

Knockin' on Heaven's Door

My father, Al Aronowitz (1928-2005), helped invent the Sixties, but that's just part of the story *By Brett Aronowitz*

Mismatched cups gather dust in the cabinet of my father's kitchen. Alongside his sink, five "Class of 1950" mugs are lined up; an odd one with a picture of his grandson, Noah, breaks the rhythm. I know this detail is just one of many clues left behind, to forever remind me of how important both family and Rutgers were to my father, Al Aronowitz RC'50.

I will miss his shipment of Scarlet key chains, kitchen magnets, whistles, and other alumni paraphernalia, which arrived like clockwork in a padded envelope each year addressed to Noah. I suspect his old classmates will miss him too, colorful character that he was, even back in the late forties while studying journalism. His classmate Norm Ledgin remembers him sporting "a brown suit and coat, and lugging a heavy, brown, accordion-style briefcase, always dashing to catch a train."

Although my dad commuted to New Brunswick, he would occasionally spend nights in the *Targum* building even when he wasn't winning in some poker game that he'd kept going for a day and a half. "He was one great bluffer," remembers Ham Carson RC'50, former *Targum* editor, adding, "If Al had a home on campus, it was the *Targum* building."

It didn't make any difference if the topic was baseball or football; my father's writing was considered "more thoughtful" by some of his other *Targum* buddies. His openings were "poetic" and "mellifluous" and he took forever to crank them out. Norm Ledgin wrote, "Some of his editors felt like butchers when they realized that tearing off his first two paragraphs with a straight edge left them with a perfect news story." My dad had a hard time editing himself from the very beginning.

He wrote about the Beat Generation as a literary movement, certain one day their work would be studied in



John Lennon's 1971 photograph captured different sides of my father.

college classrooms. He was so "turned-on," both literally and figuratively, that he could never again be content as merely a reporter, and he used the tools of his trade, his colorful personality, and the great avatar of the day, marijuana, to hunt down culture heroes to write about. As a journalist, he went on to pen stories about Bobby Darin, Miles Davis, Mick Jagger, Brian Jones, Jerry Garcia, and Bob Dylan (to name a few). In the process, he befriended them and, like a visionary entrepreneur, introduced many of these icons to one another.



Our family album holds photos of my father talking to John Lennon and Yoko, canoeing with George Harrison, and posing with Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead.

My father first met Dylan at Chumley's, the famous literary hangout in the West Village, when the *Saturday Evening Post* assigned him to do a piece in 1963. His self-proclaimed "crowning achievement" happened the next year at the Hotel Delmonico on Park Avenue on August 28. "The Beatles and their manager, Brian Epstein, had just finished eating their room-service dinner when Bob Dylan and I pulled up in Bob's blue Ford station wagon."

As he wrote in his book, *Bob Dylan and the Beatles* (Authorhouse, 2004), "I still see that evening as one of the greatest moments of my life. Actually, I was well aware at the time that I was brokering the most fruitful union in the history of pop music . . . The Beatles' magic was in their sound. Bob's magic was in his words. After they met, the Beatles' words got grittier and Bob invented folk-rock." My father took great pride in calling himself, "the link from Kerouac to the Rock Revolution, from the Beats to the Beatles."

I spent two weeks visiting him in the early part of July, while he was a patient at Trinitas Hospital suffering from an obstructed liver. My dedicated brother, Joel, delivered food, mail, and love each day. He begged my dad to sign the remaining copies of his *Blacklisted Masterpieces of Al Aronowitz* (a collection of manuscripts he self-published), hoping one day they would be considered collectors' items. My dad refused. "I'm busy," he said.

"You're busy?" My brother responded in disbelief. "You're in a hospital bed, what are you doing?"

"I'm busy dying."

Even on his deathbed, my father was quoting Dylan. I tried to contact the ever-elusive Bob through several people to let him know his phone call, perhaps more than any other, would give my dad a little peace of mind knowing he wouldn't be forgotten. Bob had been my dad's hero. For years he believed Bob was the Messiah. My dad wrote, "I adored Dylan too much to see him through critical eyes. I was too impressed with his hipness and too humbled by his artistry. He handled words with an economy that put me to shame and he aimed those words with the precision of a laser bomb."

Periodically my dad would pile everyone in the car and drive to Woodstock so he could hang out with Bob and his wife, Sara. We spent plenty of time in their cold, spacious home, and I remember a little pond with a rowboat that we used to play in until we discovered leeches on the seat, the oars, and our legs; a star-studded Thanksgiving potluck in this same home with George Harrison and the Beatles' road manager, Mal Evans; as well as plenty of time spent listening to music as it emanated from "Big Pink," the famous house where The Band lived and rehearsed.

My father's dreams faded in May of 1972 with the death of my mother. By the end of that year, the *New York Post* dropped his "Pop Scene" column citing "conflict of interest" over his efforts to manage his own acts. Many of his "friends" began vanishing, too. My dad began to submerge himself in a drug culture so dark, it was hard even for me to talk to him. But after he'd been forgotten, it was his brother-in-law who helped him find refuge in Elizabeth, New Jersey, less than five miles from Roselle where he grew up, raised by an immigrant family of chicken butchers.

My great-grandfather, Louis, had raised the money to

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bring his six children to America by selling baked sweet potatoes from a pushcart in New York. My grandfather, Moishe, loved art, music, and sports and shared his optimistic dreams of success and patriotism with his only son, my father. Alfred G. Aronowitz was the first member of his family to go to college. I realized how proud he was of that when he gave me another clue, by passing on his Phi Beta Kappa key to me. My father had wanted to be a writer since he was a kid, and never forgot how his family and alma mater helped him realize his dreams.

Writing, the thing he'd learned at Rutgers, was the one thing that kept him alive for the last 20 years. When he resurfaced in Elizabeth, he used the Internet to rehabilitate himself by creating The Blacklisted Journalist

(continued on page 48)

(www.theblacklistedjournalist.com), an ongoing collection of monthly cyberzines, featuring a lead story by my father, as well as contributions by other writers. The web site gave my dad a way to quell his own madness and once again attract what he'd wanted most all his life, readers.



My brother, Myles, photographed our dad at a football game at Rutgers Stadium in 2004.

In the end, my father still thought he could win the lottery and beat cancer. He knew with conviction that people would eventually recognize his pivotal role in the evolution of contemporary music. I don't think he ever gave up hope that Bob Dylan actually was the Messiah either.

His companion, Ida, recently told me that my dad radiated with pride as he carried the Class of 1950 banner along College Avenue in New Brunswick during the 2000 alumni parade. "Your father loved Rutgers," she said. "He would sit in the rain, refusing to leave a football game even though the stadium was almost empty. Finally, when he realized he was too wet, cold, and uncomfortable, he gave in and bought sweatshirts and raingear, and you know what color he bought? Scarlet red . . . of course." □

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"Drive through Camden and you will find streets that are overflowing with kids," he says. "There's an exuberance and a vibrancy on these streets that you just don't find in many places."

Indeed, in a series of studies, Hart and Atkins found that youth bulges—a disproportionately large cohort of 16- to 25-year-olds within a community—are associated with high levels of civic engagement. That association disappears, however, when poverty and its attendant social ills conspire to limit kids' opportunities to play sports, join clubs, and do volunteer work. Kids bereft of interaction with socially engaged adults may find surrogates in other misguided peers, with consequences like antisocial behaviors and juvenile delinquency. Hart and Atkins have determined, for example, that the number of assaults in any given Camden neighborhood rises in proportion to the size of the youth bulge there. "It's energy," says Hart. "The question becomes, does that energy get channeled in a positive or a negative direction?"

Collaborators for nearly a decade, the pair—"You've heard of Crick and Watson?" quips Hart, "We're more like Abbott and Costello"—are exploring the factors that can push a child along one life path or the other. At the center of their research is the interaction between personality and neighborhood environment and its influence on how children develop their moral and social identity. When kids grow up fatherless and impoverished in a high-stress home environment, their research shows, they often adopt maladaptive coping behaviors that can literally transform their personalities. Even upbeat and cooperative children may become defensive and aggressive—a personality type associated with academic and behavioral problems. Instead of giving up on these kids, says Hart, society needs to "focus on the things that encourage positive development in children, like interaction with supportive adults and the opportunity to engage in altruistic behaviors like volunteering."

But are the ideas they explore in their research borne out in the lives

lived by STARR kids? There's no reliable way to answer that question in a well-designed research study given the unstructured nature of the STARR program, say Hart and Atkins, so gut feelings and small victories will have to substitute for hard data. Atkins recalls a recent trip to a buffet-style restaurant, where David, the 14-year-old in need of shoes, marshaled a half-dozen run-amok youngsters into a well-organized line that efficiently maneuvered through the food stations. "That was gratifying," beams Atkins. "I watched him taking care of the little ones and thought, 'Man, this really is working!'"

Temperamentally more cautious than his younger colleague, Hart has a tendency to downplay the sway of the STARR program. Just as in any community, he notes, Camden has its share of happy children who live in stable homes, do well in school, and meet life's challenges with confidence and resilience. "Some of the kids do need us," he says, "and some come out just to play soccer and talk trash."

Trees planted and shovels stowed, the STARR kids file back onto the bus and jostle for the best seats, their exuberance seemingly undiminished by a morning of hard work. Hart assigns Anthony the responsibility of taking a head count and, with everyone present and accounted for, reaches for the gearshift. Just then David appears at the driver's side window. He's made his high school's soccer team, but with two parents on disability, he doesn't have the money to suit up. "Coach Hart," he says, "Those shoes Coach Atkins gave me, they don't fit."

Hart absently taps his fingers against the steering wheel, lips lightly pursed. Back home in suburbia, the approach of fall means a thousand little chores. Hart casts about for a scrap of paper and a pen, then reaches out the window and places the slip in David's hand. "Here. I'll be home in half an hour. Call me, and we'll figure something out." □

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