

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



NoDa Soda

Random Recollections of the 1990s on North Davidson

by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) May
2013

Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) moseyed over to The Smelly Cat coffeehouse on East 36th Street in NoDa (North Davidson, Charlotte, NC, USA), after having eaten a tasty Sunday brunch at Cabo Fish Taco. I ordered us a pair of Monique's favorite: caramel-flavored black coffee, extra sweet, lots of whipped cream. 600 calories to burn.

We found a cozy table outside. The April morning air was pleasantly dry and mild. I began to tell Monique about NoDa in the 1990s, starting out with 1991 – the year I arrived on the scene under the nom de brosse of m. van tryke.

Monique had virtually no knowledge of NoDa's history, as she didn't live in Charlotte prior to 2011 (when we got married). I told her that this energetic guy from the Boston area named Terry Carano got smitten by the art bug late in life and decided to go for it, all out. (Rest in peace, Terry.)

"So, where did Terry go to art school?" Monique asked.

"Carano graduated from the School of Naïveté with honors. He was determined to create the most famous co-op art gallery in the world: Absinthe."

"Absinthe? What is Absinthe?"

"It's a liquor drink made from wormwood, Monique. Artists would claim that it would help to inspire them. The green fairy, they would often call it."

"Oh, did you drink any?"

"No, I've never tried it, but you can buy it at the ABC store. Terry just wanted an art-related name, I guess."

“Did the gallery become world famous?” Monique asked with raised eyebrows. Cute eyebrows.

“Uh, not exactly, 32. It’s now the place where we just ate.”

“Cabo Fish Taco?”

“Yeah, that would be the space. Actually, that space became 23 Studio during the summer of ‘92. Another artist named Lepton Neutrino – or more commonly known as Steve Holt – kept the ship off the rocks until the fall of 2002. Then the old Woolworth Building was felled, and the Cabo edifice was built.”

“I see.” Monique was genuinely intrigued by the history.

“We had quite an amazingly improbable run. All kinds of art and artists passed through there over those 11 years. There were some monumental turnouts on Gallery Crawl nights.”

“Gallery crawl nights?”

“The first Friday of every month. And later on, the third Friday was added, though it was always much smaller than the first Friday.”

“Was any art being purchased, or was it just a drunk fest?”

“Art was actually being bought and sold. Just ask Jerry Kirk (Agent 51). And, no, it wasn’t just a mindless drunk fest. Well, not in the beginning.”

“How about the artists ... did any of you become famous?”

“No, not that I am aware of. But Joe Behm would announce to everyone that came in the door that we were the best artists in the world.” I chuckled. “It made us feel good. What a showman that guy was.”

“Where are Terry and Joe now?”

“Uh, they’re dead.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s ok. They weren’t spring chickens when they checked out. They had an honest go at it.” I watched some cyclists pass by. “Those early Gallery Crawls were something else. They were pack-a-zoid, Monique. The sidewalks were so jammed; strollers were forced into the street. Bands – like The Ravelers and Tranzend – would play behind the gallery. Eventually, Pat’s Tavern was internally connected to 23 Studio to facilitate alcohol transit. We even shot Z-Axis public access videos in the gallery. Fun times. Great memories.”

“Wow! Wish I could have been here then.”

“Well, I was looking for you, Agent 32.”

“I bet you were, 33.” She laughed.

“Oh, and we had this lounge-like setting inside 23 Studio.”

“Really?”

“Yep. The artists and their friends would sit on the couches and chairs and chat about art – and non-art – matters.”

“A salon?”

“Of sorts. Of odd sorts. Yeah, it was whey kewl.”

“Parkaar, [my ailing alias] I don’t trust your spellings.”

“Are you seeing my words again, you synesthesiatic one?”

Monique laughed for a few seconds. “No, I just know your word games, 33. Remember, I’m your <poof> weeder.”

“Oh, yes. Now, how could eyes forget?”

“I don’t know. How could you?”

“Well, I seem to forget many things in my old age.”

“You’re not that old!”

“I’m ancient history, Agent 32. I’m yesterday’s slightly emetic aftertaste.”

“You’re making bizarre statements again for the audio recorder, aren’t you?” Monique asked with a stern look.

But, before I could respond to Monique’s question, an early 40s Latino hipster dude stopped at our table. “Hey man, I heard you guys talking about the NoDa scene in the ‘90s. I was there, too. I was even there in 1990 when it was known as the Historic North Charlotte Arts District.”

“Yeah, I remember that mouthful of an appellation.”

“Appalachian?” Monique asked, looking confused.

“Well, it sounds like that, Monique, but isn’t quite as inclined. Hey, who coined the term NoDa anyway?”

The Hispanic hipster groomed his goatee. “Boy, I’ve heard that debate many times. One time back in ’94, this guy asked me at 35th and North Davidson: ‘Is this NoDa?’ I just said: ‘No dah. Not, no duh, dude.’ I even repeated it for emphasis.”

“And what happened?” I asked, intrigued by his anecdote.

“He just kept walking up the sidewalk,” the hipster said. “Not sure if it sank in with him. He seemed pretty focked up.”

The Latino hipster dude then moved along towards Yadkin Avenue. Twenty seconds later, and he was gone. *Wonder where he’s going? To get a fix?*

Monique looked across East 36th Street at the Neighborhood Theater. “What is that over there?”

“Well, it was once a movie theater. Then it was a church. Now it’s a music hall. Bands play there. Todd Rundgren played there. And supposedly when Mr. Rundgren saw the marquee sign with his name in assorted letter colors, fonts and sizes, he exclaimed: “Jeez-us effing Christ, what the hell happened to my career?!”

Monique had a quizzical look. “He’s a famous artist?”

“Yes, a musical artist.”

“Did he stop in 23 Studio?”

“I don’t think so. I think he just played, then split for the next town.”

“Did Frank (Agent 107) and Mike (Agent 2) ever come up here?” Monique asked while continuing to study the marquee.

“Yes, many times, Monique.”

“I feel like I got cheated out of something.”

“Ah, don’t feel like that, 32. That initial NoDa phase was fun, but the current phase is kewl, too. Though, there sure aren’t many art galleries left.”

“Maybe the recession of ’08 knocked them out?”

“Yeah, maybe so. People are more likely to buy beer and coffee before artwork.”

Monique was still very interested, and continued with her questions. “What was this area initially?”

“A textile mill village. The little one-bedroom house that I owned on Mercury Street was a millhouse.”

Monique noticed a dark-haired, 20-something, Asian female walking up. “Gosh, that girl has so many tattoos.”

“Yeah, the ink flows all over the skin down here. Kinda like in Wigwood.”

“Which area do you prefer, Agent 33?”

“Hard to say. It seems to vary. I’m just glad that Charlotte finally has more than one hip area. For the longest time this city had no kewl scenes - zero, nil, nada. It was sad.”

Our conversation went on like this for another 13 minutes. That's when the barista came outside and asked if we wanted anything else. We told her that we were good. She thanked us for coming.

We got up and began to walk back to the van, which we parked in front of Cabo Fish Taco. We stopped near The Evening Muse for a minute.

"Ah, if these walls could talk, what language do you think they would speak in, Agent 32?"

"Mortarese?"

I laughed. "Good one, Monique – a winner. That's crisp money. I'll use that one later."

Next, I looked down the sidewalk. In one of the slab cracks was a silver piece of metal. I bent down and picked it up. It was a miniature chrome skull with an eyelet on top. I showed it to Monique.

"Yikes! That's creepy."

"It must've fallen off of someone's necklace." I placed it in my front pocket.

"You're going to bring that home?"

"Why not? A memento of our day in NoDa. I'll engrave today's date on it."

"It might bring bad luck."

“Nah, it’ll be ok. You are watching too many horror movies with Agent 666.”

“Ok, but hide it somewhere; I don’t want to see it.”

“Sure. No problem. Consider it done, 32.”

Now, back in the old green van, we headed up North Davidson Street. We slowly crossed over the railroad track mound after 36th Street. I then pointed to the right at a small, old millhouse.

“Well, that was where I lived, Monique, from December of ’94 to December of ’97.”

“Were you alone in that house for those three years, Parkaar?”

“Very much alone, I assure you.”

I turned right onto Mercury Street and looked at the front porch. *Looks about the same. Just a different color of paint. I wonder if the new owners have found those notes about the NoDa soda formulation.*

We crossed another railroad mound and then turned right onto North Alexander Street to arrive back at 36th Street. I turned right and we passed the Neighborhood Theater. Then I turned left at the light to head south (towards downtown/uptown) on North Davidson Street. As we passed 35th Street, I pointed to the left.

“A bar called The Aardvark used to be there, Monique. It was Joe Behm’s bar.”

“When was this?” she asked. “Did he have the bar and a share of Absinthe?”

“Oh, this is going way back, 32 ... probably all the way back to 1992. I believe that he did one before the other, but the chronology escapes me. Anyway, the Aardvark was belly-up by '96, maybe earlier. It didn't last that long. Though, I can still remember the late Joe Behm saying, after I rang the tip bell without yet buying anything, ‘Sir, if we lose control of the bell, we lose control of everything!’ Truly epik with a k. May he rest in eternal peace.”

We continued driving towards downtown/uptown Charlotte. We could see the tall buildings rising at the end of the railroad yard.

“See, it's not that far from downtown, Monique. It's probably just two miles as a crow flies.”

“Does a crow always fly in a straight line, Parkaar?”

“Only when the crow is trying to live up to that old saying, Agent 32.”

Monique laughed and looked over to her left. “So, what's this area called? It looks kinda scary.”

“This is Villa Heights. Soon it will be trendy, too.”

“No way!”

“Sure way. Look how close it is to downtown. The millennials love living close to work.”

We were now crossing 15th Street. Traffic was light.

I continued with my real estate predictions. “Heck, even this Belmont neighborhood will be bo-ho chic someday.”

“So, you think NoDa will get scooped someday by the neighborhoods closer to downtown, 33?”

“I don’t know if NoDa will ever get totally scooped, as these areas down here are pretty much just residential with only a few shops. The main scene will still be in NoDa, I would suspect ... but who knows? Oh, we just passed Area 15. It was once so underground that you had to be in the know to even know where it was. And look at it now. Oh, how it has sprouted. They have a kewl rehab bike store, too.”

Monique looked to her right intently. “Oh, yes, I see it.”

“Once the Lynx Blue Line gets extended, all of these areas should really take off. NoDa will get a big boost out of it, as there will be a station at 36th Street. Even the now-scary Howie Acres at Sugar Creek & Eastway will see an amazing upward transformation. I just wish I had the cash to buy one of those small houses on Bearwood Avenue.”

“Will it spiralize upward, Parkaar?”

“Spiralize.” I chuckled. “Very funny, Monique. I guess you were right on cue with replaying that inanity, as I was starting to sound like a real estate commercial.” I coughed. “But, you know, thinking back ... NoDa in 1990 was scary territory. People would sometimes get mugged after leaving one of the two art galleries. Most of the storefronts were still boarded up ... or worse, not boarded up, and being used by crackheads. We started a citizen’s patrol. We were armed

with flashlights. You know how cockroaches hate the light of day. It was actually fairly effective.”

“Sounds like it was an uphill battle, 33.”

“Yeah, it definitely was during the first half of the ‘90s decade, Monique.”

“Can I see that skull trinket that you picked up?”

“I thought you were afraid of it.”

“Phobia suddenly cured. Let’s see it.”

“Ok, one sec, 32.”

I retrieved the little chrome skull and gave it to Monique. Then, for some strange reason, I remembered a great NoDa/Z-Axis videographer who passed away on June 30, 2000: Bruce Gillenwater. May he rest in peace, too.