

Review: Songs of Petroleum by Jan Lundberg

Contributed by Frank Kaminski
05 December 2011

Note: this review appeared five weeks ago in Mud City Press and Energy Bulletin.

Songs of Petroleum: The Autobiography of Jan Lundberg, Independent oil Industry Analyst and Eco-Activist

By Jan C. Lundberg

391 pp. Culture Change Press – April 2011. \$18.00.

Jan Lundberg is a former oil analyst turned whistleblower and rock musician. Lundberg's memoir, *Songs of Petroleum*, delves deeply into the goings-on at his family's oil market-research firm, Lundberg Survey, from when he was growing up to when he took charge of the company.

During that time he came to loath oil money and its atrocities against our planet and all of its poorer inhabitants, as well as against the physical health of everyone alive today, rich and poor. He also learned firsthand how money can tear apart families and change a person's very character, as it took away his mother and bitterly estranged him from a sister. He eventually left Lundberg Survey to pursue an activist career and attempt to salvage some family unity. Both of these proved mighty struggles, and only the first of them successful.

A child of 1950s Los Angeles, Lundberg grew up at the dawn of America's postwar economic bonanza. His parents didn't buy into the consumer culture, however, and weren't afraid of being thought kooky because of it. Some of their neighbors scoffed at them for feeding their kids "rabbit food" from their garden and refusing to use that miracle pesticide, DDT. The Lundbergs also believed ardently in fighting disease with fasting and other alternative therapies, after a child of theirs survived a life-threatening illness and they credited his survival to a stringent fast. (Years later, Jan's desperately ill father would himself be written off as gone, only to recover and live another 12 years following a 40-day regimen of nothing but Perrier water.)

Jan would eventually attend UCLA, where he would flourish as a student journalist and environmental lobbyist. Yet he received some of his most valuable schooling while sailing the world with his family as a boy. They sailed for four and a half years, staying in Greece, Mazatlan, Mexico City, El Salvador, Bermuda, the U.S. Virgin Islands and many other places. These years gave Lundberg rich cultural exposure, taught him to love surf music and saw him through danger and adventure on the proverbial high seas. They also taught him sailing and other skills that would one day serve him well as an advocate of carbon-free transport.

The family company was quite well known by the late '60s, and would become famous for accurately predicting the '79 oil crisis. The Lundbergs were acquainted with a number of celebrities, and thus Jan enjoyed some childhood brushes with fame. In fact, even before his father, Dan, was christened America's "Oil Guru," he'd had an accomplished writing career and hosted a TV talk show on which he once interviewed science fiction legend Ray Bradbury. Jan recounts how struck he was to learn that Bradbury didn't drive a car, in autocentric L.A. of all places. Now, writes Jan, "I have a hard time remembering that almost every time someone runs into my car-free-by-choice lifestyle, he or she probably feels the way I did when I ran up against Ray Bradbury's lifestyle."

The first forebodings of tragedy in the Lundberg family saga came in the early '80s, when the siblings had reached adulthood and were working for the family business. Division and strife erupted between brothers Jan and Darius on the one hand and sister Trilby on the other. ... [deletion of a legal reference, January 2013]

Who is right isn't for this reviewer to judge. However, one previous reviewer has opined that Jan dwells too long on the matter in his book; and in a note to me, Jan acknowledged that this may indeed be the case. The length didn't bother me, though, and I think that Jan was wise to subordinate much of the material to appendices.

In any event, out of tragedy came inspiration. Jan went on to found the grassroots activist group Culture Change, and it took its name largely from what he had learned during his family ordeal: that we need an entirely new culture, not reforms to the current one.

Culture Change scores an A-plus for political courage and resoluteness, with its stated intention of keeping up the fight until the culture really has changed. It's unfortunate that this sensible stance has alienated mainstream environmental groups, with their vested interests in the status quo. Lundberg recalls how the manager of a speaking venue vowed never to work with him again because he'd had the forthrightness to tell the audience that there's no grand "technological fix." From depaving roads to transporting goods by sail to drastically curtailing household energy usage, there sadly isn't a Culture Change initiative that's an easy sell with today's public.

Lundberg truly has lived a life of voluntary simplicity, though he admits that getting there wasn't an entirely voluntary process. Rather, it was due largely to his naiveté in thinking that there was "a market for the truth." Years of struggling to make ends meet in the nonprofit sector gave way to years of sleeping on couches and barely scraping together the cash to go to conferences. (He did, however, enjoy some musical fame during this time, when he and his band, the Depavers, performed a song of theirs at Kyoto in '97 and it wound up on NPR and CNN.) Here was a man who, at the height of his prosperity, had owned a Mercedes and a yacht and raised a family in L.A. But he's faring better now than when he was at his most destitute, and he's come to find his life of simplicity liberating.

So too will his book be liberating for a great many readers, helping free them from the dogma of industrial progress. And its appeal isn't limited to those who already follow energy and the environment. Those simply looking for thought-provoking discussion on travel, sailing, fasting to purify the body or the period flavor of mid-century Hollywood, to name a few topics, will find much to like in *Songs of Petroleum*.

The above review appeared on Oct. 31, 2011 in
Mud City Press and
Energy Bulletin as part of a two-book review that included Amanda Kovattana's *Diamonds in My Pocket*. The above paragraph beginning with "The first forebodings of tragedy" was edited down on the CultureChange.org website.

Author's note: "What a generous review. You'd think I was the reviewer's favorite uncle or something! But I've never met Frank Kaminski. The only thing I could add is that the word 'destitute' is a relative term, and it brings up a key issue: I didn't feel destitute; rather, I felt I was an activist learning what I needed. I had faith that the picture was ever changing, good to bad to good, ad infinitum, according to my chosen path. Living without money to the extent possible was and is a serious goal. Yet, to accomplish certain things requires money, such as bringing dozens of copies of *Songs of Petroleum* to the peak oil conference held in Washington, D.C. in November 2011, and to give copies to journalists, Congressmen and Occupy activists!"

Buy the book for \$18.00 (which includes delivery cost) from Culture Change or Amazon.com (see a review there), if you can't get to your local bookstore that easily can order *Songs of Petroleum* - ISBN# 9780615343730.