

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Gentrification of Mi Barrio, LA's Echo Park

Eric · Tuesday, July 1st, 2014

I first moved here 21 years ago, to the hills of Echo Park. That's not a long time ago compared to the likes of Eddie and Alana, who live next door, uphill, who have been here almost 40 years. Or Frank on the other side, downhill, who's been here almost as long. Or Marian, just across the street, who died just this past spring at age 91, who had been living here on Lucretia Avenue for over 50 years. I know this specifically because I wrote short pieces about their lives for the now defunct *Echo Park Gazette*, in a column I created called "Meet Your Neighbors." I wanted to preserve the memory of the neighborhood's long time residents, knowing that they wouldn't be with us all that much longer.



And yesterday, I went to the "Presencia Cubana Festival," the longtime echo park arts & music festival in front of the Jose Marti statue at the iconic Echo Park Lake, which celebrates the music and culture of Cubans in Los Angeles, especially their history in Echo Park. But because Echo Park Lake itself had been closed for the last three years for a glorious and much-needed, ecological restoration until just this spring, the festival had some funding problems, though none of attendance. In fact, the north side of the park, just south of Amy Semple McPherson's famous Four Square Temple, was mobbed with thousands of people, hordes of them draped in flags, t-shirts, and accessories of Cuban red, white and blue. (An irony of patriotic color?)



My problem was that I couldn't find a place to park. I drove around and around the park for maybe 20 minutes and came up empty. Sure, there was a festival going on, but this had never happened before. I knew all the little nooks and crannies, all the secret parking spots, down the alleys, in the grocery store parking lots, behind the liquor stores. Still... nada. I drove back home, disgruntled, but not defeated. I lifted my old school, blue three-speed bike into the RAV 4s extended, back-seats-down, wagon, and I drove on back down the steep, un-walkable and un-bikeable hill. I parked on Echo Park and Scott, just around the corner from the new Blue Collar Pet Shop, about a mile from the lake, and I peddled my way back to the festival.



Once there, I open-endedly roamed around amidst the red, white, and blue Cubano crowds of every skin complexion, I ate some tasty fried plantains, and then I laid on my back in the newly planted grass, staring up at one of the park's only remaining, giant Christmas trees (a 100 foot conifer). I

relaxed and soaked up the multi-rhythmic, piano-brass dancing music, the throbbing bass, and the entire Cuban hubbub exploding and pulsating around me. I felt like I was back in Havana, like da wife and I were in 2010, but this was even more, if possible, Cuban.

Yet... here I was in my own *barrio*, Echo Park. All of which struck me hard about how much neighborhood had changed over these last 21 years.



I remember when I first moved here in 1993, after 10 years living in white bread, homogenous Santa Monica. Just 31 blocks from the ocean, naturally not in the toney part of Santa Monica north of Montana, still I was bored with my little rent controlled (\$459/month) 1 bedroom in a stucco cookie cutter apartment building on Berkeley Street. Sure, it was dirt cheap and I was lucky to have inherited it from my cousin who moved back east, but like I said, it was brain dead, boring. Not big or private enough for parties, living in the same building with the same old white bread neighbors year after year, I jumped at the opportunity to move into the old Hollywood Hills of Echo Park when a bass-singing friend, Jolly Chollie, called me up to say “just found a single family residence in Echo Park with a killer view of the Hollywood sign and two garages. Unfortunately, the latter are too small for my Bonneville, so I thought you should check it out.” We jumped on it, me and the great Taj Mondayla, and within a week, we had signed a one-year lease, packed up both of our separate one bedroom bachelor pads, and were implanted in our new fertile garden in Echo Park.

Back in those days, 1993, Echo Park still had the reputation of being a dangerous gun-toting Latino *barrio*. “La M” (pronounced “la em-ay”), the prison-infested adult gang of the neighborhood, supposedly still hung out after dark in Elysian Park, LA’s second largest after Griffith, just a two-minute walk up the street. In fact, it was hard to distinguish between the fireworks of nearby Dodger Stadium and the random gun shots that always kept the neighborhood “popping” at all hours of the night. Of course when the “pops” came at 2-3 in the morning, you were pretty sure it wasn’t from the stadium in Chavez Ravine.



Then... just down the hill... beyond our terraced back yard, was the still rough and tumble Echo Park Avenue, where Allison Anders documented the neighborhood’s every day, gang-banging, drug-dealing goings on, in her film, *La Vida Loca*. And of course, right across from the also-iconic, drug-dealing “Magic Gas Station” at the fork of Echo Park and Morton, there was “Chicken Corner,” where in a huge undeveloped plot of brown arid land, local Latino immigrants used to raise yardfulls of fertile and clucking chickens. The randy and ribald roosters would wake us up every morning in their call to prayer, any time between 3 and 6 a.m. Apparently, their religiously-crowing rooster clocks were a bit off.

All of which had the *LA Times* interview me about my suspect choice of moving from the comfort and safety of the homogenous West Side to the wild and woolly frontier of East LA, namely Echo Park. “Hey,” I said glibly, but truly, in print, “the West Side has no color, no sense of community. Echo Park has history, a feeling of neighborhood. Sure, it’s suspect in some ways, but not for me. I’m looking forward to joining its history... of reds and radicals, of artists and bohemians, of Latinos and immigrants.” “Best of luck,” the doubtful reporter wished me. “Thanks a lot,” I said. And I never looked back.

Because it's true: My hill, the top of Lucretia, or at least another hill somewhere nearby, used to be called "Red Hill," for all the socialist and commie sympathizers that gravitated to the left-leaning hills of Echo Park. That's right, long before the neighborhood became the trendy magnet for wannabe hipsters and musicians deifying the suicidal death of Elliot Smith, it was the home of the likes of Carey McWilliams, Grace Simon, and Leo Politi, activists all, not to mention Hollywood mavericks John Huston and Steve McQueen, jazzman Art Pepper, and unique, oddball artists like Jackson Pollack and Frank Zappa. Now unfortunately, they've been replaced with the likes of Leonardo DiCaprio and Shia LaBouf.



But here's one not listed in Wikipedia: Marian's son... you know, right across the street Marian? Her son was the lawyer for Sirhan Sirhan, the accused and convicted murderer of Bobby Kennedy, right here in downtown LA at the Ambassador Hotel. In fact, for the many months before Marian had to be moved to a nursing home, she would sit home all day long, blaring the tapes of the Sirhan-Kennedy trial at levels that I guess she hoped would immortalize her labor lawyering son. It was very loud, very intrusive, and very sad, all at the same time. But hey, I think it accomplished its point: informing all the fashionable newbies anywhere within hearing range of the endlessly-looping tapes, of the neighborhood's bonafides in terms of socialist and left-leaning politics. Oddly, the self-condemning irony of my Echo-radical story is that now, right down the hill from Lucretia, on Echo Park Avenue, across the street from the long-established liquor store, "House of Spirits," sits the new top chef, trendy eatery called... don'tcha know... "Red Hill." Sad but true.

But then again, long before the sojourns of Hollywood's Huston and McQueen, Echo Park had a different name, Edendale, and it was the home of the original Hollywood film productions, the silent movies. From Tom Mix, Hollywood's first cowboy star, to even more importantly, Charlie Chaplin himself. That's right, the Little Tramp started right here, on the soundless stages of Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops, just down the hill in Edendale. Fatty Arbuckle, Mabel Normand, and Chaplin, the young apprentice scuffling little tramp... all worked at the foot of Red Hill on what is now Glendale Boulevard. In studios that are long gone and have been replaced with the likes of "Bert and Company," a package design company at 1855 Glendale Boulevard, and with a Public Storage Company, just behind the Jack In The Box, across the street on the east side of Glendale. But can't you just imagine the parties that rocked these hills back in the day? Long before Hollywood moved to Paramount and Warner Brothers, Universal and Fox, MGM and the newer hills of Mulholland Drive? With Fatty and Mabel, Charlie and Paulette Goddard, and with Gloria Swanson and her "I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. De Mille." It must have been scandalous and loud. Oh no, it was still MOS ("mid out sound").



So how did it happen? The gentrification of Echo Park? Well, at least from one long-time resident's point of view, that is yours Truly, it happened right here, up the street, at the top of the hill on Lucretia. Yes, that's right. you see, there was an empty lot just three houses uphill, on our side of the street, looking gloriously out at the Hollywood sign and the Griffith Park Observatory... from the old silent movie hills of Edendale... now called "Elysian Heights," at least by those who want to distinguish themselves from the common flatlanders of "Echo Park." Anyway, this lot was quite empty for about the first thirteen years we lived here. Every time we walked Clay, the dog, uphill towards Elysian Park, he used the scrub dry and arid dirt as he liked. It was just uphill of one of the famous Echo Park wooden stairways that used to bring the "suburban" hillside residents of Echo Park down to the Red Car trolley line on Echo Park Avenue

to clang their way to work in downtown LA.



But then one sad and unremarkable day in about the year 2003, they (some forward-thinking and entrepreneurial investors) started clearing and leveling the land of the empty lot uphill on Lucretia. Bulldozing and jack-hammering and... building. And about a year later, the lot was no longer empty, but rather the site of three new “modern” single family residences, all looking down upon Echo Park Avenue and out over legendary “Tom Mix Hill” beyond, to the sexy and almost-touchable hills of Hollywood. But these three, new, houses were all seen as monstrosities by us local longtime residents. Huge, two-three floor, four-bedroom concrete and stucco structures, they stuck out like sore thumbs in the old neighborhood of 1920s wood bungalows, and even 1950s one story stucco houses, like ours, built right into the hillside on long wooden stilts like historical architectural flamingos. No, these new and arrogant intruders were more like concrete birds of prey, hovering atop hillside modernity, cruelly announcing the formal and official “gentrification of Echo Park.”

The old wooden stairway was “renovated” into more durable and permanent concrete, and these houses were put on the marketplace for well upwards of three quarters of a million dollars. Maybe not much to speak of in terms of 2014 Echo Park real estate prices, but back then, a decade ago, a veritable... small fortune. And so what happened was that... in one fell, upwardly mobile swoop... these three houses... singly changed the very fabric of Echo Park. Quickly they were followed by Silverwood properties down on Echo Park Avenue, and Fototeka gallery next to the long time Latino “El Batey” grocery store, and then, eventually, by the pricey vegan grocery store that sells celery root and hajiki to our trendy, wannabe hipster neighbors who naturally, not only wear their prescribed short-brimmed hipster hats, but also who have babies and dogs that they walk up the hill past our house, in an unending parade of ambitious and self-satisfied display.



In fact, one of these new neighbors ,who just moved in less than a year ago, had the nerve to knock on my door just a few months ago... to demand that I “turn down my music.” I was confused a little mind-altered having just come to the door expecting perhaps just another Jehovah’s Witness or magazine-slinging teenager, when this neighbor, without ever introducing himself or even telling me his name just bluntly asked me to “turn down my music.” I took a moment and then I laughed out loud. I said something like:

“Do you know what neighborhood you just moved into, my friend? It’s called Echo Park. We have dogs here who bark 24/7... which, by the way, is much better than the roosters who used to crow here every frigging morning whenever they felt like it. We have bands full of musicians that practice here whenever they want to... day or night. We may not have as many gun shots as we used to when I moved in here 21 years ago, but it’s called ‘Echo Park’, dude. The hills here are alive... they resound... not only with music... but with gun-toting gangbangers and real jazz-playing bohemians... with old school socialists and illegal immigrants... with yuppies and bobos, of which you might even say I was one (‘bobo’ = bourgeois bohemian). But chill, dude. We do play music here. Loud music. We have to put up with our neighbors and their eccentricities. Just imagine if you had to listen to Marian’s son’s Sirhan Sirhan tapes blaring 24/7 right across the street from you for over a year. Just imagine if you had to listen to suicidal Elliot Smith or weird Frank Zappa practicing live music in the neighborhood 24/7 at totally unpredictable hours. Just imagine that one of your neighbors was an heroin-addicted, anti-

Semitic junkie, who hurled anti-Semitic insults at you from her doorstep 20 feet from your bedroom window whenever the hell she had the drug-induced urge. Just imagine any of this, pal. And think maybe... you've moved to the wrong neighborhood. Or moved maybe... too soon. Before the gentrification was of Echo Park complete. Maybe, pal, you should go back to... Woodland Hills... or back to... Nebraska... where there's still some reliable civility and expectation from your neighbors. And just maybe... you should think twice before you come knocking at my front door again, asking me to turn down my KJZZ or KCRW radio broadcast out the speakers of my back deck overlooking Echo Park Avenue... and the Hollywood Hills... and your newly-purchased, over-priced home just below me on Avalon Street. Because no, pal, I'm not gonna turn down my music at 6 p.m. on a Friday afternoon at the beginning of my weekend in middle of my California paradise... just because it's a little loud or inconvenient for you and your wife and your 2.2 kids, going to work at the Disney animation factory in Burbank or at the Wells Fargo Bank downtown or wherever the hell you come and go to, earning you the privilege of living in our great and historical neighborhood now known as 'trendy and gentrified Echo Park.'"

Yeah, that's what I said. And this guy, this nameless and nervy neighbor, he said, after his neck turned beet red and steam came out of his nose:

"Well, fuck you too. Maybe we did move to the wrong neighborhood. If the rest of the neighbors are anything like you!"

"Have a good night, neighbor," I said as I closed the door on him, went out to the back deck and heard that my music might just have been... a tad loud. I went inside... and turned it down... a bit. Disappointed in myself. What a frigging hypocrite!



And guess what else? There's another empty lot on Lucretia... this one exactly across the street from us. Apparently the house that sat there burned down over three decades ago and the extended Japanese family who owned it could never agree on what to do with the property. They fought amongst each other, the lot stayed empty, and Clay, the dog, fought coyotes there. Because the only thing left on the property was the concrete foundation and some retaining walls, along with some overgrown, flowering fruit trees. But from there, we could always see the glow of well-lit Dodger Stadium just down the hill on the other side, and we could hear the likes of Mick Jagger sing whenever the Rolling Stones were in town.



Finally though, the property was sold, about six years ago, and some bulldozers came in to pull down some of the fruit trees and to level the land for the development of 4 new modern townhouses. The neighbors protested...and we lost. But then, the 2008 recession saved us. The owners stopped everything and there the empty lot sat...

... until...

...about two weeks from today, when some new ambitious and entrepreneurial management company will start pulling out the rest of the trees and leveling the rest of the land, for four newer townhouses. I spoke to the foreman just the other day. It's true. They have all the permits. They'll "follow the rules" and they'll start clanging and banging and bulldozing six days a week, starting at

7 a.m., 8 on Saturdays.

It was all...inevitable. Along with the development of Chicken Corner, across the street from the “alternative” *Chango* coffee shop. Yep, the roosters have been replaced with maybe 34 new town houses, bringing maybe... 500 new residents into the hood... parading their dogs and babies up the street, especially to the Dodgers firework displays after all the home games. And the iconic Magic Gas Station, stalwart of Echo Park’s Latino gang banging culture, just across the street from *Chango* at the fork of Echo Park and Morton, long time site the ubiquitous drug deals from *Mi Vida Loca*? It’s gone too. Replaced with a new Chevron Station. Just half a year ago. And the original Pioneer Chicken and super market? Here for decades? Gone too, replaced with a new *Pizza Hut* and *Walgreens*, across the parking lot from Red Hill, the new trendy top chef eatery.



And just two months ago? Barragan’s, the oldest Mexican restaurant in LA, just east of Echo Park on Sunset, where da wife and I went every other Friday afternoon for the most delicious, free fried chicken and half-price margarita happy hour in town? Closed too. Waiting for a new restaurant or super vintage store to move in.

“What can i can?” Mr. Barragan himself, the now late-middle aged son of the original owner, said to me the other day, as I lamented his decision to close shop. “The neighborhood is changing... and... I’m tired.”

I shook his hand and thanked him for all the years in sort of a sad and reverse admission that yes, “the times they were a changin’”... but I’m not sure if for the better.



Finally, I just heard the other day, *El Batey*, the eternal Latino grocery store on Echo Park Avenue, right next to *Chango*, it too, is closing shop, having had its rent tripled by the voracious and relentless landlords.

The truth is... I don’t even own “my” house. I’m a renter. And sure, my rent has doubled since 2003 when I first moved in. I cover it by subletting the downstairs, and I have a good relationship with my landlady who used to live here in the ’50s and whose first husband used to raise chickens and goats on the terraced back hillside. But hey, none of us really own anything, right? And “you can’t take it with you,” right? And the times, they always will be a changin’, right, Bob?

For now though, and for who knows how much longer, my wife, from Indonesia, and I, from New Yawk, are still both happy residents of Echo Park. We enjoy the view from the back deck out over the Hollywood sign, where the sun sets over the Pacific Ocean in a kaleidoscope of color about 340 days a year. We plant vegetables... tomatoes, jalapeños, Japanese eggplant... crawling cucumbers... every spring, in the top terrace of the “lower 40,” and we eat them all summer long until the Santa Ana winds come and go during the brutally hot days of Indian summer. I appreciate where I live, my landlady’s home, my “brief,” 21-year stay here on planet Echo Park. Like I said, who knows how much longer I’ll be lucky enough to stay here? And like I said, things change... eh?



But here's a toast to Echo Park, to the reds and the artists, to the Latinos and the *newbies*. We all live here together. Sure, the old Cuban bakery and jewelry shop, where I bought our engraved gold wedding bands, are long gone. The stores are now occupied by "Masa," the successful combo French creperie and deep dish pizza joint on Sunset, next to the few remaining pawn shops and 99 cent stores from the "old days." And there's *The Echo* itself, center and symbol of Echo Park's hipster gentrification, half a block away, now the most popular alternative music club in LA, to where, what we in New York used to call the "bridge and tunnel crowd," now flocks every weekend, lining up around the block to discover the next... the new... upcoming Elliot Smith.

And sure, I now have to bike to the Cubano music festival... because there's just no place to park around the newly renovated lake, with all the new condos and all the new residents....

But hey, I'm not complainin'...

I'm just sayin'....

Echo Park, still *mi barrio*.



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