

Other Scenes

John Wilcock

1966

David Susskind's office decided to investigate "Bohemia" in a one- or two-hour "Open End" television show. Called Israel Young's Folklore Center for information. Poets Allan Katzman, an EVO editor and Tuli Kupferberg of The Fugs were standing by. Next scene, Susskind's plushy office in Newsweek building on Mad Ave: Jean Kennedy, nice but playing dumb, interviews Tuli, Ed Sanders, drummer Ken Weaver, guitarist Pete Kearney. Attempts to orient herself: does Ed admire LBJ? (sneers) Bob Dylan? Mailer? the *Village Voice*? Do many villagers "use drugs?" Sanders remarks: "You know we might blow Susskind right off the air; not because of our foul-mouthedness or anything but because of our philosophical position." Well asks Kennedy with a brave smile, what are some of your philosophical positions? Oh, says Ed deadpan, Legalize Marijuana, Cunnilingus Now, etc. etc...

One week later a bus labeled Campus Coachlines pulls up outside the *Newsweek* building to load up with a miscellaneous crowd of beards, beats, weirdos, freaks, all brave and beautiful, who have been creating consternation among the pinstriped Mad Ave. types on route to and from lunch. A final call at the 47th street factory to pick up the Warhol contingent and the bus sets off for Newark, two pretty Susskind chicks riding shotgun upfront, Susskind himself having gone ahead by chauffeured limousine without prior contact. From the haze of sweet-smelling Mexican grass and Indian incense at the back of the bus rises an occasional Texas drawl: "Kill more gooks!" Somebody is outlining foreign policy...

A cheerful, zonked-out mob of ruffians straggled into the Mosque Theatre, crammed into two elevators and spilled out onto the barren studio floor. Too formal a reception; the temperature fell 20 degrees. Susskind, gray-haired, benign, heavily made-up, welcomed the group, motioning them towards the sandwiches and coffee. And red wine.

Warhol, still the center of fascination almost everywhere he appears, is shielded from direct assault by the cohorts who travel everywhere with him. Movie cameras handled by Danny Williams and Barbara Rubin, and still photographer Nat Finklestein with Nikons strung around his neck, somebody with tape recorder and somebody else with strobe lights. A self-contained, self-packaged, self-communicating unit which creates excitement as well as recording it. And Andy, bland as always at its center but seemingly doing and saying nothing. The perfect catalyst.

Eighteen beats, beards, bohemians, form a circle on the floor around Susskind who sits two or three feet above them on a low stool. The group is corralled, penned-in by three television cameras. Andy, who has kept on his shades, chooses to be a spectator, is quickly fascinated to discover a television set to his right is transmitting the actual circle in front of him, switches his head from one to the other.

The enemy, a slick, spade director, natty dresser with triangle of red handkerchief sticking from breast pocket of his neat suit, soon identifies himself. Objects to use of cameras filming the whole scene, his whole scene, while his well-trained technicians go about recording the Susskind circle. He is ignored, filming of Open End proceeds, filming of filming of Open End also continues.

Ed and Tuli talked most of all, Sanders occasionally breaking into gleeful bursts about The Marijuana Society.

Susskind mildly questions his allegiance to his country. "I'd fight for it but I wouldn't die for it," replies Ed. An incongruous statement, says Susskind, what does it mean? Laughter from behind him in the circle. Paul Morrissey appreciates the whispered joke of the man next to him. "What's going on back there, you've got to be quiet," snaps a rattled Susskind. (How can you keep 18 happy kooks formal for long?)

The physical organization of the show was constantly being upset by the Warhol film team, and the staff was beginning to resent it. Three anonymous Susskind staffers standing behind the debris of the sandwiches and coffee asked why they were being filmed. The spade director abruptly shouted at Susskind's brunette assistant who was handing him a cup of coffee. "Are you in this scene? No? Well, you'll have to get off then."

Onstage, Susskind is playing interrogator, or Devil's Advocate as he prefers the u/ground to think. "Do you find you can't wander from Greenwich Village without scorn and violence because of the way you look?" he asks Susanna, the golden girl, just back from a summer in Greece where she wandered barefoot with flowers in her hair and a bell around her neck. "How do your families feel? Do they get upset when you act this way?" At the other side of the circle, long-haired John Cale of the Velvet Underground, a rhinestone collar around his neck, languidly caresses poet Gerard Malanga with a leather cattle whip.

Everyone is passing around cigarettes and occasional happy giggles can be heard. Somebody offers Susskind a joint; he frowns and waves it away. Tuli is talking about drugs and about sex and has already slid the phrase "oral-genital relations" into his conversation. "It infuriates some people that other people are having fun," says Tuli blandly. Susskind shakes his head in disbelief: "Do you mean to tell me that drug addiction is based on sexual envy?" he asks incredulously. Somebody throws in a comment about the "cruel" abortion laws. Says Tuli: "Laws are always the result of failure. The philosophy if we only had more laws things would be better is wrong."

Susskind is getting rattled. The roving cameramen, the disorderly group, the smell of pot, the occasional clicks, shrieks and catcalls from Barbara are apparently so much more than he expected. "Could you control your little tinkle bell?" he asks Susanna. "You realize that what you are saying is arrogant and absurd," he says in answer to another panelist's comment. He makes a manful effort to sum everything up: "Are you engaged in the civil rights movement?" he asks Sanders.

"Maybe, maybe not," replies Ed. "You don't have a homogenous group here; many hadn't even met until today but they're all agreed on the human side of life. We've turned our backs to the heckling creeps and we're going forward."

"Well then," Susskind continues, "when sexual restrictions are eased and marijuana will be legal we'll still have America...?"

"America the beautiful, America the brave," says Ed.

A few minutes later the circle broke up. It had been decided not to proceed for a second hour. The natty director, heard muttering that they'd "never do this again," clapped his hands and asked everybody to leave because "we have another show on this set in ten minutes." Grips began to tidy up the set for the shooting of the Cha Cha Cha Señorita Television Rose Show.

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