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# Ed Brewer

Ed Brewer was Judson's music director from 1964 to 1968. \_\_\_\_\_

**W**riting about Judson House more than thirty years after the fact is a bit like playing the game "Telephone," where one whispers into a neighbor's ear some secret sentence and then waits for the garbled answer to come out at the other end of the line of people. Filtered through the ears of the intervening players and through the aging eyes of someone who wonders if he has grown up yet, these memories are naturally a bit suspect.

My residence in the house began in the fall of 1964. The mid-1960s were the days of flower power and miniskirts, of all-night radio on WNCN when Bill Watson would play the passions of Bach twice in a row, a time when our federal government saw fit to send its young men to fight a war in the heroin haven of Vietnam, a period of major changes in the structure of our society, a setting for dancing in the rain on Thompson Street after a Sunday service.

The Student House was the setting where lots of things happened, not necessarily by design but because a lot of different people lived there and had a chance to mingle. The environment was conducive to activity. My memories of that time are unrelated to any grand scheme. There was none; the play was unscripted. However, the composite of these elements made for a way of life that thrived at Judson. The Student House was a focal point where ideas germinated and grew, often finding their way into the larger Judson community and beyond.

Judson House provided accommodations for some members of the church staff and for a wide variety of students pursuing various disciplines at institutions throughout Manhattan. It was in my capacity as music director of Judson Memorial Church that I came to have an apartment in this stimulating place. The permanent residents, such as myself, enjoyed complete apartments. In spite of this we spent much time in the communal living areas, all of which were on the lowest level of the building. The most popular of these areas, the kitchen, was adjacent to my apartment. The lounge, to the

north of the kitchen, was the site of frequent parties, and to the north of the lounge was the gallery, where during the week Al Carmines and Jimmy Carter were often heard playing Mozart late into the night. The tempos seemed to increase as the liquid refreshment flowed.

Other staff members besides Al who lived there during my time were Beverly and Ralph Waite and Chuck and Ann Eaton, both couples serving at different times as house "parents." Ro Lee, the office administrator, lived in the apartment upstairs from me.

## THE COOK AND THE KITCHEN

Willie Mae Wallace cooked the communal supper every day, leaving it on the stove for us to help ourselves when our schedules succumbed to our appetites. Supper and its aftermath provided the focal point for activities into the evening; it was the spawning ground for much of the activity of the house. Later in the evening, other people would drift through, often after theater rehearsals in the Meeting Room.

One such person I remember very fondly was Susie Pardue, also one of the few New Yorkers in this complexity of invaders. A dancer who had had considerable success on stage during her childhood, she had a deep appreciation of people. Her spirit was infectiously cheerful. Her contacts in the music world included some of the major composers of the time. Many people remember her performances as Roo in Al's *Sing Ho for a Bear*. Al would often come over with the director Larry Kornfeld, who also lived at the house for a while. Everyone knows that the best part of any party takes place in the kitchen.

Bull sessions of the type found most often in college dormitory rooms took place in the kitchen as well, with people hanging around after supper before heading out for the evening. Kent, a law student, had a particularly lucid rationale for the nonexistence of God, based on the premise that the logical conclusion one must draw, given the brains that we have, leads to a denial of the existence of God.

The lounge was the site of Friday night dance parties. These occasions provided the opportunity for me to learn to dance again, what with rock 'n' roll having taken over the dance floor. The madrigal group, made up of some members of the church choir augmented by a few other singers, met there. The lounge was also a place to

hang out during the week, providing a change of venue from one's own room, and it tended to be quieter than the kitchen.

The gallery was a space with as many purposes as the church's Meeting Room. Not only did it house the art shows that its name implies but it also served as a small lecture/recital hall. Here is where I held my weekly lecture/demos, where I discussed the structure of the preludes and fugues of Bach and played them on the harpsichord. Kate Millett and Yoko Ono, to name but two, sat there many days during their one-person shows.

### **APPLE WINE AND A HARPSICHORD**

The bedroom of my apartment, aside from providing direct access to the garden and being the location of several maturing gallons of apple wine I made one year, became a workshop in which I built my first harpsichord. The construction took many months, and the completed instrument became an integral part of the Judson Chamber Concerts. The space I worked in was desperately cramped, and the only available power saw was in the community center at the church. I made endless trips to the saw to shave a hair's width from one part or another to ensure a proper fit. The most intoxicating and toxic part of the building was in the finishing, when I sprayed a lacquer base paint with all the lack of ventilation a basement room affords. Although I had a large door opening to the garden, there was only one small window opening onto the street to provide any amount of cross-ventilation. Twenty minutes into the job I was close to legally intoxicated. It was on this instrument that I played my debut recital in the Meeting Room at the church in 1966. The apple wine, by the way, tasted more like vinegar than wine, and it produced a most god-awful hangover I can remember to this day.

Charlie Adams was one of the icons of the house. More than most people I knew at that time, Charlie personified the caricature of how many people saw the sixties. Older than most of us, he participated fully in the dropout culture. By affection an artist, he helped with the custodial duties required by any community. His paintings reflected the tripping common in the sixties and to which he was no stranger. When the historic Roosevelt organ in the church needed a lot of repair, Charlie spent endless hours removing the old, dried-out leather from countless valves and replacing it.

The many social events at Judson House were interspersed with moments of solitude. One Christmas day—probably my first year there—I woke as was my custom late in the morning and wondered how to spend the rest of the day. Since the house was always so active, I had assumed that sooner or later someone would surface and I would find some company. This did not happen. I kept listening for footsteps somewhere, but the house seemed empty. I recall hearing a few footsteps coming from the apartment directly above me, where Ro lived, but lacking confidence I did not go upstairs and knock, not wanting to intrude. We compared notes at a later time and found we had both spent a lonely Christmas.

A close friend of mine who lived at Judson House when I first moved in was Lurline Purvis. My relationship with her was more personal than with the other residents in the house. One of the profound influences of the house, although seldom verbalized, was that it made this type of relationship possible. One of the few native-born New Yorkers at Judson, Lurline challenged me emotionally, and even with her lack of formal musical training she knew much more about the emotional content of my performances than any of my teachers had discussed.

The front steps of Judson House had their regular occupants. In those days they were called winos, and they seemed to help keep the street safe. They were regulars who knew the people on the block and caused little or no trouble except from the minor inconvenience of having to step over them to get into the house. My private entrance to the subterranean level at the corner of Third and Thompson had a continuation down the stairs to a subbasement, and there were occasional visitors to these realms.

The vacancy created by the departure of Ro Lee from the overhead apartment was filled by Thom and Joan Kilpatrick. Thom, a writer on scientific issues, went to Vietnam as a reporter for an electronics magazine and came back trying to figure out how to tell a story he had seen that the manufacturers of electronic military gear did not want to hear.

## DEATH AND LIFE

One of the clearest memories I have is the reaction of the kitchen crowd to the news of Jimmy Waring's suicide. The house seemed to

be in shock. Although I was stunned by his death, I did not understand the deeper despair that pervaded the atmosphere. For many of the residents life was a fragile entity, and the line between life and death a thin one indeed. For my part, I was so engulfed in the richness of the life I was experiencing in New York and in the Judson community that the death of a contemporary was a tragedy but it was not a threat to my own future—death was not staring *me* in the face. Life was my friend, and death was something that happened to others. It took me a long time to comprehend the emotional impact of this tragedy on the community.

### THE BLACKOUT OF 1965

Several other events have left sharp memories. One was the blackout of November 1965, when the only lights on the street came from motor vehicles. Another was the transit strike on New Year's Day in 1966, which forced people needing transportation to trust strangers in cars and which ushered in a temporary reign of human warmth and compassion in the cruel streets of New York. Then there were the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy in 1968. I vividly recall David Johnson sitting on my couch in shock over King's untimely death.

### MUSIC WITH VIRGINIA

One Sunday morning in 1965 marked the beginning of my current stability (?) and happiness. The horn player of a woodwind quintet that was supposed to play at a Sunday service had fallen victim to Saturday night overindulgence and never showed up. However, Virginia Bland, the oboist with the group, did. We later got together to read through some music for another service. The rehearsal did not last long, since everything just fit together so easily. Virginia joined the choir (that seemed to be one of the major ways to get my attention in those days), and when her lease expired in the spring of 1967 she parked her stuff with me before departing for Italy for the summer. Upon her return she moved in, and in November 1968 Hugh Pickett showed up at our new apartment on 104th Street along with Thom and Joanie Kilpatrick, the best man and matron of honor.

Two of the lasting results of that Student House meeting in 1965 are Barry and Diana, our son and daughter.

Judson House and Judson Church have been inseparable for as long as they have existed side by side. The programs of each have moved with the needs of the day and the interests of the people who use the space. I am often reminded of Howard Moody's statement on the mission of the church—and this applies equally to the Student House—to bring God to the artistic community. The church invited the artists to come in and use the space, and when the time came to bring God to the artists, the church community discovered that the artists had brought life to the church.

The success of the Student House must be measured in its relevance to its participants. I can testify to the success of the Student House as a place where I found new meanings in life and personal growth.

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