

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

From 1970: Susan Hayden and Jim Natal

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The 1970s were a heyday for Los Angeles, Hollywood was being revolutionized, the music business was booming, and authors like Joan Didion were producing great novels about the realities of living in the land of eternal sunshine. *In Weird Scenes Inside The Gold Mine*, great writers muse on the city in its classic decade. Featuring John Densmore on being a rock star, Matthew Specktor's reflections on The Z Channel, Deanne Stillman on the desert, Golden Globe-nominated comedy writer Bruce Ferber on entering the film industry at the height of the B-movie scene and many, many more.

This is an insider's look at what being an Angeleno was and how it has changed and stayed the same.



A Few, Mostly True Things About LA

Jim Natal

SAFE, WARM, IF, L.A....

Event horizon

No one here gets out alive

Memory's black hole

Tall ships, two hundred years of America, palm trees and independence shimmying in the heat. My first summer in Los Angeles, crashed unscripted in the guest room of a couple I barely knew at the farthest margin of Santa Monica, where a ripple from a stone thrown into the Bay would widen to the east until it backwashed against the breakwater of Interstate 10—a freeway not an expressway—rush hour traffic jams outside the kitchen window. Every acquaintance since has branched from there like capillaries and canyon roads, like backward brackets in a tournament chart. L.A. was brazen that Bicentennial July, a wide and garish necktie that didn't quite make it down to the beltline, a Zen riddle whose only answer was "What's so funny?" if you laughed too.

Rain, snowcaps, mudslides
Then it doesn't rain for years
Fountain of sorrow

Beater '66 VW bus, New Mexico plates, every lane a slow lane with a horizontal steering wheel and the turning radius of a tramp freighter. Immediate pilgrimage to 77 Sunset Strip, the 1960's show that had set the California hook. Except it wasn't there; no door beside Dino's Lodge where the investigations office should have been and the address had four numbers instead of double lucky sevens. L.A. illusion/disillusion. Should have known things are not necessarily what they appear to be; art and artifice, fiction and nonfiction intertwined, sometimes interchangeable. Bedside Raymond Chandler had it right—that saffron filtered afternoon light turns harsh in an instant, shows all the creases and scars, the bus ticket disappointments. Wasn't that what kept the private eyes in business? Not so apparent then that L.A. was the city the future relied upon, a destiny cast from character actors, drugstore counters, and reinvention. You are who you say you are until proven otherwise.

Next revolution
This old world keeps spinnin' 'round
The pier carousel

Mornings. Crows squawking, hummingbirds zipping, parrots in the fronds, and noisy little finches flocking like extras, promoting themselves. Even plants were Birds of Paradise. The weather always sunny side up, barely two minutes of the local newscast, floral days following one after another like Rose Bowl floats. People told me they missed having seasons. All this Chicago boy cared about was that one season had gone missing, was presumed dead. I asked where all the "fruits and nuts" were, staple fodder for the L.A. jokes on the New York late night talk shows (before the hosts relocated West). "You want that?" a new friend shrugged. "Just go down to Hollywood Boulevard." Went once, no need to go back. Bought into the dream, didn't want to undream it.

Shoreline silver coins
Tide checks out but never leaves
Midnight grunion run

Academy Awards rehearsal. Exit through the artist's door, blinding sidewalk glare, dozens of cameras raised then dropped, Doppler murmur surfing through the crowd—"It's nobody...nobody...nobody." Hit me like a commuter train except there weren't any, ego pulped in a blender, wondered if I'd made a mistake, should have tried San Francisco instead, worn flowers in my hair ten years too late. Scenes and scenery more oppressive than over-whitened teeth, ostentatious displays of wealth, unaffordable, unattainable even in my gold chain screenwriter fantasies. The Porsche convertibles. Cantilevered canyon houses and Malibu poolside parties. The beautiful women in restaurants with even more beautiful men. My friend laughed, took pity, divulged the secret combination: "They don't actually own any of it. Everyone's in hock up to their eyeballs."

Unfettered, alive
The only faultlines are yours
Lost maps to the stars



Jim Natal's most recent poetry collection, *52 Views: The Haibun Variations*, was published by Tebot Bach in April 2013. He is the author of three previous collections: *Memory and Rain*; *Talking Back to the Rocks*; and *In the Bee Trees*, which was a finalist for the 2000 Pen Center USA and Publisher's Marketing Association Ben Franklin Awards. He also is the author of three chapbooks (*Explaining Water With Water*, *Oil on Paper*, and *The Landscape from Behind*) and two limited-edition chapbooks (*A Collector of Infinity* and *Rain in L.A.*). A multi-year Pushcart Prize nominee (including 2012), his poetry has been published or reviewed in *Bellingham Review*, *Runes*, *Spillway*, *Pool*, *Reed*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Poetry International*, and *The Los Angeles Review* among other print and online journals.

Natal is the founder and director of the Hassayampa Institute's The Literary Southwest series at Yavapai College in Prescott, Arizona. He curated and co-hosted the Poem.X and Rose Café poetry series in Santa Monica for more than 10 years and helped establish and coordinate Antioch University's multi-genre L.A. Writers Series. He also leads writing workshops, one of which, the long-running annual Plein Air Poetry outdoor writing workshop at Joshua Tree National Park, is coordinated through the Desert Institute.

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Borrowing Sugar

Susan Hayden

I used to borrow sugar,
or try to.
Not from just anyone;
from "entertainers"
in the neighborhood.
They lived
in sprawling, ranch-style homes
with aerial views,
front yard aquariums
and life-sized statues.
Leon Russell, on Woodley
The Jackson Five, on Hayvenhurst
Tom Petty on Mooncrest.
Affluence and intimacy—
a false sense of security:
That was the real Encino.

Never had a strategy,
only an impulse.
I wasn't even developed.
Was nine/ten/eleven—
playing house with

a Betsey Clark folding scene
 and Hallmark reusable stickers,
 the inspirational kind
 that said things like:
 “Every Day Is A Gift From God,”
 “Showered With Blessings”
 and “I Believe In Miracles.”

I was an anomaly
 in the West Valley
 A trickster
 with a two-spirit nature,
 a Technics turntable
 and a Barbie suitcase,
 jam-packed
 with personal belongings—
 a sheltered freewheeler,
 seeking access
 and the thrill of the hunt.
 And I was a bolter,
 always running away,
 just for a little while.

Mostly I was
 a New Romantic,
 the sameness of my fate
 as yet to be determined.
 Love was someone else’s story
 carved in a spiral groove
 on a vinyl platter
 and so I borrowed sugar
 or tried to
 but instead
 dogs barked, alarms rang out
 and I was escorted off Private Property,
 released back into
 “The Ranch of the Evergreens”
 —Los Encinos—
 encircled by the Transverse Ranges,
 surrounded by the nouveau riche.

For months, years,
 my measuring cup stayed empty;
 roaming the streets of the 91316
 where “It’s A Wonderful Life”
 was shot
 long before anyone was ever
 borrowing sugar.
 South of Ventura,

Liberace had a piano-shaped pool.
Let me swim in it once.
Called me “Sweetie.”
North of Valley Vista,
the gulleys and ditches
connecting flatland to hillside
were hideouts,
wishing wells of early faith—

Faith in the power of Everything
cancelled out by a voice saying,
“You’re Nothing.”
Words of my brother,
brazenly dealing weed and coke
from his bedroom window,
dispensing insult and harm
to the one most in need
of protection.
He tried to teach me
that Goodness was impermanent,
on loan
but I had my stickers to remind me
of another way of thinking;
I had love songs in my head
that gave fair warning
but made Big promises.
When the lunatic moon
touched my brother,
converting him from a tender boy
into the Opposite of Sugar,
it was songs and sweets
that pulled me across.

When not borrowing,
I was busy eating:
Hostess cupcakes, Fruit pies,
Sno-balls, Twinkies,
Zingers, Donettes.
I was addicted to sugar.
It made me bold and shy.
Empowered me.
Sedated me.
Borrowing sugar equaled escape
from an unsafe home.
Fleeing risk by risking
was better than staying put.

The in-crowd lived elsewhere,
that much was clear.

Over-the-Hill,
 in woodsy canyons
 with more shade and less heat.
 Jackson Browne was on Outpost Drive;

Joni Mitchell, on Appian Way.
 I wanted to be free and in the clouds
 but was relegated to Royal Oaks
 with its lion's head door knockers
 and central air conditioning
 and I learned how to work my way in
 by saying things like:
 "Lend me some sugar,
 I am your neighbor."

It was my only way around
 a set of circumstances:
 In search of the sweetness
 from someone else's life
 whose whereabouts were hidden
 but known to me.
 That's how it started,
 this borrowing sugar.
 That's how it started,
 this running away.



Susan Hayden is a fiction writer and poet. Her essay, "The Soul Section," was published in the critically acclaimed anthology, *The Black Body* (Seven Stories Press/edited by Meri Danquah.) Her short story, "You Are What You Drive," was published in *Storie: All Write*, an Italian/American literary journal based in Rome. She is the author of a novel set in the San Fernando Valley in the 1970s. Her poetry has appeared in numerous publications, including *Arete*, *Hollywood Review*, *Venice Magazine*, *Atlanta Journal*, and can be heard on two spoken word CDs, *Innings and Quarters* and *DisClosures: Voices of Women*. She is the co-founder of L.A.'s first performance fiction series, Gas/Food/Lodging, where writers, actors and directors would come together to dramatize short stories. Most recently, she is the creator/producer of Library Girl, a monthly literary series at the Ruskin Theatre in Santa Monica.

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