Climbing a Bikeway to Heaven: Bob Berry Remembered

Contributed by Gar Smith
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Robert Stephen Berry

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It's not every day you find a Quaker church service crammed with CalTrans (California Dept. of Transportation) employees -- especially when more than half of them are decked out in tie-dyed shirts. But it's not everyday that our community says goodbye to a unique Berkeley treasure like Bob Berry -- a songwriting, pro-biking activist who became so disenchanted with traditional political parties that, in the Bicentennial Year of 1976, he dedicated himself to reviving the Whig Party.
The invitation to Berry's June 10 memorial service included a unique request: "The family hopes that people attending the memorial service would arrive in tie-dyed T-shirts to honor Bob's free spirit."

According to longtime friend and housemate, Tom Yamaguchi, Bob died suddenly, after a short illness. He leaves behind a brother, daughter Avila Birch, a wide circle of friends and CalTrans colleagues and a legendary library containing tens of thousands of books, many of which are related to conspiracy research.

Bob was one of the first activists to take to the road with the Bike Coalition and in support of the Critical Mass bicycling events that have now become a worldwide phenomenon. His first job after graduating from UC Berkeley was working as a loadmaster at Zoom Zoom Air, which carried cargo from SF to LA on a small fleet of propeller-driven DC-3s and C-47s. Bob felt comfortable working at Zoom Zoom, which he liked to call a "Marxist Airline." He joined CalTrans in 1983 and quickly moved through a series of promotions as he proved himself to be an "invaluable" employee.

Bob was active in the Free Speech Movement and in the People's Park demonstrations. He also worked at the Berkeley Barb, one of the country's first "underground" newspapers. In addition to tracking conspiracy theories, Bob liked to spend his free time marching in anti-war rallies and getting down at Grateful Dead concerts. As to be expected, Berry's memorial service (held at the Berkeley Friends Church at the corner of Cedar and Sacramento and a short walk from North Berkeley BART) was somewhat quirky. It began with readings from Psalms and Vonnegut.

Bob's brother Bill recalled Joan Rivers' advice for coping with adversity: "Just laugh at everything. If you can laugh at it, you can live with it." Bob had his own version. Exasperated by a world of shameless political chicanery, Bob would quip: "It's all just a big conspiracy to keep me entertained." As a songmeister, his political ditties provided another outlet for his mischievous nature. As one friend recalled, "He would take a song like 'Old McDonald' and write a bunch of new lyrics about Dick Cheney." Another friend recalled Bob's anarchist version of "No Business Like Show Business." It went: "There's No Government Like No Government..."

Bob was remembered as someone who sounded like former 49ers football coach John Madden and "bounded" about with a Madden-like level of excitement and passion. Bob's young niece recalled living in his house for a spell. "When my friends came over to visit, I had to warn them about my uncle: 'He'll come down the stairs in his underwear and sing to you.'"

In addition to family reminiscences, many of the stories shared at the Friday memorial came from members of CalTrans --

from supervisors and yard workers who took personal time off to attend the service. As one CalTrans official noted, Bob Berry's passing had prompted "the first two-page memorial in CalTrans history."

One of Bob's supervisors (a woman with more than 30 years' service at CalTrans and who looked resplendent in a tie-dyed shirt), spoke lovingly of Bob. "He had no guile. He was not afraid of anything and he would talk to anyone. He was absolutely unbound." And he reportedly took delight in the nickname that someone had bestowed on him -- "The BobBerryan."

One District 4 co-worked broke down in tears as she remembered the night Bob found her still working at the office at 11PM and insisted on staying up with her until she finished her work. One of Bob's jobs was to provide research to help CalTrans defend itself from lawsuits. "He knew everything. He could find whatever you needed," one co-worker marveled. "He did all our work for us!" a supervisor laughed. Bob's supervisor of 17 years, recalled him as a thrifty "free spirit" who refused to abandon "his 10-year-old computer."

Another colleague recalled how Bob had once come up with two forgotten hand-drawn sketches of Highway 1 that proved critical in assessing a road accident in Marin. "He always added a lot of color to reports that would otherwise have been quite dry," she noted. As proof, she read one of Bob's classic CalTrans memos and, sure enough, it was salted with an array of snarky adjectives that quickly had the memorial crowd chuckling.

One coworker recalled how he first met Bob during an off-hours project -- directing a satirical political movie called "Dr. Alzheimer's Medicine Show." The movie was designed to mock the First Bush Presidency. "I needed some people to perform as a political lynch mob," he recalled. "Bob was only too willing to brandish a shovel over his head."

Anti-car activist Jan Lundberg recalled that Berry was "the first to write a check for the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium." Lundberg paused and added with a grin: "Not quite the mission of Caltrans."

Despite his long career as a CalTrans Engineering Technician and Assistant Transportation Engineer, Bob refused to own a car and commuted exclusively by bike and BART. On those occasions when he got off work during BART's prime commute hours (when bicycles are banned), he would hop on his bike and pedal 11 miles back to his Berkeley home.

One of his CalTrans colleagues recalled asking Bob how it was that a "long-haired, bike-ridding hippie who never owned a car" wound up working for CalTrans.

"Don't you get it?" Bob replied. "In 20 years, the oil will be gone and there won't be any gas for cars -- but California will have the best paved system of bicycle lanes in the country!"

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Bob Berry's old friend Jan Lundberg remembers Bob fondly as a friend to count on, an excellent father, and dedicated to the community good and health of the planet. His education and humble, amused beliefs were largely an accomplishment of his own keen efforts, and transcended ideology. Bob is proof that one's working to just pay the bills at a bureaucracy did not mean giving up fierce, independent thinking, nor being shy about singing in public to get a message across, even though he couldn't really sing!

For more information, see: tomyamaguchi.wordpress.com

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