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Echo Park's Last And Truest Bohemians

The greatest parties in Echo Park have been going on for nearly a century at the top of Echo Park Avenue at the home of Les and Annie Claypool.

By [Lionel Rolfe](#) | [Email the author](#) | March 27, 2012

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A little more than 50 years ago, a guy named Les Claypool lived with his lovely wife Annie at the top of Echo Park Avenue. They lived in a home built on the steep hillside out of giant redwood lumber and lots of glass and sunshine. It was a lovely place to wake up in after a great night of partying.

Annie was the librarian at Bell Gardens High School, a city known in those days for having more ex-prisoners than any other city in the state at the time. In those days the residents were still mostly poor white trash--Oakies, or from Georgia or Alabama.

The Claypool's home was a famous spot in Echo Park bohemianism. Only a few years shy of a century ago, folks like photographer Edward Weston, avant garde composer John Cage, Carl Sandberg, Sadakitchi Hartmann, Aimee Semple McPherson, Woody Guthrie, had lived in the same general area and written poems and novels, painted, photographed and composed there. There was also a lot of passionate lovemaking going on.

Greg Alexander, a student at the high school, used to go to some of those parties--first in Echo Park and later in Highland Park after the Claypools were forced to move from Echo Park.

Alexander remembers a friend of Les and Annie's showing a 16mm movie which included some pretty cool laser images he had created. He remembers thinking "this is unbelievably cool, but how will they make money with it? Well Ivan Dryer and his friend, (Charlie, I think), went on to create the Laserium show at that ran over 25 years at the Griffith Park Observatory."

Claypool was a local celebrity by that point. He had an early radio show on KRHM, the predecessor of K-Earth, that basically introduced two great musicians to Los Angeles, because they were friends of his--Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan. He later continued his show on KPFK, but it never had quite the same punch as the KRHM one had had.

I met Claypool in a coffeehouse near Los Angeles City College, and was a bit in awe. Partly that was because he was the son of a prominent Los Angeles newspaperman of the era who had the same name.

Also, Claypool was a wild card, somewhere between a bohemian and a radical, except he had a tinge of a disposed white man about him as well. Especially when he'd get drunk and wave around a gun.

He wasn't quite as famous as Lenny Bruce or Mort Sahl in those days, but his patter could be pretty brilliant. He could be tedious and difficult in person, especially when he was drunk, but on the radio he was always great--and in person he could also be great when he was holding forth and pontificating.

Folks would hang out at the Xanadu, on Melrose Avenue next to the Ukrainian Cultural Center and then on the weekends go to the great parties at the Claypools there atop Echo Park, overlooking the train yards and the 5 freeway. Whether at night or in the sunny mornings, they were great parties. For the sake of all of us who partook, I will not reveal in total detail there among the green hillside all that happened. But take my word word for it, there was a lot of drinking, free love, eating and playing chess going on there.

The musicians who came by were impressive. There were a couple of real Blues guys, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. They came to hang, drink a lot of whiskey, and sometimes get admiring female attention, especially when the picked up banjo and harmonica and sang for hours.

Les reminded me of my old boyhood hero Mort Sahl. He was cut out of that traditional American revolutionary stance, started by Tom Paine, Benjamin Franklin and sanctified by Mark Twain. He summed up for a lot of us the ideas of the counter culture, whether it was opposition to imperialist wars, or the hypocrisy of the ruling class.

One night Les acted on what had been bugging him for several years. He was getting tired of his show. His boss, the guy who owned the radio station, was of course much more conservative than his employee, but he liked the ratings Claypool gave him. But what really stuck in Les' crawl was that he sometimes had to do the ads himself--one in particular galled him, an ad for toothpaste, and another, I think, for something even more banal and genocidal--I forgot exactly what now.

One night rather than reading the ad, Claypool launched into some diatribe against the product, and for the 20 minutes it took the station owner to drive down to the station and fire him on the air, Claypool ranted.

It was a brilliant rant, one of the greats.

It was a sort of empty gesture, though, and his firing eventually resulted in the destruction of Anne and Les' domestic life. Les had met Anne because she was an acolyte who loved to come down to the station and hang out with Les while he did the show. She was a pretty and charming and intelligent young woman then and it was hard even for Les, the divine malcontent, not to enjoy her company.

Eventually everything came apart between Anne and Les, when she ran off with someone else after they were forced to move to Highland Park. In truth, he hadn't always treated her very well, so it wasn't entirely unexpected.

For some years after the radio show, Les did some high-end photography with his beloved Hasselblad camera. But none of it was ever again like it had been in the glory years.

I met up with Les a few years later, and he had definitely fallen on harder times. He was with another woman, and she was no Annie. Then I didn't hear from him for years, and no one seemed to know what had happened to him. And then, one by one, the folks who would have known, died off.

There is a rock musician who has the same name as Claypool around today and when I heard there was such, I idly wondered if Les was his father. I know Annie wouldn't have been the mother, but Les had been married once before and had had a kid or kids with his first wife. I do know that Les and Annie made their mark there in the Bohemian gardens at the top of Echo Park for many years.

*

Editor's Note: The original version of the story had Echo Park Avenue as "Echo Park Boulevard."

Lionel Rolfe is the author of "Literary L.A.," about which a documentary is being made (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Literary-LA/115509071864686?sk=wall>). Many of his books, including "Literary L.A.," "Fat Man on the Left," "The Menuhins: A Family Odyssey" and "The Uncommon Friendship of Yaltah Menuhin and Willa Cather" are available digitally in Amazon's Kindlestore.

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Thanks for the nostalgia! I spent many happy, stimulating times and met a lot of very cool people at the Claypool's in Echo Park and at Annie's father's cabin in Idyllwild. In fact, Les introduced me to Charlie McDonald. For me, it was the quintessential experience of the late 60s, and it brings a smile to recall it.

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