, wondering if he believed in this latest of the new gods.

He didn't hesitate an instant. "He's the devil," the old man said.

Despite myself I shuddered. Then dropped a quarter in the old man's cup.

Very soon now beautiful women pushing baby carts and wearing long flowing dresses with nothing underneath would be strolling up and down Telegraph, smiling at shirtless young men in straw hats. And everywhere one would feel the agreement men and women make before they are born, feel the silent knowledge of eternity that young people express in their secret erotic smiles. And even in the midst of all the blue, all the glass, all the smoke – even in the midst of torn posters and crusty saliva on blind men's lips, one would feel a glimmer of hope, a twinge of anticipation.

Ah, Berkeley in the year of 1973. Just two blocks more.

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