

CLIPPINGS AND MUSINGS, ART AND INFLUENCES... DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... JUNE 2016

I clipped an op-ed from New York Times's Thomas L. Friedman the other day, where he writes about lessons to be drawn from the Age of Discovery and the Renaissance, 1450-1550, a time of profound and upsetting changes. When science revealed a new world, and Columbus found one; while Copernicus announced that the earth revolved around the sun, not the other way around. Then as now many people felt worse off, dislocated, and threatened. At this moment the world is shocked that the Brits have left the European Union. Another op-ed in the Times said that this too, has happened before, back in the 5th century A.D. when they kicked the Romans out. And then there was Henry VIII. "We have all been here before," goes the song—by the Beatles, come to think about it.

It's an old habit, this saving of clippings. I cut out a page of excerpts from commencement addresses that included this from Jessye Norman, opera singer, to graduates at Oberlin College, Ohio: "You see art brings us together as a family because it is an individual expression of universal human experience. It comes from that part of us that is without fear, prejudice, malice or any of the other things that we create in order to separate ourselves one from the other. Art makes each of us whole by insisting that we use all of our senses, our heads and our hearts, that we express with our bodies, our voices, our hands, as well as with our minds."

I often find myself thinking about art and what it means, what it can do. What is an artist, anyway? For me at this point it's a person who over a lifetime accumulates a body of creative work. Along the way he or she must gain enough support from the larger community to keep on creating. Success, while helpful, may not be required. Too much of it, and you're prima donna bound, and risk trading your voice for that of a public persona.

People who write about art and artists look to trace influences. They want to know who it was that helped mold the artist, and thereby suggest a link to some known figure or movement. But when you're young and starting a career, your greatest influence might be your old roommate, or an English professor who liked your early stories. Or a guitar picker only a handful of people ever heard of, like the reclusive country-bluesman John Grimaudo down in Rockport, Texas. Or Jack Saunders in Florida churning out a lifetime in prose he never sold; or Jason Eklund, street singer-roofer living out of his car and printing his hand-written manuscripts at the copy shop. These people, and others I could name, have probably influenced me as much as any better known artist.

Considering the economics, I'm still amazed that anyone would choose a life making music or writing books or painting. The answer to that one, of course, is the life chooses you. This opens up other questions about success, and what that might be. Artists are forgotten like everybody else. Only a tiny handful are remembered. Success might be nothing more than survival. I might have given a different answer thirty years ago. Now I would say honoring your vision and your muse, carrying on, and doing your work. That's your joy, and that might be what success really means. The hobbyists, the people who never had a vision, or didn't really want it bad enough, tend to winnow out. What you're left with is artists. Shorn of all the romance and bullshit, just people going about their work.

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In another event, it gives me great pleasure to announce that my personal papers, early journals, recordings, and memorabilia have been archived at the Woodson Research Center at Rice University in Houston. It is an honor to be part of this project, part of a larger collection of Houston Folk music archives from the 1960s-1980s. For more information, please contact Norie Guthrie, CA, Archivist Librarian. <http://library.rice.edu/woodson> ...

We have sad news to share as well: Trudi Matter, Edith's middle sister, passed away last week from leukemia. Coming on the heels of the sudden death of our brother in law, Enzo Mercurio in April, this has been a difficult time for the family. RIP.

Running clear and fast, the Rhine is as high as I've ever seen it. A few brave people are beginning to swim, mostly kids. At 18 degrees Celsius, that's still a little cool for me. I don't think I've ever gone in until July. That's when summer begins, and a high point of the year. We look to better days.

Richard J. Dobson

Diessenhofen am Rhein, 29 June 2016

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