

The Strip
Trina Robbins

Jo said there was a new group playing at Ciro's, the nightclub on the Sunset strip. They were called The Byrds and we would love them, she said, so she took us to see them on the second day of their engagement. We had no idea what to expect. Ciro's had been a hangout for movie stars back in the 1940s, which meant it was dusty and passé, a has-been nightclub in 1965.

The first thing I noticed was the outrageous crowd: young longhaired men and women dressed in outfits made of tattered antique velvets and old lace tablecloths, mostly worn sans underwear. I later found out they were all followers and hangers-on of the sculptor and artist Vito Paulakas, better known as simply Vito, and they were known as "Vito's freaks." Quite a few of the girls were teenage runaways, and Vito and his friend Carl Franzoni had an easy time convincing them that sex was healthy – especially sex with Vito and Carl. Vito was in his fifties and Carl was no kid either. Most of the wondrous getups worn by the freaks had been made by Vito's much younger cute blonde wife, Szou. Before their first gig at Ciro's, the Byrds had practiced in Vito's studio, so from the beginning they came with a contingent of the most bizarre looking fans any group could ask for.

When we got to know Vito's freaks and the girls found out I had a sewing machine, they would come over wearing their navy surplus bellbottoms, so they could take the pants in on my machine. They would step out of the bellbottoms and sit at the machine bare-ass naked from the waist down, making the pants fit.

After I had gaped at Vito's freaks for a few minutes, the Byrds came on. Oh my god, I was not prepared for four longhaired guys who played Dylan! Who played Pete Seeger! And who played some really great songs written by their songwriter, Gene Clarke, who played tambourine and harmonica and looked like Prince Valiant. He had such a unique style that if I hear a Gene Clarke song that I'd never heard before, I can instantly tell that it's by Gene. The other unique thing about the Byrds was the jingle-jangle sound that came from Jim (later Roger) McGuinn's 12-string guitar. Knowing nothing about music, I can't explain how he got the sound, but I instantly fell in love with it. Even today, and probably forever, when I hear the introductory chords of their Mister Tambourine Man, I get chills. There will never be another group like them.

After their set, Paul and I went back stage and met them. There were still so few long-haired guys in Los Angeles, and, despite Vito's freaks, so few chicks in velvet mini-dresses, that the Byrds welcomed us backstage and we instantly became friends. How could we not? They were science fiction fans! They used a term from Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human*, telling us that they "bleshed." Ted Sturgeon was one of my favorite writers, second only to Ray Bradbury. Blesh was a combination of blend and mesh, and it meant you thought and acted as one. It was the word of that year. In about a year, the new word became "Grok," from Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and science fiction, that previously weird genre that nobody in my high school read but

me, was accepted by anyone who had the least amount of hipness to them.

The Byrds made sure that we could get into Ciro's free, and we did, every night. Everybody was coming to Ciro's to dance to the Byrds. Buffy St. Marie was in town, and when she wasn't performing she came with her boyfriend, the two of them resplendent in long braids, beaded leather and fringe. Everybody cleared the dance floor just to watch them dance. Paul wasn't much of a dancer but it didn't matter because I had no end of dance partners, like actor Michael J. Pollard or Barry McGuire, who had a huge hit with the song "Eve of Destruction". Everybody had their own personal dancing style and Barry's was a kind of good natured folksy clomping. I danced with Kim Fowley, who was tall and skinny and reminded me of a guy in a Toulouse Lautrec poster. My own dancing style incorporated a lot of hair-tossing.

The Byrds were pretty cavalier about their girlfriends. They'd show up at our house with beautiful girls hanging on their arms, long straight blonde hair, big eyes, the works, and a couple of weeks later the girls would be calling me: "Have you seen David recently? Have you heard from him?" They would just drop the girls and move on to the next ones. We inherited their dumped girlfriends. One day David Crosby showed up at our house with Maxine, a tiny girl – shorter than even me – with a tiny nose and a large top. She went from David to Chris Hillman before giving up on the Byrds entirely, but we became friends. Maxine, where are you now? Emerald Thomas was Chris Hillman's girlfriend when we first met the Byrds, a beautiful and very bright African American who was only seventeen years old. (Everybody was so young!) She and Chris didn't last but she became one of my best friends. Emmie, where are you now?

Our house came with a goldfish pond and a Quan Yin statue in the backyard, and a little back house that was empty but clean and in excellent condition. At one time or another everybody crashed in it, including folk singer Pamela Poland and Emmie, who lived there with her friend Cynthia Jessup. One day David Crosby showed up at our house with Martha Wax in tow. She was a fifteen year old who had run away from home to be with David. (Everybody was so young!) Not only that, but her father just happened to be mayor of Sausalito. This was potential trouble for David – the fifteen year old daughter of a mayor? Please! – and he needed somewhere to put her that was *not* his house, so we put her up in the little back house. Pretty soon she was joined by her girlfriend, Girl, also fifteen, also a runaway. They would hang out at our house, rolling joints and coloring the rolling paper with magic markers, and they were both immortalized in song: Jefferson Airplane did a song called "Martha" about, well, Martha, and the Quicksilver Messenger Service recorded "Quicksilver Girl."

In 1967, about a year after I had left Paul, I phoned him from New York and Martha answered the phone. She was living with him now. I was so happy! I'd been feeling terribly guilty about leaving Paul, and now I didn't have to feel guilty anymore.

I was designing and wearing my clothes to Ciro's. One of my best outfits was a white pique pants suit with hip hugger bellbottoms and a top that looked modest from the front, but was open all down the back, kept from falling off by just a button at the neck. A bare

back is ho-hum today, but it was considered absolutely outrageous in the mid-60s. Bob Dylan was in town at the time, and of course he came to see the Byrds, and along with him came his sidekick, Bobby Neuwirth. In those days, Bobby was wherever Dylan was, and they even looked alike. Emmie Thomas called him a bizarro Bob Dylan. Bobby danced with me, making sure that my exposed back was always turned to Dylan, just, he said, to blow his mind.

When I wasn't wearing clothes of my own design I was wearing vintage. The craze for vintage was just beginning. There were thrift shops in Pasadena where you could buy beaded flapper dresses for five or ten dollars. I had a garden party dress from about 1917 that I had bought for \$7 at a place called Granny's Attic. It consisted of about a half dozen different kinds of white lace all sewn together, and today I could not get so much as a thigh into it, but I was very skinny in those days.

My clothes were getting a reputation. Sonny Bono approached me in Ciro's, about designing clothes for him and Cher, but he said they both had to wear exactly the same thing, and tailoring pants for men was beyond me – I avoided zippers at all cost -- so I declined. They found themselves a great designer in Bridget Milligan, who was barely out of her teens. By then, besides Szou Vito, there were only a few women in the Sunset Strip scene making clothes for the rock'n'roll crowd: Bridget and me, and Genie the Tailor. When I first knew Genie, she was making clothes for Paul Revere and the Raiders. Later, when I was already living in New York, she was designing outfits for almost everybody: The Monkees, Cream, Eric Burdon, you name it. In 1968, when I visited from New York, she had opened a big fancy boutique on the Strip, backed by Brian Wilson I think, where she was making chiefly Indian robes, which I found rather boring. Her fabrics were great, though, and I coveted a blue satin with tiny white stars, but she wouldn't tell me where she got it. She really didn't need to feel competitive, but she did. After all, not only was my boutique located on the other side of America, but hers was so much bigger and fancier than my tiny storefront in New York. Sadly, a year later she was killed in a highway accident. She was only 27.

But if Bridget had Sonny and Cher, and Genie had Paul Revere, I was making clothes for my share of rock stars, too. One day I heard motorcycles and looked out the window to see David Crosby and a very large woman driving up to our house on their respective bikes. David introduced us; she was Cass Elliot, of the newly formed Mamas and Papas. Cass was aggressively friendly, almost forcing you to like her, and who could resist? I think she came on so strong because most people's first impression was simply "fat girl", But her attitude was, "I'm Cass Elliot, and you're my friend," and – voila! – you *were*. Cass couldn't find any decent clothes in her size, so I made her a couple of tent-dresses. You can find both of them on YouTube including the one she wore on the Ed Sullivan show. Michelle Phillips threw a Halloween costume party, and I can't remember what I wore but Cass dressed up as a daffodil and looked adorable!

By the way, I told the Mamas and the Papas that they should change their name back to The Mugwumps because Mamas and Papas made them sound like a motorcycle gang, so it's a good thing they never listened to me.

I also made shirts for David Crosby and Donovan, but they couldn't perform in them because the cuffs were dripping with lace that got caught in their guitars.

I made dresses for the various wives and girlfriends of musicians. Look magazine came to the strip to photograph the scene and took this photo in Donovan's dressing room when he was playing at a new club called The Trip. Donovan, sucking on a lily, is the only one on the photo *not* wearing clothing made by me. That's me at the top, face mostly hidden behind nose-length bangs and ironed hair, with Paul next to me in a shirt and vest I made for him. I wish I could remember everybody's names but at the bottom left is Ronnie Haran, and next to her is Enid Karl, who was the mother of Donovan Leitch, son of Donovan Leitch. Second tier, second from left is Paula Hyun. Where are you all now?

As for the photo, it wound up on the cutting room floor.

In 1965 the big Cinerama Theater on Sunset Boulevard premiered "Battle of the Bulge" starring Henry Fonda. Outside the theater they had a huge display with dummy soldiers shooting off rifles and even cannons. Of course we were all very anti-war, especially since the war in Vietnam was escalating, so we decided to stage a protest, but a decorative flower-power protest. We dressed up in our finest clothes, much of them made by me, bought a bunch of teddybears and fake flowers at Goodwill, and showed up at the theater. We placed the teddybears in the arms of the soldiers, and the flowers in the barrels of the rifles and cannons. Paul and I were there, of course, and David Crosby showed up, and writer Eve Babitz with her kid sister Miriam. I can't remember if Peter Fonda showed up or not; he may have chickened out because his father was starring in the movie. Underground journalist John Bryan, publisher of a San Francisco underground paper, Open City, hid across the street and took pictures for his paper. Open City and the L.A. Free Press (often called the Freep) were two of the first underground papers in the country, and John, who was called "King of the underground press" in the mainstream San Francisco Chronicle, became part of my karass.

We were having the time of our lives until the theater manager called the cops, and we decided it was time to split. Paul Robbins was standing on top of a tank; stuffing into it the last of the flowers, and he jumped off, breaking his foot. We drove him to the hospital emergency room where the doctor took one look at his foot, declared it broken, and asked him if he had jumped off a wall or something. Paul answered, "A tank," and I saw the doctor write in his report: "Jumped off a wall."

Everybody was forming a band, and some were better than others, and you had to have a good name. One night after the clubs closed, we gave a ride to a young Irishman named Danny Hutton, who told us he had formed a new band called Three Dog Night. He explained that Eskimos sleep with their huskies for warmth (makes sense to me, I sleep with my cat) and on an ordinary night they sleep with one dog, colder nights mean two dogs, but if it's *really* cold, it's a three dog night. And there was a great new group, he informed us, called the Lovin' Spoonful. The name was from an old blues song, and it

was one of those double entendre songs: the spoonful could have been a spoonful of sugar as the song said or it could have been a spoonful of heroine, to be melted down over a flame. Everybody was doing drug references, and even if all you did was smoke pot, you got the reference. The Mamas and the Papas sang "Straight Shooter": *Baby are you holding/ holding anyone but me?/ 'cause I'm a real straight shooter if you know what I mean.* We knew what they meant.

Our friend Ronnie Haran was the talent booker at the Whisky A GoGo. She told us she was managing a new band called The Doors and started coming over with Jim, who was living with her. He hardly spoke. He would sit on the couch or on one of the armchairs and I would serve him coffee. He always politely thanked me. Then, while Ronnie and Paul and I chatted, he would silently sip his coffee and glower at me over the rim of his cup. He had amazing eyes that just seemed to glow. The only other person I've ever seen with eyes like that was Rudolph Valentino on the silver screen.

It turned out that the woman who lived next door to us (what was your name? Where are you now?) was a friend of Jim's and had gone to UCLA with him. One day when Paul and I were just hanging out at home, there was a thump on the door that sounded as if someone had fallen against it (he had!) and a voice said, "Oh, man..." I opened the door and Jim fell inside. He was drunk as a skunk. We sat him down in a comfortable chair and I made coffee. And he started talking! I can't remember a word he said, but it was brilliant and amazing, it was intelligent, and it was prose as poetry. It was like all the Doors lyrics that I was to hear later. I just sat at his feet and listened, and he didn't stop. I have no idea how long the entire experience was, but by the time Jim had come down enough to leave on his own two feet, he went, leaving us with a newfound admiration for a brilliant guy.

Shortly after that, we went to the Doors' first gig at the Whisky A Gogo. Need I say they were amazing? I was stoned (weren't we always?) but only on pot. Nevertheless, listening to Jim set me off on some strange psychedelic trip of which I remember nothing except that somehow it involved Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and it convinced me that I should return to New York.

As I've already said, I know nothing about music but I know what I like. I was particularly struck by "Moonlight Drive" and in my stupor I decided it sounded Hawaiian. I've since learned that Robbie Krieger's slide guitar had the same effect as a Hawaiian guitar, but still, the lyrics were all about *swimming*, right?

Let's swim to the moon,

Let's climb through the tide...

After their first set I said to Jim, "I loved that Hawaiian song." He said, "Hawaiian?"

The Doors' original name was The Doors of Perception. I had just read Aldous Huxley's book by that name and I thought it was cool. I asked Jim, "So you named the group after Huxley's book?" and he said, "No, after Blake." Oh my god, he had gone to the source! I was so impressed!

Back to drugs: for a comparatively conservative hippie couple who mostly used nothing but pot and took the occasional acid trip, we nonetheless had some strange drug experiences. Once Van Dyke Parks gave us something that I've since found out was some form of animal tranquilizer, but we didn't know it at the time. We were never the kind of people to just pop a pill the minute someone hands it to you, so we waited for some evening at home to take the pills. We had just taken the pills when the bell rang. It was Gary Marker, the bass player for a great folk rock group called The Rising Sons, along with his first wife, Cookie. We sat around the living room and chatted, and suddenly I felt very sick. I was just able to make it to the bathroom before I threw up. The next thing I knew, I was staring at a vast expanse of gleaming white. It was of course the toilet bowl. I stood up and tried to walk. Somehow my inner gravity had become skewed, and my equilibrium was shot to shit. I couldn't differentiate between a small step and a lurch, so I lurched. Years later, Van Dyke described it as the moon walk. Somehow I got to the bedroom and fell face up across the bed, where Gary joined me, sitting next to me and holding my hand. I clutched his hand like it was a life preserver and held on tight. The ceiling was a glowing expanse of jade. I was full of love for all mankind and especially for Gary Marker, my kind and true friend who sat with me in my hour of need, and I told him so, again and again. Meanwhile, in the living room, Cookie was reading to Paul from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, at his request. At some point in the early morning, we must have passed out. Gary gently reclaimed his hand, which had certainly grown numb, and he and Cookie tiptoed out.

About the Rising Sons: they were a one-of-a-kind if short-lived folk and blues group consisting of Gary, Jesse Lee Kinkaid, along with music legends Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal. One day shortly after we met them, the group was at our house when I commented to Jesse on how much I liked Taj. He said, "Ah, but he's suffering from a rare disease and only has a year to live." I was devastated. Such talent! A year later I couldn't help but notice that Taj was still alive and seemed to be in fine health. I asked Jesse, and he told me, "Oh, that was just something he said to get girls."

Return with me again to the planet of drugs. One evening we dropped in to visit some friends who had just made hasheesh brownies, closely following the recipe in the Alice B. Toklas cookbook. We sat around their big dining room table and ate the hash. About ten minutes later, I noticed that the table was suddenly too high and my feet didn't touch the floor. I had become a four year old child! Paul had to bring me back to my original age by calling out the years: five, six, seven, eight, nine, until he reached twenty-five. Now my feet touched the floor again, but I had to throw up. Why do so many drug experiences involve throwing up? I ran to the bathroom, took off my glasses so they wouldn't fall into the toilet, and barfed. I stood up shakily, looked into the mirror – and saw my mother's face staring back at me. Suddenly it was all clear! I had just thrown up all the garbage I'd been feeding myself about taking after my father. Now I saw clearly: I understood everything, I was my mother's daughter and I needed to accept her. In fact, I saw so clearly that I didn't need my glasses anymore!

The next morning I woke up blind as a bat as always, and we had to drive to our friend's house to retrieve my glasses.

The Byrds got us in free to all their concerts, so because they opened for the Beatles at the Hollywood Bowl, we got to see them. *See* is the important word here, because we couldn't hear them. The Bowl was filled with teenaged girls who started screaming the moment the Beatles took the stage and didn't stop until they left. By the end of the concert, the place was completely trashed. Sitting near us was a girl who looked to be about 14, weeping hysterically. She was with her mother, who was trying to calm her. Her hair was a mess, her clothes were ripped, she looked like a rape victim. It was my first and so far only experience with mass hysteria.

Bonnie Jean's boyfriend, Ivars Perlbach, was a photographer. He had been a WWII refugee and had childhood memories of being strafed by a German bomber, along with his mother. Ivars was backstage with us at the first American Rolling Stones concert, in San Bernardino in 1964. The Byrds were also playing, so they got us in free. Backstage was crawling with pretty young girls, so the security cops decided they must go; they chased out all the girls. It didn't matter that I wasn't a groupie, that I was there with my husband. Paul could stay, the guard said, I had to go. In a panic, I pointed to Ivars, who had cameras and equipment hanging all over his body: "I have to stay. I'm his assistant." Ivars nodded, and I got to stay. So I actually *became* his assistant. We stood up front, right below the stage, and I carried all his equipment, handing him what he needed. Meanwhile Mick Jagger was prancing around right in front of my nose, and we were all – Stones and Ivars and me -- being pelted with jelly babies, because Mick had said, in an interview in some teen magazine, that he liked jelly babies.

We knew Mick Jagger considered Howlin' Wolf a major influence, and it just so happened that Howlin' was playing at the Ash Grove, so after the concert we took him to the Ash Grove, where Howlin' Wolf was sharing a bill with The Rising Sons. I found myself sitting next to disk jockey Les Claypool, whose radio show I loved so much. But Claypool had been growing bitter; he was a folk purist and he hated with a passion the electrified folk rock groups, and stated on his show that he would never play Peter, Paul, and Mary. The Rising Sons, with their electrified blues and R&B, had him practically foaming at the mouth. I tried to explain how amazing the group was – there had been nothing like them – but he snarled back at me, "I fought the war for people like you!"

What? What did that mean? In "A Hard Day's Night" some guy says that to the Beatles. I still don't get it.

Paul was still printing on his beautiful antique press, and Ivars commissioned him to print menus for his new Sunset Strip restaurant, the Fred C. Dobbs. (If you don't recognize the name, you'd better watch "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" pronto.) Paul designed a background for the menu: in pale gold on a cream colored background, the background

said, over and over, GOLD GOLD GOLD steenking badges GOLD GOLD GOLD steenking badges GOLD GOLD GOLD, you get the picture.

Then Ivars died tragically in an auto accident, and Bonnie Jean stepped in behind the counter to do what had to be done to keep the restaurant afloat. The quirky menu featured peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with raisins in them, and Bonnie added peanuts to the hamburgers, which endeared her to Hugh Romney. Bonnie's friend Bob Dylan came, and he called the place "The Lee J. Cobbs," and because Dylan came, so did all his friends and fellow rock stars, like the Byrds. News travelled fast, and soon the place was jammed with kids from the burbs who hoped to get a glimpse of Dylan and his pals, which meant that Dylan and his pals stayed away. So that was the end of the Fred C. Dobbs. (but the beginning of Bonnie and Hugh's relationship.) In the words of Yogi Berra, "Nobody goes there anymore, it's too crowded."

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