

The View From Right Field by Rick Ohler June 15, 2017

Paradise Lost?

It would have taken a jet-powered personal hovercraft to cover the entire EA Music Fest lineup—42 bands at 12 venues, plus another two dozen acts at the family venues—in ten hours; that’s roughly 12 minutes per band, not including time for walking (my car never left my driveway), shuttling or chatting with long-lost friends you run into between venues. But your intrepid Right Field correspondent gave it the good old college try. I began with the opening ceremony at the Rink: a bagpipers’ rendition of the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard hymns as the EA American Legion Post 362 Honor Guard marched in, followed by the Leftovers’ Elizabeth Shea belting out the National Anthem. Much, much later, long past my grandfatherly bedtime, I heard a few chords of Famous Fred’s cover of Pink Floyd’s “Comfortably Numb” wafting over the circle from the 11th Frame as I headed back to Right Field World Headquarters on the western frontier of the village. In those intervening hours, I boogied my aging townie legs to plenty of great music; I even gave a listen to the Second-Story Men (Dan Beitz, Pat O’Brien and Ralph Irvin) on a balcony across from the Middle School and the street buskers: a couple of guitarists by the viaduct, a stand-up (and upon) bass and trombone high school duo by Subway, and a young fiddler by the library. A great night that raised a ton of money for worthy causes.

Needless to say, the great Saturday night was followed by a somnambulistic Sunday. Well, that’s not entirely correct. Off in the morning for aspirin at Tops before returning to bed, I took the opportunity to drive the village. A few short hours after the gala, the old hometown was clean as a whistle, not an errant beer can in sight. Folks were walking their dogs, Timmy cups and doggie bags in hand, and the local houses of worship and diners were drawing good-sized crowds. After an influx of 10,000 people, business as usual the morning after.

Which brings me, at long last, to the point of this week’s musing from Right Field.

There has been an ongoing conversation on the “You KNOW you’re from East Aurora, NY, if you remember…” Facebook page lately, the page begun by Tracy Sievenpiper Galucki and contributed to regularly by Joe “Potts” Stapleton. It began with Potts’ photo of the new paint job on the east side of Wallenwein’s. Within minutes, the opinions pro and con were flying. As you might expect, townies past and present are split into “Never change!” and “Change is good!” camps. The same is true for the lively mural heralding the Bar Bill’s new take out facility—some folks think it’s wonderful; others think it’s a death knell for a once habitable village. “Not my East Aurora,” commented one ex-patriate about the mural.

But one comment in the thread has stuck with me. It came from Kirk Herniman, who grew up in East Aurora the same time I did—’50s and ’60s—and who now lives in Houston. He lamented the upscaling of Wally’s and added, “When I came back for my

mother's funeral, I was very shocked how the village had changed and how rude the people were." I take these comments seriously and personally. Even though I have absolutely no official position or standing in my community, other than perhaps a kind of *éminence grise* (RIP Snake), I feel somehow responsible when there's a complaint.

So, I wrote back to Kirk Herniman:

Good morning, Kirk. First, let me say that I'm sorry you encountered some rude people in EA recently; I apologize on their behalf. I've spent time in Houston and have run into a few rude folks there, too. Not everyone learned good manners from their parents the way you and I did. Next time you're in the old hometown, look me up or drop into the Right Field Satellite Office (known to some as Wally's) and ask for me. I'll introduce you to some folks who are the antithesis of rude.

But the real reason I'm writing is that I keep coming back to your Facebook comment in which you lament how EA has changed. It's an important discussion to be having, especially now and especially for those of us who are still here. Your perspective is a valuable one for us, because you come back only occasionally with big blocks of time in between, so the changes are more obvious. I appreciate your comments.

But really, what place hasn't changed? Every town, village, city, suburb and landscape has changed. It's inevitable. East Aurora was changing even as you and I were growing up. I'll bet there were plenty of villagers who weren't happy when that crazy Elbert Hubbard set up shop on South Grove Street. Or when Herm Fisher began making toys on Church Street? Talk about changes. What about the 400 Expressway? Hubbard Park? Warren Drive? The high school on the hill? We haven't ever remained static here. I'm sure people born in Houston in the '50s would find it a bit different in 2017, too.

The key is to exert some local influence over the extent and the nature of the changes. The pressure on a small town like EA to get with the program and become a big, sprawly nauseo-burb is immense. And we can see that the franchise-ification of America bankrolled by outside money tends to ruin the character of a place, reducing it to little more than a hollow town center surrounded by chain stores and outlet malls. So far in East Aurora we've done well keeping those pressures of homogenization at bay. Twenty-two years ago, we said no to Walmart and now have a thriving Main Street made up mostly of local merchants. And there's a Walmart 8.5 miles away if anybody really needs one.

As changed as we might be, we remain much the same. Yeah, we have sushi, not just cheeseburgers; craft beer, not just Genny; lattes, not just Maxwell House; acupuncture, not just Doc Pierce; and natural foods, not just Loblaws. But we still turn out en masse for the Kiwanis Chicken Barbecue. We have fancy cars driving our streets, but 2500 souls walk up to the Carolcade every year. We might have some modern yuppies as you suggest, but we honor our history and fund our local non-profits with money and caring. Most of us get how precious community is. And hey, who would have believed in

1960 that the village could give itself over to a Music Fest fundraiser, let the music crank up to 11, invite the whole world, let 'em drink beer and dance on the streets? No one. Who would believe that eight hours later, the village would be the calm place you grew up in? I would. So to your charge that EA has changed, I admit you're right. To your intimation that the changes are all for the worse, I say give us a more careful inspection. By the way, the folks who bought the old Herniman house are good friends and terrifically un-rude people. I'm sure they'd be happy to show you around when you come back for Reunion Weekend. See you soon, Rick.