

Absolutely Abbie

By Dan McCue

It was the kind of surprise that was only amplified by the fact that I had rolled out of bed, showered and, skipping breakfast, immediately headed out to the car on my way to class.

Waiting a moment for the car to warm up on gray and slightly chill April morning, I listened as a particularly somber Lynn Samuels, then a radio talk show host on WABC-AM in New York, talked to a caller about the “sad news.”

Someone, clearly, had died. Then, just before breaking for commercial, Samuels paused to bring those who might have just tuned in up to date:

Abbie Hoffman, the 60s icon who first rose to national prominence as a member of the Chicago Seven, a group of radicals who stood trial on charges of conspiring to disrupt the 1968 Democratic National Convention, and who had, in more recent years, become a noted activist and lecturer, was dead.

As recounted by Samuels, the details of death were sketchy, but given his relative youth – he was just 52 years old – and a one-time penchant for pharmaceuticals – he spent much of the 1970s underground, avoiding a lengthy sentence on cocaine charges, speculation revolved around drugs.

The only real question was whether Hoffman’s demise was purposeful act or the tragic consequence of misadventure.

Hoffman had been found in bed, fully clothed, by Bucks County, Pennsylvania District Attorney Alan Rubenstein, who’d been summoned to the activist’s home – a converted turkey coop on Sугan Road in Solebury Township, near New Hope, Pennsylvania -- by his landlord.

Rubenstein’s initial statement to the press was sparse.

“We suspect no foul play,” he said.

Hoffman’s death was later ruled a suicide, an autopsy having found that he’d swallowed 150 Phenobarbital tablets. Officially diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1980, he was said by friends to have been deeply upset in the weeks leading up to death by his elderly mother’s cancer diagnosis.

Although I had met Hoffman only once, about 18 months earlier, it was hard to reconcile the memory of that Abbie Hoffman with the one who had apparently died a lonely death in the rolling hills of eastern Pennsylvania.

The afternoon we met in New York City, Hoffman delivered one of three keynote addresses at the annual CMJ convention, a gathering that typically revolved around new music and collegiate sensibilities, but which this year – 1987 – had the added twist of coinciding with a presidential election.

Hoffman, and singer-songwriters Billy Bragg and Jackson Browne, had each been asked to speak on the theme “the politics of dancing”. Intrigued, I arranged for a press pass and fully expected to pick up a

ticket at the door, and maybe a press kit or goody bag of free giveaways, and then to take my place in a large hotel ballroom, waiting for the “show” to begin. I was right on all counts, but the last.

Instead of wending my way into an auditorium, I was ushered over to an event publicist, who wanted to know what she could do to help with my story.

“Who would you like to speak with?” She asked.

“Well, Abbie, of course...” I said, pausing long enough not to give her the chance to pick or choose among the options of a multiple choice request.

Even all these years later, Hoffman was still the living embodiment of “Woodstock Nation,” and a creature of a school of street politics or, perhaps, street theater, that seemed to languish at that very moment.

“He’ll be along in a little while,” the publicist said.

“In the meantime,” she added helpfully, “why not catch up with Billy Bragg?”

That was how Bragg and I wound up sitting on the inside ledge of a second floor window looking out onto a corner of Second Avenue, and talking about socialism, Britain and the.

“It’s a question of a society’s priorities,” Bragg said earnestly.

“For instance, I’m a visitor from another country, and if I need to buy a guitar string while I’m here in New York, I can do so quite easily,” he said. “But if I were to be injured, say, hit by a car while I walked to that shop, the question of the health care I’d receive would be very much up in the air.

“Now back home, that guitar string might be a little harder to find, but I know if I’m hit by a car, the national health system will take care of me,” Bragg said.

We continued on in this way for another fifteen minutes or so, when the publicist once again appeared, saying Hoffman was about to go on.

Dressed in a t-shirt and largely obscured by the podium, Hoffman spoke quickly, appeared fit, and seemed to be in nearly constant motion – especially as he neared the conclusion of his remarks, during which he whipped on a rubber Ronald Reagan mask and beseeched the crown to “Just say no” to a litany of Reagan administration sins ranging from inaction on homelessness, ignoring the then raging AIDS crisis, and involvement in proxy Cold War actions in South America and other parts of the world.

After the dust settled and the applause died down, I found Hoffman in a booth set up in the “vendor” area of the hall, nestled between displays for an Indy record company and an alternative music magazine.

In the interim, Hoffman had changed into another t-shirt, and had taken a seat behind a table piled high with autographed copies of his latest book, a paperback called *Steal This Urine Test*.

The room was crowded, with many of those moving by still electrified by Hoffman's speech. As a result, we had to huddle close as we spoke. Our respective efforts to be heard over the din causing us to practically touch foreheads.

Your speech went our quite well here at the convention, but as I look around, it seems like a lot of these kids are middle class, living in the suburbs, and come from families where the biggest concern is making monthly payments on houses and cars and credit cars. What I'm wondering is, how do you take the message you delivered here today and move the people in that world?

Well, if you start with the mindset that there's only apathy out there, you had better change your mind. I've worked for the last 10 years on environmental issues up in Bucks County, and I haven't lost a battle yet. The country is very conservative, I already know that, but the techniques of organizing will overcome that. In Bucks County, they're doing democracy, not watching it go by like some parade. They're out there marching. Unfortunately 80 percent of all Americans are just humming the song.

So you see organizing on the community or local level as the fundamental cornerstone of democracy...

If you don't get organized, if you don't have student involvement, then the nightmares come true. For me, the future is always up for grabs – you just have to get in and participate – and you don't need everybody, that would be too chaotic. We never had a majority on our side in the Sixties.

Still, you have to admit that you don't have anywhere near the militancy out there that you once had. You don't have as strong a cysm between the young and old, for instance.

What you have to do is try and get people to be more aware, to read what's going on: It's out there; you just have to find it. Now, if you just want to go along with the party line, whether it's on Contra Aid, on drugs, on abortion, or whatever it is, you don't have to do any reading at all; you can just sit there and watch "Wheel of Fortune" another 10 times.

This is a college music conference. How do you feel about the state of college media outlets these days?

I find most college radio stations are just a few kids yelling and screaming, playing punk records and thinking they're radical. They neglect to use it as a means of communication, a way to present information and get a dialogue going. I had that hope for cable TV but all it's really given me is the opportunity to see "Little House on the Prairie" anytime I want. The Home Shopping Network – it's a great alternative.

You've got grown kids now. What do they think of your activism?

Well, on the one hand, they're proud of me. But they think that the mindset is very romantic. Thinking that change can happen is not of their generation.