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From CBGB to Les Halles, Anthony Bourdain Was Always a Rock Star

Ericka Schiche · Wednesday, June 20th, 2018

Anthony Bourdain was one of a kind. A real hero and inspiration to me.

An inimitable and irreverent raconteur who intimately knew the divey, dark underbelly in many of the world's great metropolises and small towns just as well as his fancier former restaurant in New York City, Brasserie Les Halles, his good friend Eric Ripert's gourmet seafood restaurant Le Bernardin, or a place like star French chef Iñaki Aizpitarte's Le Chateaubriand in Paris.

The unexpected death of Bourdain, indeed such a profound and stunning loss that really stopped me in my tracks and caused me to take a whole week to just reflect on, meditate on and process, has been hard to fathom.

Hard to understand and deal with, honestly.

A quieter time.

But in contrast to this quiet time, which has really taken my breath away and deeply affected so many people, there has been some comfort in the idea of Bourdain being a kind of rock star who outlived the infamous 27 Club and made his own way in one of the toughest hardscrabble milieus, New York City. Bourdain never eschewed the rough-hewn. The grit and grime.

What Bourdain really understood about New York City is not only the incessant hustle, but the true nature and character of the city. He deeply knew the complexity of the place. Seven years before Jim Jarmusch's existential road trip movie *Stranger than Fiction* appeared in 1984, a few years before Jean Michel Basquiat was captured wandering serendipitously thoroughout New York City streets in Edo Bertoglio's filming of *Downtown 81* and the year after Amos Poe's and guitarist Ivan Kral's CBGB-focused cult classic documentary *The Blank Generation* was first screened in 1976, Bourdain was attending punk rock shows at CBGB.

People find comfort in the oneiric glow and timelessness of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, and the iconic shots by the late, great cinematographer Gordon Willis, but Bourdain's New York City was nowhere near as surreally atmospheric or as stuck in the more slow motion pace of the Upper West Side.

In fact, Bourdain would have been at home as a character or extra in a number of lesser known films set in New York City: Robert Frank's *The Last Supper*; Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* and *The Cool World*; Paul Fejos's *Lonesome*; Josef von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York*; Hal Ashby's *The Landlord*; William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*; Conrad Rooks's *Chappaqua*; Rick Carrier's *Strangers in the City*; Larry Pierce's *The Incident*; Aki Kaurismäki's *Leningrad Cowboys Go Home*; Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker*; Spike Lee's *25th Hour*; and in underground New York City cinema masterpieces by the likes of Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol or my beloved favorites the Kuchar brothers: Mike Kuchar (*Sins of the Fleshapoids*) and the late George Kuchar (*Hold Me While I'm Naked*). The kind of person who could have stepped out of the pages of Tama Janowitz's *Slaves of New York*. Bourdain was definitely that kind of cool.

In a reflective short essay entitled "Eat to the Beat" about the reality of New York City during the year 1977 and the city's music scene, Bourdain cautioned, in retrospect, "Don't let anybody tell you different: 1977 was not a good year. Not a good decade, not a good time for New York City."

Underneath the headline for Bourdain's commentary, published 11 years ago in Spin magazine, appeared the words, "For a punk turned chef, 1977 is more fun to look back on than it was to live through."

Bourdain was all about the grimy side of New York City many of us who prefer the less glamorous, real New York City have in our minds: the dimly lit streets of *Mean Streets*; the Weegee crime scene photos and other photos he took of New York City life; the street art and fine art of the Hollywood Africans crew by Basquiat, Rammellzee and Toxic; Keith Haring getting arrested by the cops after creating graffiti masterpieces at subway stations; the drunks captured in Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery*; and all the cool characters who lived at the Chelsea Hotel. One could even imagine an early 20th Century incarnation of Bourdain hanging out with all the other characters like the beer-drinking, pool-playing man nicknamed Shorty the Bowery Cherub at the dive bar Sammy's Bowery Follies.

This July will mark the 39th anniversary of one of the defining moments in the history of New York City: the infamous blackout of 1977. In his "Eat to the Beat" commentary, Bourdain referenced the event, but he also captured the zeitgeist of the city, writing, "A smoking, moldering ruin, the city — administered by an ineffectual midget, strewn with trash, famously stalked at night by a predatory serial killer with a .44 handgun — was considered ungovernable. That the whole place went on a batshit looting rampage when the lights went out was hardly a surprise." And describing the Lower East Side, once home to recently retired jazz legend and saxophonist Sonny Rollins, who would leave his LES apartment to go practice with his saxophone on the Williamsburg Bridge, Bourdain stuck to the grit and grime of the 1970s: "The Lower East Side was a gigantic drug supermarket, its blocks and blocks of abandoned tenements riddled with the candlelit tunnels, steel-lined rooms, boobytraps, and shooting galleries of its many entrepreneurial retailers."

Even as he painted a dark picture of New York City with his words, it was Bourdain's really obvious love for the music made in the NYC music scene of the '70s that reminded me of why Bourdain was and still is a hero to me. He really liked many of the same bands I have liked over the years, but while he was 21 years old during the Summer of 1977, I was not much older than a kindergartner. And it took me 29 years after the 1977 experiences of Bourdain for me to set foot in CBGB to attend a Bad Brains concert during the final days of the club back in 2006, so like many others, I can only imagine what the club was like during its '70s heyday. Describing late guitarist

and intellectual Robert Quine, who once recorded Velvet Underground shows, Bourdain wrote, "…the Voidoids' incredible guitarist, Robert Quine, shredded his Fender over symbolist-inspired lyrics, making sounds never heard before or since."

Bourdain's love of The Ramones was legendary, but what was really cool about Bourdain, aside from his appreciation for The Ramones, was his love of other great bands he mentioned in "Eat to the Beat": Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers, Talking Heads, Television, Dead Boys, and Blondie. One can forgive Bourdain's obvious disdain for the Sex Pistols, as expressed in his writing, because he was just cool like that — a person you may have occasionally disagreed with but soon forget about it because you realize we are all different and have different opinions, but, in Bourdain's world, we are all human and united by something that transcends all the divisions: the human spirit and the human condition.

One paragraph in particular that Bourdain wrote really stands out: "When I think back on those years, I remember, of course, all the great music — a true embarrassment of riches. But I also remember pain — 1977 smelled of burning candles in an abandoned building, fermenting garbage, uncollected in the street…"

In *Kitchen Confidential*, he described himself as someone who could smoke a "pilfered Gitane" cigarette, while admitting, in the very next chapter to the idea that "Essentially, the world was my ashtray." His brash sarcasm and irreverent humor were definitely on display when he wrote, "Vegetarians, and their Hezbollah-like splinter faction, the vegans, are a persistent irritant to any chef worth a damn."

The New York City captured in the words of Bourdain no longer exists. All the nightclubs Bourdain mentioned in a chapter entitled "The Happy Time" are defunct and some of the guitar heroes are gone too: "A squadron of punk rocker junkie guitar heroes ate for free at Work Progress — so we got free tickets and backstage passes to the Mudd Club, CBGB, Tier Three, Hurrah, Club 57 and so on."

Those nightclubs Bourdain mentioned were places many of us have come to associate with various musical genres like New York No Wave, Post Punk, Punk Rock and Rock and Roll. And in his tribute to Bourdain, Marky Ramone described his friend as a "true punk," offering the words, "People should remember him as a talented, punk-rock chef who was an integral part of starting the chef/rock-star scene."

Many of New York City's street art, punk rock and some of the post punk and no wave legends who became well known during the '70s and '80s are no longer here: Haring, Basquiat, Rammellzee, Glenn O'Brien, Jim Carroll, all of the four original Ramones, Robert Quine, Stiv Bators, Johnny Thunders, Arthur Kane, Jerry Nolan, Billy Rath, Lizzy Mercier Descloux, Klaus Nomi, and Arthur Russell, among others. And just a few weeks before Bourdain died, Glenn Branca, the genius behind Theoretical Girls and an incredible guitarist and composer, passed away. Because of who he was and how he lived his life, especially in New York City, Bourdain's name should now be added to that growing list.

I tend to agree with the sentiments of those who have said Bourdain was a rock star, but also agree with how one person described the late cultural genius and global ambassador as being on "the short list." The short list of well known people one would want to hang out and grab a beer with,

befriend, try a local culinary specialty with in one of the dives around the world…or someone to even just have a great conversation with. Bourdain was one of the cool yet humble people you actually just wanted to know in real life.

One of the people who did know Bourdain in real life is John Lurie, saxophonist and co-founder of The Lounge Lizards. Lurie seemed to take Bourdain's death really hard. Later, on the same day Bourdain's body was found at the Le Chambard hotel in Kaysersberg-Vignoble, France, Lurie's spirits seemed lifted briefly out of despair when he randomly ran into genius guitarist James Blood Ulmer: "James Blood Ulmer just saved me. I saw him walking up the street and jumped out of my cab. I hugged him so hard I think it confused him," wrote Lurie on Twitter.

The idea of Lurie and Ulmer, two legends of the New York City music scene, meeting randomly on a New York City street is a beautiful, inspiring moment, culturally speaking, but it also becomes a bit poignant when one thinks of how Bourdain moved in many of the same circles Lurie and Ulmer moved in.

Before Bourdain died, he acquired a painting from Lurie which has a title that really describes how many of us felt when we first found out Bourdain had reportedly committed suicide by hanging.

The title: "The sky is falling, I am learning to live with it."

(Feature photo from Wiki; CBGB photos by Ericka Schiche)

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