

Feb 5th, 2013

Flying to New Orleans from England I have to change at Philadelphia. It's early evening in the departure lounge. The interiors of international airports have a uniformity which conspires to trick the traveller into thinking he's not travelled. He goes from one monotonous corridor to another identical one, but a thousand miles apart. But of course he has travelled and, like me, is uncomfortable and bored.

This departure lounge is where we are waiting to board the connecting flight to New Orleans. Each group is called to board by 'zones'. This is my first time in the US and I can neither understand the boarding system nor the language. PA systems seem to have been designed to make words indistinguishable, so the announcement in a 'foreign' accent is gobbledygook to my ears. I ask a girl sitting near me to translate. She explains, but in an unidentifiable accent which I *can* understand. I assume it to be from some obscure region of the States.

We board. I see the girl is getting into the seat behind mine. After landing at New Orleans, I retrieve my bag from the overhead locker and glancing down at the girl, politely ask if she had a good flight – as if I'm an insincere flight attendant. She looks up and smiles and says in her unidentifiable accent, "It was OK, thank you".

I always travel light, so I by-pass the luggage carousel and go straight to Customs and then to Arrivals, where my host, Jon Cleary, is to meet me.

I haven't seen Jon for thirty-eight years. In 1975, when I was teaching in a school in rural Kent, he was a thirteen-year-old boy in my class. I was twenty-five and in my first job as an art teacher. I was the form-master to a group of 12/13-year-old boys and girls. The twelve-year difference in ages then is of nothing now. I was to them a grown-up and to me they were a bunch of bright kids. Jon used to entertain the class, playing his guitar and singing - mostly the blues.

Jon, aged seventeen, moved to New Orleans to be with an uncle. He is now fifty-one and a piano player in the city. We kept in touch and he has now invited me to New Orleans

In Arrivals, there is no sign of him. I have his phone number but no phone. I don't have his address, so I'm stranded if he doesn't show. Then I see the girl from the plane. She is being met by another girl. I ask this second girl if she would ring Jon's number for me. I show her a scrap of paper with Jon's name on it. She says: 'Jon Cleary? I was waiting on his table only last night'. This is the first hint to me that in New Orleans Jon is famous. She rings the number and Jon answers. He says he must be just around the corner. There is no problem in recognition because by now we are the only people in Arrivals. We introduce ourselves: the girl with the phone is called Meredith and is a dancer/waitress. The girl from the plane is called Monika and is a German/Swiss law student. Meredith seems a little in awe at meeting Jon.

We agree we should meet again and swap e- addresses.

Jon lives with his wife, Trish, in Bywater ward [a district] contiguous with the French Quarter. It's laid out in a grid system of streets and residential houses that have seen better days. Streets cars go up and down the main arteries (the one that Jon's street intersects is called Desire - as in Tennessee Williams' play). He has a music and recording studio on the ground floor. They live on the next two floors. Jon has a cottage-upright piano in the first-floor entrance hall which he cannot pass without playing.

In the morning, we drive the short distance to the French Quarter. On the way, we stop to watch a television crew filming a scene for Tremé, the TV series about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Trish is a wardrobe assistant on the film.

Standing on a traffic island is a lone figure. I say: "Isn't that Clarke Peters, the actor?" Jon says he is, and that he knows

Clarke. I say he used to be my neighbour in rural Wiltshire. Clarke Peters sees Jon and comes over. He sees me and says in one long gasp: “Tilleard! What-the-fuck-are-you-doing-here-you- motherfucker!”. I tell him I’m staying with Jon. We embrace and laugh at the ridiculous coincidence. We arrange to meet that evening.

After the obligatory visit to the French Quarter and a beer in a bar in Bourbon Street we return home, where there is an e-mail from Monika, saying she is not far away, and she’d like to bicycle over. I mail back with instructions. I venture out into the street to intercept her. I notice, for the first time, how pretty she is: short dark hair, slim, gamine-like, about late twenties/early thirties with high cheek-bones and an attractive overbite - á la Gene Tierney.

When she learns that Jon, Trish, Clarke and I are to tour the music bars tonight she asks if she and Meredith may join us.

We have in Jon an expert guide, so we head to Frenchmen Street in Marigny, which is between Bywater and The French Quarter. Frenchmen’s is the hub for New Orleans’ music bars.

We drift from one dark bar to another. The bands and singers perform all the New Orleans styles: Jazz, Creole and Cuban, ragtime, blues, and rhythm and blues. Some people recognize Jon and Clarke, but they are left alone. Trish tells me of one Mardi Gras when she made a mask for Jon so he could be incognito, but it didn’t work: ‘Hi Jon! Love yer music, Jon’.

The next morning Jon drives me to the Lower Ninth ward, which is next to Bywater on the eastern side. The Lower Ninth was the first part of New Orleans to be flooded during Hurricane Katrina. It’s eight years since Katrina, yet it’s still in everyone’s daily consciousness. The trauma is real. Even now this poor, black neighborhood still bears the scars. It’s like teeth that have been knocked out, showing gaps where houses should be. The houses are one-storied and wooden; about every third one is missing. The uninsured homes were abandoned – a lot of people left for the duration to stay in other towns and cities with



friends and relatives, and never returned. One can see the rare, insured homes because they are the only

ones that have been repaired. Many houses still have on them a St Andrew's cross spray-painted in black; perhaps kept as a memorial or memento mori. The left-hand quadrant has the initials of the search party, and the State they were from; the top quadrant is the date of the search; the right-hand quadrant indicates hazards, such as escaping gas; the bottom quadrant indicates the number of dead found in the house. In the whole city, 1,500 people died.

Jon shows me Fats Domino's house. He was born and brought up in the Lower Ninth. Despite becoming hugely successful and wealthy, stayed on in his home ward. The only sign of his wealth is that his one-story house is made of brick and a bigger than his neighbours'.

We drive up to one of the first leveés to be breached by the Mississippi which flooded the Lower Ninth. There, spray painted in large letters on the ground is: R.I.P RUF1. The river at this point is half- a- mile wide and 200 feet deep. It is frighteningly mighty.

On our way back we go to Congo Square in Tremé where the seeds of jazz were planted (Tremé is the oldest African-American neighbourhood in the USA). Before 1819 the slaves were allowed to associate on Sundays. In 1819 the Code Noir forced the slaves to use only Congo Square. A market was created. Singing and dancing ensued and musicians played on improvised instruments – the beginnings of Jazz.

Later that night in the Lower Ninth we go to a black working man's bar. It's very dark inside, with just a barman and two other customers and us two - white, middle-class,

middle-aged, well-spoken Englishmen. A drunken old boy arrives. He's been celebrating his birthday. He starts complaining about his eight children, born to his five wives. He tells us it's also his dog Jo-Jo's birthday. His children have sent Jo-Jo cards but none to him. He is a happy drunk and laughs at his own complaining.

Jon was on tour when Katrina struck. His house was severely flooded so he and Trish stayed away for a number of months. All that time the city had no electricity. When they returned, they learned that everyone must, because of the fear of disease, seal with gaffer tape every fridge and freezer in the city. National Guardsmen would take them away to be destroyed. When their fridge was eventually moved, a small, black, stinkyslick emerged and a Guardsman threw-up.

After three days I decide to hire a car and explore Louisiana. I mention this to a friend of Trish who says I must go to the Café des Amis in Breaux Bridge near Lafayette because every year, on the Saturday before Mardi Gras, there is the annual Zydeco festival. She says Zydeco fans from all over the States and Canada make a pilgrimage to the Café des Amis. And she says I must stay nearby, in a Bayou cabin.

Zydeco is a Creole music exclusive to Louisiana. It's a mixture of blues, rhythm and blues, country and western and the music of the native peoples of Louisiana. It's a relative of Cajun music. The name is alleged to come from the Creole pronunciation of, 'Les haricots [zydeco] ne sont pas salés', - there is no salt on the beans - meaning: 'I'm poor'.

Monika - who has bicycled over for coffee - asks if she can come with me. This is complicating things: she is more than half my age; I hardly know her; she is a student on a limited budget; surely she is here to see her friend, Meredith; and where do we stay? I tell her it might be difficult, but she says we can sort things out when we get there. It is, of course, flattering that she trusts me, and is prepared to venture into the unknown depths



of Louisiana with a stranger. That night I'm to cook a jambalaya for Jon and Trish, so, thinking it would be sensible to get to know Monika a little, I ask her if she and Meredith would like to join us?

Jambalaya is essentially a mixture of meat and seafood and rice. I'm doing ham (jamon) and prawns and rice (paella), hence the name from when New Orleans was French after being Spanish..

I'm about to assemble it - the combining of all the ingredients is essential to the dish - when Monika announces she doesn't like prawns. So I have to keep the prawns separate. From tiny acorns of irritation do mighty oaks of annoyance grow.

A few days later we set off in a hire car. We drive from New Orleans along the 24 mile long Lake Pontchartrain Causeway to Baton Rouge past forbidding-looking swamps and on towards Lafayette. On the way, we stop for a coffee for Monika and a can of beer for me - she complains about me drinking and driving. I learn that she speaks six languages, including Arabic. She comes from a family of Swiss Calvinists - both her parents are pastors. No modern luxuries such as television were allowed in her home.

Eventually, in remote countryside we find the little complex of small wooden Bayou cabins run by a delightful husband and wife. The wife shows us around to choose a cabin. I'm assuming that we are to have separate cabins next to each other and Monika will pay for hers. We find some suitable ones with a connecting boardwalk. Monika says she is scared to be on her own. It is remote and has something about it of the horror movie 'The Blair Witch Project'. She says she's happy to share a double bed with me. I presume, bearing in mind our age difference, this is meant innocently. All this negotiating is going on in front of the woman - I've no idea what she's thinking. She says there is one cabin with two bedrooms but more

expensive.

In the evening we go in search of a restaurant. In a field on its own and garishly lit is a large red brick restaurant. On the entrance wall is a list in three inch high letters, of all the people and bands who have played here - from Bob Dylan to ZZ Top - presumably in the early days of their careers.

It's packed with middle-aged red-necked white people - not one black face. Until I notice, sitting at a crowded table, a black girl. She gets up and pulls out her neighbour's wheelchair. The only black person is a servant. At least she is sitting with them.

We eat and I have a few glasses of wine. Monika disapproves.

Later, I'm lying in bed watching a PBS production of Othello when Monika comes in and gets into my bed and cuddles up to me. I'm bemused. We are in a remote cabin in the depths of Louisiana. I am more than twice her age, in fact a year younger than her father. She says, in her German accent: "But I do not do kissing". After a while she pulls away.

She begins to confess: During the previous week, she tells me, she had been in Cairo on business for the Swiss Development Corporation - they had asked her because she was the only person they could find who spoke Arabic. She had been given a driver/guide, a young Egyptian student who was moonlighting. She didn't like him because of his Islamic attitude towards women, especially Western women. However, because of their propinquity, she got to know him better and thought, stupidly, that if she slept with him he might change his mind about Western women - besides she was physically attracted to him. She says she thinks it is too soon after Cairo for her to have sex with me. The Egyptian boy is sending her texts, which irritates her because she has told him not to make contact.

Incidentally, she has tattoos:

Upper right arm: an oval antique frame in the middle of which is an 'X' - I've no idea what it means.

Upper left arm: a lamp with a bulb and wires. (She says she



had it done when she was in 'a dark place'.)

Upper thigh: a series of large black dots ascending to her crotch.

The Café des Amis and the Zydeco festival starts at eight in the morning, the idea being that you have breakfast/brunch, and listen to the bands and dance until lunchtime. We get there soon after nine. The café, in the small town of Breaux Bridge, from the outside looks ordinary, one half-expects horses to be tethered outside at a hitching post. There's a long queue, but the patient customers dance in couples in the dusty street to the music wafting from the café. The interior is large enough to accommodate about a hundred or more people. The bands are live and loud and rocking, and everybody is vibrant, sexy, dancing, eating and drinking and having a good time.

Except for Monika, who hates it all. She disapproves of my having a beer at that time of the morning; she disapproves of a black guy dancing with every girl - nearly all white girls; she disapproves of a white guy dancing with every girl he can find; she hates the music. She suffers for her Calvinism, she wants to leave - but I'm not moving. This is a girl who only a few hours ago uninhibitedly climbed into the bed of a man almost the same age as her father..

Back in the Big Easy, the city is getting ready for Mardi Gras. They start getting ready for next year's Mardi Gras as soon as the last one finishes. There are parades during the week before Mardi.

Jon, Trish, John Porter (Jon's record producer) and his wife Linda and I, go to a downtown parade. Linda was once a Vogue model, and girlfriend of Keith Richards. She is famously responsible for the British discovery of Jimi Hendrix. She saw

Hendrix in a New York club and told Chas Chandler who brought Hendrix to London.

It's a gay parade, and the participants camp it up to 11. Later as we drift through the back streets, a woman screams from her front widow: "Hey Jon, love yer music, Jon, I've got a picture of yer on my kitchen wall, Jon". We pass a house, in the front garden of which is a bunch of guys - unknown to Jon, John and Linda - playing rhythm and blues. They recognize Jon and ask him to play with them. Jon is game and they play New Orleans standards for fifteen minutes. The guys are thrilled.

Mardi Gras starts early, so we are ready about nine o'clock. Trish is dressed up, looking pretty and glamorous. She is going off for the day with girl friends. Jon and I are meeting John and Linda. When we meet Linda says to me: "We haven't got any mushrooms", and disappears. We wait for her and she returns having tracked down some chocolate brownies laced with magic mushrooms,

I take a bite, but after a while there is no effect - she gives me another bite. Fifteen minutes later I'm out of my mind. I shouldn't have taken it. Psychotropic drugs have never agreed with me. I find a bumblebee is concerned about me and is looking after me. But it's a young friend of John and Linda's dressed as a bumblebee. It takes a couple of hours for the effects to wear off, but it's Mardi Gras and normal life is suspended anyway.

Jon tells me of a Mardi Gras when Trish had made him a costume of pink leopard-print. A problem in Mardi Gras is the shortage of loos. Jon was forced to pee behind a bush. A booming voice behind him says: "Clear it up". It's an armed policeman who makes Jon clean up his wee with his beautiful pink leopard-print jacket.

A chap dressed as the cyclist Lance Armstrong, with a drip bottle affixed to his arm, is talking to his wife, who is dressed as Oprah Winfrey. I'm sure I recognize his voice. I do, it's Montgomery Burns's from *The Simpsons*. It's not the magic



mushrooms.

A man is dressed from head to toe as a cannabis plant. A cloud of cannabis smoke is billowing out of him – you can't not inhale it. A woman walks innocently through the cloud with a child in her arms - both

of whom, I presume, are now stoned.

Outside a walk-up house, Jon bumps into a friend an old black guy who, Jon tells me, is one of the great New Orleans drummers. He invites all of us in. A feast is layed out on tables and a packed bar to which we are told to help ourselves. On the wall is a photo of Jon's friend at the White House shaking hands with President Nixon.

One of the traditions of Mardi Gras, which refers to slavery, is a float – a converted double-decker bus - with a Krewé [the name for the social clubs, and Mardi Gras organizers] called The Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club who are *blacked-up* black guys. Perhaps they think that with the passing of the years they are not now as 'black' as their slave or Zulu forebears?

All the Krewes throw heavy strings of beads, known as doubloons, into the crowd. Jon tells me they know how each year's carnival compares with other years when the street cleaners, at the end of the day, take all the millions of beads and have them weighed

Two brass bands, playing different tunes, march towards each other and collide. The sound is of clashing players, and costumed revellers, noise and chaos and the crashing cacophony of brass instruments and drums. The composer, Charles Ives, used this as a basis for his compositions. He called it 'spatial music'.

In the evening we are all invited somewhere to someone's house. We sit, exhausted, in the garden where there is a large deep pond. For some reason, Jon and I dare each other to jump

in. We strip naked and jump in – it’s cold. Oh well ... it’s Mardi Gras.

It will soon be time for me to go to Los Angeles. One morning I’m talking to Jon and Trish about my train to LA when Monika arrives, having bicycled over again. She asks if she can come with me. My heart sinks. I’m blunt and ask her how she can afford it? And will she can get back to New Orleans? I’m travelling on an expensive sleeper train – it takes two days and two nights. I don’t know what a single supplement costs, and even whether one is available? She says she can afford it – I’ve heard Swiss further education grants are generous, and last forever. I ask her what would Meredith say? I say she must first find out the cost and availability. After Trish’s unhelpfully helps with finding her the train station number. She comes back to say it’s fine and that she can fly back from LA. I say I’m driving up to San Francisco. She says she’ll come with me and fly back from there.

This is almost a *fait accompli*. It’s not like I want the company – I prefer travelling alone, and Monika has form for being irritating. But I am still flattered by a pretty young girl wishing to be with me. So, against my better judgement, she comes.

After she has gone Trish, in the endearingly frank language of her native New York, says: “That girl’s a cunt!”

The train is known, both romantically and prosaically, as the ‘Sunset Limited’. It will take us through Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California – 2,000 miles. It’s a double-decker affair, with the lower section containing the luggage, loos, kitchens and bars. Staircases take you to the upper level to the observation cars, lounges and couchette compartments.

Monika’s first words to me are: “Don’t think I’m going to allow you to sleep with me.” Trish is right.

One imagines that long-distance trains - especially First Class, which mine is - would have spacious couchettes. Not on the

Sunset Limited. Mine/ours is cramped. It has a sink and a loo which can be a shower, it has banquette seating, but this has to be up-ended with difficulty each night so the beds can be pulled out – and reversed in the mornings. It is a crush for two people. The Sunset *is* limited. We spend our days, out of the tiny room, in the observation cars. I even used the public loos since ours is tiny.

We leave New Orleans at ten in the morning, after Louisiana the train reaches the Texas border in the early evening, we get to San Antonio about ten, to be told the train stops for four hours. Some experienced train-goers have pre-booked taxis and take-off for an evening in San Antonio.

We wake at dawn, we are still in Texas, it's lunchtime, we are in Texas, it's evening, we are in Texas, we go to bed, it is Texas.

In the observation car, Monika reads – she won't tell me what the book is. She says it changed her life. She hides it from me when she's not reading. I'm preparing for LA by reading Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*.

We hardly speak. I give up trying to understand why the Swiss-Miss - as I've begun to call her - has come on this journey. I can only guess is that Meredith's film director boyfriend is in New Orleans to see her – so maybe Monika thinks she is a gooseberry. But it would be cheaper to go to a hotel than pay for a long-distance train fare. She is confirming why I like to travel on my own.

At a table opposite is a black family of six: mother, father and four grown-up children. They play cards all day and are chatting and cheerful. If I was alone I would have asked to join them. They seem sensitive to Monika ignoring me and I get sympathetic glances. Ahead of me is a middle-aged red-faced white guy with a permanently angry expression. He often glares at the happy black family. He's even wearing a check shirt.



Because I'm travelling First Class, Monika and I have all meals for free in the dining car. This means we are forced to eat together through breakfast, lunch and dinner. Sometimes we are

joined by others, whom I chat to - but not Ursula. And she continues to be fussy about her food. She also continues to disapprove whenever I have a beer.

I would estimate that 70% of the land between New Orleans and LA is desert or unfertile scrub. Mile, after mile, after mile of nothing. But it's mesmerising. It's an event when a juggernaut on a distant highway can be glimpsed cruising through the parched landscape.

At El Paso, on the Texas side is the standard American conurbation but on the Mexican side is a poverty-ridden corrugated-iron shanty town; and neatly dividing them, mile after mile of high chain-link fencing.

We pull into LA rail station at five-thirty in the morning. We have three hours to kill before the hire car people open. I bump into the mother of the card-playing family eating a giant sandwich – she's a large woman. To my surprise, she greets me as if I was a long-lost member of her family. She gives me a great bear-hug – still clutching her sandwich.

Within minutes of driving the hire car, I'm stopped by the police. I was confused by a one-way sign that is ambiguous about which road it's indicating as one-way. In my most English manner I try to point out the confusing sign; I fear the worse, but he lets me off with a warning. Monika is unforgiving and says it's all my fault. We set off for Santa Monica. Monika is thrilled to see the great HOLLYWOOD sign.



I've arranged to have lunch with an English couple I haven't seen for 18 years. I met them when teaching art privately in Spain. Terry Marsh is a retired Hollywood art director/production designer. He has two Oscars, one for Doctor Zhivago, the other for Oliver! He was also the production designer on numerous films, including Lawrence of Arabia and the Shawshank Redemption. Sandra, his wife, has a Hollywood talent agency and is a film producer. They live in the Pacific Palisades.

Monika and I spend the morning on the Santa Monica pier watching a film being made.

Relaxing after lunch at the Marshes, I ask Terry about the making of Doctor Zhivago. Sitting on the bookshelf are the two Oscars. Through the picture window is a view of the vast Pacific. Sandra says the next landfall is Antarctica. Monika is engrossed by Terry's stories, but not as much as when he tells us the beach below their house is where the television series 'Baywatch' was filmed. Monika explains that her Calvinist parents wouldn't allow a television in the house, so she would sneak off to a friend's house. The programme they loved the most was Baywatch. A strange childhood of Calvinist austerity mixed with a secret lusting after rippling American beach bodies.

After lunch, we set-off for San Francisco. Monika says, because I'd had a beer and a couple of glasses of wine, I must be drunk and shouldn't be driving. She confesses she was intimidated by the Marsh's luxurious home. She'd never been in anything like it. This from a Swiss – but a Calvinist.

I discover that there are no service stations on US highways. To find petrol one must leave the highway and go in search on

lesser roads. We eventually stop at a rundown-looking gas station in the depths of the California countryside. A woman customer is in the forecourt giving a drink of water to her Yorkshire terrier. She has just come from the ladies where she has filled a bowl with water. The gas-station attendant rushes out in a panic, shouting for her to stop. He breathlessly explains that all the water in the immediate district is contaminated – not even dogs can drink it. The woman is shocked, gathers-up her pooch and drives hurriedly away. This, in the richest State in the richest country in the world.

I was told by Trish that en route to San Francisco I must stay in a hotel called 'The Madonna Inn'; she says it's the most eccentric hotel in the States. It's very kitsch, and very expensive and the service is bad. Each bedroom is a detached house cum cabin; they are scattered over acres of grounds and each one is decorated and furnished to a theme.

When I booked I asked for the 'Ice House' decorated like a large igloo, but we are given a 'Mexican' themed house. It has two bedrooms and a sitting room and is cold and we have to work out the heating ourselves. We have to carry our bags – I later point out at Reception that for these prices we should have a porter and someone to show us to our rooms and tells us how to operate things. They look at me in puzzlement.

We have supper in the main house which has ugly ornate carved furniture and an over-the-top staircase that used to be in William Randolph Hearst's nearby, spectacularly vulgar, Hearst Castle – 'Xanadu' in Citizen Kane. Our fellow guests seem very much at home in these surroundings.

In San Francisco, my hotel is off Union Square. I say 'my' because Monika tells me she's going to stay with friends of Meredith's - this is news to me. I suspect this is a fib and she is going to find, or has found, another hotel.

We say goodbye and I watch her disappear into the crowds her raspberry coloured beret gradually fading into the distance.

A strange girl. This is quite brave of her; she's young and

alone in a strange city. My thoughts and emotions are mixed. She turned from an interesting, attractive, intelligent, but irritating, girl who sought my company and half-attempted a seduction, into a wilful, bemusing, cold-fish. I sort of miss her because I was flattered; but I'm pleased to be alone and rid of her - but a little saddened. I think Trish's verdict was crude but true. I need a drink and find the nearest bar.

I sit in a corner reading my book. I go to the bar to get a second beer when next to me, a hand appears. I look up and a young handsome Indian guy is wanting to shake hand. I instinctively do so out of politeness. I then realise this is a gay bar and this is a pick-up - I've hardly been in San Francisco for more than ten minutes and I'm living an SF cliché. He is charming and we have a long chat about his education in India and how he did an MA in electrical engineering in England at Manchester university. He realises I'm not gay and we have a friendly parting

Walking back to my hotel I'm approached by a middle-aged woman. She has dyed ash-blonde hair and rotten teeth. She says: "I've never done this before but, because you look so much like my late husband, I feel I can ask you for money so that I can buy some diapers for my baby daughter." An interesting pitch - I walk on.

The next morning I take a bus to Haight-Ashbury, the birthplace of hippiedom and 'peace and love'. In 1967, the Summer of Love, I was starting at art college and I met my first girlfriend.

The Haight-Ashbury's turn of the 19th-century houses, once the home of communal squats, are now expensive homes. I go to Buena Vista Park, San Francisco's oldest park which looks down upon the city with views across the Bay. There is a large sign at the entrance listing twenty things banned at the park - the most striking of which is: No Drugs.

At a crowded café - in this home of sixties communal living

and the new-found ethos of their Pilgrim ancestors - nobody talks to each other. I count over thirty people having coffee and all of them looking silently into their laptop screens. It appears to be the norm.

After the tourist-ridden Fisherman's Wharf, I catch a random street-car and alight at the Ferry Building. In a large square nearby is a true throwback to the sixties/seventies – a huge noisy demo. It's about the Keystone XL pipeline which is to run through a Native Reservation, so the great majority of demonstrators are Native Americans. There is a stage onto which anybody can wonder – including me. On it is a line of a dozen guys rhythmically hitting hand-held drums and a chorus of chanting men and women – like a war dance. There is, in true hippie fashion, no leader so anybody can get up and make a speech. The large number of sixty and seventy-year-olds in the crowd have not changed their style of clothes or hair since their hippy youths.

Everywhere there is street-music. At night in Union Square is an raucous R and B band. On a sidewalk is a gay teenage boy, a fedora on his head, he's as thin as a stick-insect in tight trousers and tap shoes playing the trumpet with one hand and tap dancing. Passersby ignore him.

It's the last thing I see in San Francisco before returning home.

