

The View From Right Field by Rick Ohler June 25, 2020

Discovery Day EA: Private Parties, Public Invited by Rick Ohler

It was shaping up to be another quiet weekend in the old hometown as we rounded the corner on the third month of the Coronazoic distancing era and headed into the fourth, albeit with some welcomed loosening of restrictions. Still, the list of things we could do remained much shorter than those we couldn't. Chief among the no-nos was going out to hear the live music for which the village is so well known. That would be a while.

Or would it?

Last Thursday, I was cycling down Main Street near Walnut when a voice called out my name. When I turned my ancient Fuji bicycle around (the one Chain Ring Rhythm owner Dan Park claims he orders parts from the Smithsonian for), there were Dave Nojaim and Curt Almond, a couple of musical stalwarts, not to mention Stott Award winners.

"I have a secret," Dave said. "Day after tomorrow, from one to four, all over the village, musicians will be setting up in front yards and on porches to play. Private parties on private property with all the bands facing the street to encourage passersby to stop. The players will be set up apart from the audience. No cost, but all tips go to support musicians who haven't had a gig in ages. We want everyone to observe social distancing, be safe and smart, to wear masks. We'll all be respectful of neighbors as far as volume and crowds are concerned. We're anticipating 15 venues (including Almond's front yard), all within a mile walking or biking distance of each other."

Here's the cool part. "But," said Nojaim, who's as close to a pied piper as anyone we have as far as his ability to incite music in young and old, "no social media of any kind. This is an unofficial event. Word of mouth is fine, but we want this to be a spontaneous, organic, intimate village event, not a huge thing with people pouring in from all over."

"So who's putting this together?" I asked. "Who's playing?"

"See you Saturday," he said, a crenulated (RIP Snake) smile spreading across his face. Apparently, that's all I would get out of him.

Amazingly, everyone complied with the social media blackout. There was no mention until just before the first chord of the first song. In a wonderful throwback to the old days—old as the pre-cellphone 1990s—word got out.

At one o'clock on Saturday, I rolled the ancient Fuji onto West Fillmore between North Willow and Hamlin. In a scene reminiscent of my high school days, a trio of

teenagers, who called themselves Hard Left, were just setting up: Pearl drum kit, Fender telecaster, Fender bass, Marshall amps. It could have been 1968. The three launched into an original grunge composition that drew a small crowd and thoroughly surprised motorists who just happened to be passing by.

On Parkdale, barely a sustained bass note away, the Young Relics were breaking out of their Covid-imposed cocoon with a little Neil Young and Portugal's "Just for Kicks." They've recently added saxophonist Jason Weitzel to the original lineup of Garry Kimmel-Hurt, son Steve Kimmel-Hurt, Becca Kocent, husband Justin Kocent, John Sundquist and Larry Walker. Families with little ones gathered, and from all the directions you could hear the sound of flip-flops on sidewalk. The word had gotten out.

At Maple and Parkdale, acoustic guitar player and singer Brad Robinson offered Paul Simon and Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released." An unexpected gift was the virtuoso jazz from four Eastman School of Music students or grads on Girard near Maple. Half a block away high schooler Richard LaRouech and Harrison Graser—trombone and keyboards, respectively—played a soothing "Heart and Soul."

That's the way it went, all afternoon. I could barely get the Fuji up to speed before I ran into another concert. At Rich and Ellen Svenson's Girard-Avenue porch, their son and band mates wafted a perfect "Harvest Moon" to a crowd of three-dozen. Around the corner, recording artists and Backyard Bash veterans the Scott Celani Band played, while on Walnut, John Whitney, Bob Sowyrda and drummer William Cooper covered Cat Stevens and John Denver for a lawnful. Phil Elinski, open mic impresario and motivator of the young and timid, set up at Gary and Andrea Frost's house on Willow along with Joe Ernst and Colin O'Donnell for one set, followed by chanteuse Whitney Curry after them. And what a treat to see and hear music ambassador Doug Yeomans in the shade on Pine Street.

I know that as hard as I pedaled, I missed several acts; so much music, so little time.

The upsides of the event were many. Selfishly, I was able to play Right Field again, to wander (more or less aimlessly) around town, talking to people (at a distance, we understand that we're not out of the woods yet—far from it), mining our conversations for *Advertiser* stories and column ideas. It's been a long haul for this congregationalist, these last three months, expecting to find newsworthy happenings from my desk here at Right Field World Headquarters. Discovery Day EA was like returning from three months at the international space station to find everyone here, emerging like Munchkins after the death of the Wicked Witch to embrace the new normal. Not only had everyone survived, but the magic of the village survived as well. Friends, neighbors, strangers, families came out to play, responsibly, for a few hours. "If music be the food of love," wrote the Bard, "let's eat," or something like that. Air hugs and elbow bumps all around.

Before I got too deep in the fun, I remembered that I had work to do as a correspondent for the world's best hometown newspaper. Enquiring minds would want to know how this thing—Discovery Day EA—had come together, under the radar, quietly, with so many moving parts. I corralled Dave Nojaim to see what he could tell me about the most public private party I had ever crashed.

“No organization that put this thing together,” said Nojaim. “This was basically a five o’clock, walk your dog and talk to your neighbor thing. I would run into a young guy like my neighbor Steve Kimmel-Hurt (Young Relics) walking his dog and we’d talk about music and how hard it is without it and wouldn’t it be good if everybody could just play, have a little celebration. It grew from there, completely organic. There’s so much music in this little town; it’s like a mini-Austin. It just needed an outlet. That’s what makes this place special, people coming together.” Nojaim stressed that Discovery Day was not affiliated with or funded by any organization—not Borderland, not Music Fest, not business owners, not the village. Whatever shortcomings the day had would be on him and his team alone.

He needn’t have worried. It worked. There were no complaints, no trouble and those of us who hadn’t heard a live human being play music since March remembered how to tap our feet and, safely, boogie just a little. Stay tuned.