

## **A few San Francisco Cacophony Society memoirs**

I had been curious about the San Francisco Cacophony Society, since first finding a “*Rough Draft*” at the Academy of Art in the autumn of '87. I saved this — their bizarre newsletter — wondering if some of the listed events really happened, such as the macabre and amusingly unreal sounding “Frankenstein’s workshop” actually happened or not? And how prancing through the park in costume with musical instruments panned out? This sounded appealing and out of trend. Unfortunately at that stage of my younger life, I was too shy and asocial to motivate myself to go.

**In 1989** I found more Rough Drafts at the Academy, feeling glad that this was a continuing group that were made of interesting, fun people. The caption read: “*A random gathering of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society. You may already be a member*”

That last line appealed to me the most.

### **— Carrie Galbraith —**

At the Academy in autumn of '89, in the painting studio on the 3rd floor of the Sutter street building painting with new studio mate Carrie Galbraith, I was speaking of this newsletter to her one evening, that I keep finding around the hallways called **Rough Draft**.

I went on to describe this fun sounding event called **The Atomic Café**, featuring someone named **Ethyl Ketone**.

All this while she is starting to laugh, and gets around after a few moments of regaining composure to tell me that ***“I am Ethyl Ketone!”***

That discovery was a surprising hoot! And so I was now convinced to finally make it to a Cacophony event now that I knew someone in the society. She enthusiastically encouraged me to show up! In my mind I hesitated, being still in my reticent hermit shell, but that was about to begin to crack open.

### **— October 7th 1989. The first Atomic Café:**

Ethyl Ketone encouraged my attendance, and so I got together with roommate Joes friend Karlin, (aka Radiotta) and went off to the 9th and Lincoln ballpark at night, a nice October evening, arriving to a good little crowd of maybe around 30 people costumed up for the topic involved. This felt like a sneaky Halloween party!

I was dressed in a psychedelic sweater with bits of aluminum foil accenting my radioactive persona.

After about three dozen or so Cacophonists arrived, we began to file into the vehicles carpooled to bring us there in good time. With directions given by Jeffrey Spalding and Zymbot, who led us to the Golden Gate bridge parking lot.

When arriving, fireworks were going off at the Marina in honor of fleet week. Perfect touch for our apocalyptic sojourn!

It took a few scouts, including Ethyl Ketone who was at the scene, to give us the green light to wander towards the bunkers up and across

the road. We had to do it in small sections, so as not to attract unwanted attention to the illegal takeover of the bunker system.

We descended into a small door in the side of the bunkers, a narrow ladder steeply led down a few hundred feet to the lair of the Atomic Café. The first to see was the smiling Violet Crumble, looking delightfully costumed as a ghoulish underworld denizen of Victorian times.

We filed into the bunker space, and sat on the floor in this “atomic church” prepared with wall paintings depicting mushroom clouds, and cryptic references to the overworld. The theatrics of individuals began, with moanings of radiation sickness, remembering the past with its blue skies and peaceful valleys, questioning the nature of natural earthly reality, if it ever existed at all.

A purification and radiativity detection ceremony ensued as we filed into the main “café”. That’s when I first met up with John Law, Annie, Zymbot ( M2 with Orange wig and white face) Jayson Wechter (Capt Spaulding), Phil Bewley, Louise, Erik von Erik, Mary, Brigid, and a host of new faces.

Then we pulled out our canned food (with labels peeled away) and began the “café” part of the evening. Zymbot handed me a can of beer and said *“This Bud’s for you”*.

Someone (it was Mary, John Law's then roommate) started a chant of *“I remember.....”*, which sparked host of remembrances from all...

*"I remember blue skies and fresh vegetables"*

*I remember Groucho Marx"* (as Mary held up a photo of our moustached cigar chomping hero of irreverence)

*"I remember Ringo Starr"* (who I'd recently seen! So that was me)

*"I remember television"*

*"I remember Golden Gate Park"*

*"I remember the Grateful Dead"* with a response of ***"They're still playing!"***

Annie pointed out how terrible I started to look from the radiation and probably only had a day to live. And how we'll have to resort to cannibalism before the nuclear sickness kicks in, so some can survive.

Fellow Academy student Amelia played the part of one too young to know that world above and remarked on how she was born here and never saw the real sky.

This fun acting weirdness went on amongst viewing a b&w film of mushroom cloud explosions, "The Atomic Café", shown on the walls through a 16mm projector.

As the post apocalyptic theme party reached it's peak, and then ended with a quick group effort cleanup, we filed back up to the parkland above. On the ladder, Sebastian Melmoth earnestly warned me to *"Watch out for the Morlocks"*.

Sneaking out of the small door, its padlock secured, The gang poured out into the street, carrying back various items, trying not to be

noticeable, at one point hiding behind a part of the hill after a patrol car passed, Ethyl whispered to me *“Dean, isn't this fun! It's living.”*

Later when in the clear, we were making a lot of noise in the tunnel below hwy 101. (In my memory I can still see Erik carrying what looked like a large car battery on his shoulder.)

A group picture was taken in the parking lot. That was my first event, inspiring many more. I was hooked!

Decades later I made this cartoon strip, mostly accurate with a few twists: [https://dean-gustafson.com/ATOMIC\\_CAFE-8pg.pdf](https://dean-gustafson.com/ATOMIC_CAFE-8pg.pdf)

**— Midnight Walks, 1990 —**  
“The hikes that John Muir never took”

Melmoth lead these great urban hikes, this January one was south of Market, beginning at Bouncers Bar and going through the CalTrain tunnels, passing through some very shoddy areas, with homeless camps. One of them was an abandoned with a display of collaged magazine clippings decoupage on the concrete underpass. This was on a winter night under scattered showers. We ended up at a tiny Potrero Hill bar, that pleased the owner (it had been quite empty).

The walk for the next month started at Hotel Utah and we went over the Embarcadero freeway under the full moon. It was a spectacle, especially when the motorcycle cop came up to bust us, and saw a line of about 2 dozen of us lying down in the middle of the road! The cop was in good humor about this, and we went on our way, walking around Telegraph

hill and down to the North Beach pub that specialized in a good Guinness.

In March we got the walk from Finnegans Wake bar, going over Mt. Sutro (near Sutro tower) and down to Noe Valley, ending up at the Rat & Raven. This began as a moist night of light rain, but no one minded the mud. It was a clear sight of downtown from Twin Peaks, and down over Kite Hill. Such splendid times! My siblings Brian and Jill joined this night and totally loved it!

I became acquainted with several new friends on these walks, and many claim them to be some of their favorite events. With the surprise of where you would find us going, into places no one would venture alone, and with plenty of time spaces involved to socialize within. There was one each month for a while there, and then he continued them through the 90's on occasion, but became rare. Inspired by John's walks, I started doing my own nighttime hiking events, some were long, but never as dangerously placed as what Melmoth led us on (though he was always safety conscious and thoughtful to each attendee's needs and abilities).

### — The approach and appeal of The Cacophony Society —

The atmosphere of Cacophony supported an appreciation for things **out-of-place**. Of truly surrealistic thinking, thriving on irony. I think about the old acid tests of the Merry Pranksters days, transforming consciousness but effective without the acid. The ability to act out unusual circumstances was fitting at many of the events, considering

whether or not a particular role was not being participated in or not. It appealed to the oddball within us individuals in a group setting, and often it took a group to pull off effectively. It takes planning, organizing, implementing. The results were varied and had a social chemistry unique to each event. I found this to be very liberating, and acknowledging that other participants having a similar experience was often cathartic and kept us seeking and creating yet more *events beyond the pale of mainstream society!*

My favorite events were not public, but hidden behind the scenes. The dark walks where most of us would never tread alone, exposed me to some very unusual zones around San Francisco's more decaying underside. Old bars, eccentric decrepit spaces, abandoned zones, etc. The city was our playground, and a vast unlimited one!

Thing is, those events would not be the same in the 21st century, with too much social media exposure and too many photos taken. Someone nowadays would certainly make events into Facebook spectacles, spoiling the limitations. Back in the eighties and nineties, once you were involved it would take hours after the event to start to publicize it, and more often it would be days and weeks — or better yet not at all, making it seem more like a dream! There was a fantastic experiential value to this quality that haunts me to this day.

### — **More favorite events:**

#### **The Annual Post-Yule Pyre**

Turns out we'd meet under the Doggie Diner head, at the fast food dive

called Carousel by then. People would have Christmas trees in their car, prime for burning! Danger Ranger was the leader, guiding us to the nearby lot, where we sneakily brought the dry dead trees on the beach in the dark. As soon as enough were piled up, it was Burn, baby, burn! The fire was always big, with each year grew to enormously huge inferno's — often as big as a house! A real illegal spectacle! Controlled for safety by smart cacophony society members.

This tradition would always be the first Saturday of the year, (now why didn't the law authorities catch on to this pattern?) and would coincide with the annual Christmas party at 1907 Golden Gate. The legendary party central for the cacophony crowd, hosted by the one and only P Segal! A great cap to the oceanside flambé.

The amount of Christmas trees grew to absurdly large amounts! One cacophonist (not saying who!) rented a U-Haul, would fill with trees, and get us to help unload it rapidly. This resulted in a quicker bigger fire! Maybe around 2000? And he'd give away these small thumbblights, using a watch battery. Really cool! [years later he gave me one of those lights with a picture of Edward Snowden on it. ]

The law would show up too late to stop it, and nobody could be singled out unless they were caught feeding the fire, which I witnessed a few times in later years with massive crowds. One year, after police show up too late, one guy in the crowd in a fireproof hazmat suit proceeded to march into the fire as a spectacle. He was immediately arrested as a participant while everyone else was just being spectators, just milling



about on the beach. They couldn't start arresting random people who just happened to be there, but that one guy was easy to single out.

I think I attended that event most every year from 1990-2010? Not certain when the final year was, but 20 years is an impressive run. I believe, like many good things, got ruined by numbers. Too popular and smart phones and social media ruined any semblance of underground exclusivity. Memorable years were with Brian and Jill, 91-96. In following years running into friends there from different social circles out of its increased popularity, which ultimately crushed it by the 20-teens. I'd say it had a good run, beyond Cacophony.

***The Cave Shaman*** event I threw with the help of fellow Academy student friend Norsk Rooteater at the Sutro Baths cave was a night of absurd Cacophony craziness, illuminated by the beautiful mystique of the place itself on a rare clear fogless April night in 1991 with a high tide and full moon.

The idea was to bring speak in tongues only! (for however long its group energy naturally lasted). Around 3 dozen showed up at the event, some in costume, ready to be weird. It was a hit! We lined the cave with candles to great effect, we had some wandering teens pass by to have Kevin Evans attempt to scare them with satanist accounts. Ha! John Law got drenched with high tide water, after the tongues insanity receded, a marshmallow roast in a grill, then storytelling.

The event lasted to around 3am, we had a bonfire going for a good while

out front, while no cops stopped it.

***Canoeing the wharves:*** One of my favorites, we signed up for commanding a rented canoe, paid the costs, and met at Islais creek at the shipyard late at night. And took canoes out in the bay, passing the giant ships parked there, and then under the old wooden piers.

Phosphorus was in the water... as we paddled, it sparked! I was zealous with the oar that night and happily did some of my own enthused laps.

***Death tag in the zone,*** with Tarot cards. We were led by John Law into the dark edge of the park, blindfolded, it turned out to be in the forest near the decrepit windmill and played zombie death tag games in slow motion. This drove out the gay groups that had made it a cruising site.

Sorry, guys!

— **Other events of note, with anecdotal descriptions** —

***Finnegans Wake procession.*** Reading James Joyce simultaneously out loud in a mini parade through the Haight. Results were enthusiastic and wobbly!

***The Third Mind -Burroughs cut up recitation.*** . Tiny literate event, pasting slices of xeroxed literature. Chinese pagoda in the rain.

***Critiquing the museum*** utilitarian features, the old SFMOMA

***Skating*** the abandoned freeways

***Atomic Café 1990.*** Abandoned warehouse taken over! Dance party with The Haight Ashbury Free Band

***Something at the No Nothing.*** Steve Mobia unique independent films shown, in a small theater in the industrial zone, South of SOMAR.

***Operatic Banquet.*** Sister Jills event! Italian restaurant, we can only sing! Popular! Followed by surrealistic karaoke, Cacophony style!

***Jayson Wechters annual Chinese New Year treasure hunt.*** Popular!

Still as a fundraising event for needed organizations.( And occasional citywide treasure hunt.)

***The Marcel Proust support group.*** Reading Proust and reviewing monthly at 1907 Golden Gate. Event by P Segal!

***The Prisoner Marathon.*** Spud Parlor, celebrating that surreal British TV show from 1967-68. On VHS!

***Toasters*** event. Bring an old toaster, to hang all over the city! GGP, then down to Embarcadero. Brewsters event.

***Twin Peaks marathon.*** Nik & Nancys. The bizarre, surrealistic David Lynch mystery series, shown all night long. Again .

***Atomic Café 1992 in Berkeley.*** Abandoned toothpaste factory.

Elaborate event! Free Band playing, I was the drummer! Huge turnout.

***Ronn Rosens annual winter solstice ritual*** on Strawberry Hill

***'A day with Daedalus'***, A day of rapelling giant rocks on Mt Tamalpais, led by expert Harry Haller.

***A secaedarian oddysey***, rapelling, canoeing, multimedia, Free Band, all in abandoned Warehouse 6.

***Peter Copperseeds Penny parades*** on Haight Street, handing out our spare pennies. By the inimitable Peter Doty!

***Zone trip #5 - Mexico for the total eclipse!*** [I wrote about this phenomenal experience in my 1991 essay]

***Chandlers jukebox tape parties.*** Participants brought songs in, leaving with a mix tape!

***Charles Bukowski tribute.*** In the diviest dive bar in the Tenderloin.

Amazing literature! Too many cheap beers. A Melmoth event.

***Ronn's dada parties.*** At his Judah Street apartment. Art! Music! Poetry! Always unconventional.

***Zone Trip #4.*** 1990 Burning Man. Nuff said.

***White Christmas*** in the bunker at Fort Funston. All white food, clothes, bunker walls, wine. Full moon. Ethyl K., Cap'n Spalding event.

***St stupids day parade.*** With several from Cacophony, but not an actual Cacophony event.

***Night of the Exquisite Corpse.*** Bigger theater event, the audience

writes a play, acted out soon after! Victoria Theater.

**Halloween at 1907 Golden Gate!** The annual Halloween at Cacophony party central!

**Protesting the Millennium.** My final attended and participated in Cacophony Society event. By Peter Doty. Afternoon December 31 , 1999! We protested against y2k, demanding we stay in the 20th century.!

There's always more events that will be remembered, but this list works for now. Be sure to check out the official book **Tales Of The San Francisco Cacophony Society** By Carrie Galbraith, John Law, and Kevin Evans!

— Dean Gustafson, wrapping this up on April 1st, 2024

A few remembered nom de plumes :

Ethyl Ketone

Jeffrey Spalding

Mr Science

Zymbot

Avatar

Sebastian Melmoth

Svensk Runestone

Celeste Albaret

Violet Crumble

Amelia X

Dwayne Newtron

Harry Haller