

# ASK KENT



I hadn't been to Berkeley much while growing up. Occasionally I'd hitch over from Marin for shows at the Berkeley Community Theater, and once I came for a People's Park riot in the summer of '69. I was 10 or 11 years old at the time and thought I was really politically involved. I had a "Free Huey" button, and wanted to burn down police stations with H. Rap Brown. In fact, I thought I thought I was a Black Panther. It was so cool running around trying not to get beaten or tear gassed. Of course, I had no idea what was really going on.

I didn't really belong there. I wasn't an activist, I was an adolescent voyeur of the movement. Back at home in my sheltered environment I still followed current events and considered myself a radical, but I wasn't truly involved as more than a bystander. It wasn't until moving to Berkeley that I was really confronted by a stimulating environment, and forced to put everything into perspective.

It was mid-September of 1978 and I still didn't know the first thing about Berkeley's south-of-campus area. My first mistake was getting a job at Rasputin's. I was hired as "used record store manager". That's what the ad had said anyway. To my surprise, my job turned out to be putting away records and doing security. On my first day of work I sat outside of Rasputin's trying to figure out what the hell was going on. The store was supposed to open at 10:30 am, but it was 10:45 already and I was the only one there waiting. But I had the fortunate company of Serge, an old guy with a beard, spouting off his stream-of-consciousness life story/ comment on the students passing by/ science fiction plot-loop which he seemingly couldn't or wouldn't escape from.

After a long while waiting with Serge, I was joined by a few fellow workers. Being the new guy, I was sent to the phone booth to call the manager to wake him up. Thirty rings go by until he answers, mumbles something over the wire, and hangs up. So I go back to the store and wait another 20 minutes til he drives up in a battered VW Bug, gets out dressed in his pajamas, unlocks the door, gets the change from the safe, then gets back in his car and disappears for 2 hours. I'm told this guy is Reed (real name Jeff) and he's the head manager. Reed snorts a lot of cocaine and likes to sleep in late. Ken was the owner and lord of Rasputin's, and Reed was Ken's favorite. They would stay at the store until the wee morning hours pricing out used LPs, 8-tracks (yeah 8-tracks) and cassettes.

It was an interesting collection of people working at Rasputin's at the time. There was Luke Lukash, basically a street person/ artist who also night managed the hotel at Haste &

Telegraph. He was a kind, big Russian bear, always having a positive philosophical slant on things. Shannon, with his thick Irish accent, was also a manager. He spent most of his time on LSD looking through the dollar records in the back of the store. I remember Shannon punching out a bearded asshole named Ron for playing some Marianne Faithful song off the "Broken English" album where she swears. So Ron's nose is broken, and Shannon runs down the street never to be seen again on Telegraph.

There was a guy, one of these Americans with a fake English accent, a total poseur, who ran drugs across the border for a living. At one point, he had to leave town suddenly and I inherited his cool apartment on University. There was my new pal Rick, who was a hyper-nice guy from Los Angeles. He was a musician like me and we shared a love of really weird music, like Cage, Music Concrete, Pere Ubu, and The Residents. We ended up doing a lot of sound experiments together and a couple of film soundtracks. Then there was Pat, who still works for Ken at Rasputin's. He was another L.A. guy, but he had been some hot surfer in the sixties, and a Velvet Underground groupie, following them around during their 1966 West Coast tour. (John Cale got him to try heroin and Maureen Tucker cooked him breakfast once). Pat didn't talk much though. It took me years to find out much about him. He was the big enigma of Rasputin's.

In short, I found myself in a place filled with misfits and serious neurotics. And that was just at work. Outside on Telegraph the truly outcast and deranged took hold of the street. During Reagan's governorship of California he had cut budgets by closing a lot of mental institutions, so many people were now on the streets who needed serious care just to function. Many died in the streets, unable to fend for themselves. Many somehow found themselves on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley.

Stories are told through the years about the various mainstays of Telegraph. The most common story is the "He was a college Professor who got involved with drug

experiments in the 60's" myth. I fell for that one the first time. Someone was telling me the story of Serge, how he'd been a Yale professor, the experiments had gone wrong, he'd dropped out of society, etc. I'd listened to his verbal loop almost every day while drinking my morning coffee, waiting for Rasputin's to open. I heard the changing tangents and nuances in Serge's loop. Certain words could cue a number of new branches to his word sphere. But the tangents always returned to four main realities: 'S-E-R-G-E', 'people walking up inclines', 'Yale graduate', and 'experiments gone bad'. The 'experiments' thought seemed the most crucial to Serge. After many references to experiments he would yell "Watch out" or "Help" or simply "Aaahgr" and then hum in a high pitched whine, a sort of personal vibrational resting area for Serge. He would sometimes do this for 15 minutes or so before going back into a loop. Very spooky for a child like myself to absorb. So of course the ex-professor story made sense. But over the years, hearing the same story about countless other street people, I've realized it's just a small urban myth on a mythic college street.

Even though many of the "colorful" street people on Telegraph nowadays are very self aware of their 'star' status (The Hate Man, Rick Star, Rare, Chicken George, etc.) they are, I think, the catalyst of radical socio-political thought. If you listen closely, much of what they say is hyper-intelligent. Much is also pure stupidity, but even that opens up new ideas. They extend the possible boundaries of thought, much the same way the ideas they come up with stretch the standards of normality, so that a person considered "normal" in Berkeley might move to Debuque, Montana and be the weirdest person in a hundred miles. Just by being aware how completely outside and on the edge Telegraph streetpeople are, and still they exist and survive and sometimes flourish— that extends the possibilities of reality.

Telegraph Avenue, for me, is and will always be the center of Berkeley. There is