



Children of the American Decades

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Out on the edge of the Western world, the Golden Gate channel cuts through the coastal range to link the Pacific Ocean and a bay, creating a haven called San Francisco. In 1492, the greater region was the fertile home to the most populous place in what would become the United States. When it was colonized and named for St. Francis of Assisi in 1776, some ineffable but authentic connection linked the name source to the spirit of the land and kept it a place that wasn't quite like the rest of the continent. The gold rush that began in 1848 filled it with marginalized seekers from the rest of the United States and the world, and ever after, it was a sanctuary for the odd and eccentric. As Robinson Jeffers put it, "For our country here at the west of things / Is pregnant of dreams."

Near the end of World War I, it welcomed Manuel Garcia, an electrician from La Coruña, Spain, who bought a home in the outer Mission District and settled there with his wife and four children. In 1935 his second son—baptized Jose, but commonly called Joe—a swing-band leader and reedman, married for the second time, to Ruth Marie "Bobbie" Clifford, a nurse. Their first child, Clifford ("Tiff"), was born in 1937, and their second and last child was born on August 1, 1942, at Children's

Hospital in the city. They named him Jerome John Garcia, after Jerome Kern, Bobbie's favorite composer. From all accounts, Joe and Bobbie were both easygoing and benevolent, and it was a happy home. By now, Joe had leased a building on the corner of 1st and Harrison Streets near the waterfront, with a tavern, Joe Garcia's, downstairs and rooms for rent above, and they were financially comfortable. Their house on Amazon Street was filled with music, as Joe kept up with his clarinet and Bobbie played the piano. At the age of four or five, Jerry dug into a box in the attic of his maternal grandparents' country place and discovered a windup Victrola phonograph, some steel needles, and the first recorded music he would be able to recall, a handful of dusty, one-sided old records of folk songs like "Sweet Betsy from Pike." No one showed him how, but he played them over and over, "a compulsion almost," as he later put it.

It was a miserable irony that the Garcia family was irremediably shattered while on vacation. In the summer of 1947, they were enjoying themselves near Arcata, in Northern California. Joe went fishing, and drowned. Jerry later claimed to have witnessed his father's death, though it seems more likely that this was a memory formed from repeated tellings. A bit paradoxically, he also recalled being unable to listen to stories about his father until he was ten or eleven. In any event, their wounds were grievous.

In the absence of his father, Jerry naturally depended on his mother for support. But Bobbie had never been a particularly domestic woman. Artistic and a student of opera, she was also a follower of Velikovsky, astrology, and palm reading. More pressingly, she had a living to earn, and as she came to spend the bulk of her time down at Joe Garcia's at 1st and Harrison, the care of her children fell more and more to her parents, Tillie and Bill Clifford, "Nan" and "Pop." Jerry in particular felt deprived and deserted, especially when he and Tiff moved in with Nan and Pop at 87 Harrington Street, in the Excelsior neighborhood of the outer Mission District, while Bobbie lived in a cottage across the street. In later years he would relate a specific traumatic memory of being left behind on the street one day by his mother, of frantically searching for her until he was finally found by his grandmother. He was bereft, and he would always carry a feeling that he was not loved or cared for, that he was not worthy. These scars would never fade.

Jerry's relationship with his mother would sour further when Bobbie, as Tiff put it, "started getting married a lot." There was a brief marriage to one Ben Brown in 1949, seemingly because Ben was a construction foreman whose labors Bobbie employed to improve her cottage. The extended

Garcia family did not approve of the marriage, and any support they might have given the boys fell away. Years later, as a teenager, Jerry even made nasty remarks about his mother's morals. Fair or not, the damage was done. His self-esteem and capacity for trust in women had been permanently damaged.

A few months before his father's death, Jerry suffered another loss. He and Tiff were at Nan and Pop's country house in the Santa Cruz mountains south of San Francisco. Tiff was chopping wood, and Jerry was being his little helper when his right hand got in the way of the descending ax. His enduring memory was of a buzzing sound he would come to associate with shock, then jumping around not looking at his wound, then a long drive to the doctor's, the world vibrating in his ears. It was only when the last bandage fell off in the bathtub one night that he discovered to his surprise that he had lost the top two joints of his middle finger.

Harrington Street was only a block long, connecting Mission Street at one end and a major thoroughfare, Alemany Boulevard, at the other. In the 1940s, the center of the block was not yet developed, and there was a small open field, with a barn, trees, and an informal playground. Mission Street was lined with stores, including a hobby and model train shop. It was an Italian and Irish working-class neighborhood, with the Jewish Home for the Aged just a block or two down Mission. Despite their Latin last name and Tillie's own Swedish heritage, the Garcia boys thought of their ethnicity as deriving largely from Pop and saw themselves as Mission (District) Irish, a standard San Francisco ethnic classification. Around the corner on Alemany was Corpus Christi Church, which they attended regularly. The Church's theater of hell served as usual to tinge Jerry's later sexuality with guilt, but even more important, he realized later, it gave him a sense of the mysterious spiritual world beyond the material one.

Life with Nan and Pop had its rewards. For Tiff, who at ten was supposed to be the man of the family (at least as this applied to his mother and brother), there was a good role model in Pop, a taciturn man who liked his beer, the fights, and puttering with a wide array of hobbies. His independent laundry delivery business brought him home early, in time to keep an eye on the boys. Jerry, by contrast, thought of Pop as a "bump on a log," and instead turned to Nan, whom he resembled in charm and gregariousness. Tillie Clifford was a fascinating and formidable woman. A founder and the secretary/treasurer of the local Laundry Workers' Union, she was an expert politician who always dressed well and seemingly knew everyone in San Francisco. She was not to be trifled with. In 1916, she

had filed charges against her husband for assault. He was contrite, and the judge had taken his side. "You will run for office again," she warned the court. "I shall see to it that you don't get some votes." Her threat did not seem to have any effect, but she remained unabashed. Jerry would recall her as a beautiful woman with a spiritual quality, an authentic socialist who was either "a fabulous liar or she just genuinely loved everybody." She was also a second-generation San Franciscan, independent of conventional mores as she openly attended out-of-town union meetings with her extramarital boyfriend.

Periodically bedridden by asthma attacks as a young boy, Jerry passed his time reading and watching television. Their nearly first-on-the-block set—the people with the first one had a child with polio, so no one could visit and watch it—confirmed him as a child of the fifties. He also loved drawing, for which he showed an early talent. Perhaps it was true, as his palm-reading mother had told him, that he had "the hands to be an artist." In the third grade he had the good fortune to have a young bohemian teacher, Miss Simon, who encouraged him to be involved in every possible art project. Soon he felt not only a blossoming identity as an artist, but also a general sense of being different from most other people. His favorite reading became the comics which Tiff swiped on Mission Street, especially E.C. ("Entertaining Comics") comic books, like the classic *Tales From the Crypt*. Though the gory Old Testament tales of retribution revolted parents across the nation, their German expressionistic silent-movie graphic style introduced young Jerry unconsciously to fundamental lessons in art and form.

Whatever needs the horror genre satisfied for Jerry, and it would appeal to him all his life, he soon found a new medium in which to explore them. He went to the Granada Theater at Ocean and Mission to see *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, and both horror movies and film in general permanently captured his attention. On his first visit, he was so frightened that he couldn't look at the screen, and instead found the pattern of the fabric on the back of the seats engraved in his memory. Striving to master his fear with knowledge, he began to study the classic film monsters—Frankenstein's, Dracula, and the Wolf Man. When his reading graduated to novels, his first selection was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Horror also influenced his artwork, and his favorite subject for years was Boris Karloff in the Jack Pearce Frankenstein's monster makeup. It was his first taste of the weird, and he loved it. Always.

In 1953 Bobbie remarried, the boys moved back in with her, and for Jerry, life went straight to hell. Wally Matusiewicz was a stocky blond sailor, a hardworking man who expected his stepsons to work alongside him on home projects; but physical labor was never going to be Jerry's idea of a good time. His relationship with Wally went swiftly downhill, for a variety of deeply emotional reasons. In a confused, never-understood way, Jerry had never entirely forgiven his mother for the death of his father, nor for remarrying. Now hormones swept over him in the usual tidal wave, crashing into the retaining wall of his Roman Catholicism and creating a jumbled mess. As an adult he would concede that sex and women were never his primary concern, "except for when it really runs you around crazy, when you're around fourteen or so." Add to puberty his alienation from his mother and you had a recipe for torment. Twenty years later he would read an underground comic book called *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* and grasp profoundly that it described exactly the hell of his early teens, as captured in the rays of light, lust, guilt, that emanated from Binky's crotch, up toward the Virgin, down to hell, and out toward the entire world. Coping with sexuality is tough; dealing with the guilt of the Roman Catholic Church regarding sex is tougher; doing both when confused by an absent father and a mother perceived as disloyal—this for Jerry was impossible. He would love and be loved, but he would stay painfully confused about himself and women for all his days.

That year Union Oil bought the property on which Joe Garcia's was located, and while Bobbie waited for the company to build her a new bar on the opposite corner, she decided to move her family twenty-five miles south of the city to Menlo Park. The Garcias were part of a social tidal wave. In the aftermath of World War II, millions of veterans had used the G.I. Bill to move from working-class to middle-class lives, and from renting city apartments to owning suburban homes. Their prosperity was one consequence of the permanent war economy that the Cold War demanded. Another result was suburban conformity. Jerry would first become conscious of racism and anti-Semitism in Menlo Park, and he didn't like them. His new friends were determinedly diverse, ranging from a classmate and early sweetheart, Mary Brydges, to Will Oda, the son of a Nisei gardener at Stanford, to his best friend, Laird Grant, a working-class borderline hoodlum. One of the other ways that he countered the suburban blahs was with music. As the predominant culture of the fifties grew ever more bland, the discerning ear could find escape in the riches of African American music.

In the Bay Area, that meant the rhythm and blues station KWBR, to

which Tiff introduced him. An obscure street-corner tune by the Crows called “Gee” set him to listening to the cream of American popular music, and Ray Charles, John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, B.B. King, and Muddy Waters kept him company all day and half the night long. Initially a solo acoustic form from the Mississippi Delta, the blues evolved through boogie-woogie piano and Kansas City big-band vocal shouting to Chicago, where Muddy Waters found acoustic guitar inaudible in forties clubs. His transition to electric guitar defined a new urban blues, which evolved yet again into the R&B of the late forties and the fifties. Each mode contained a high realism that knew life as a solitary confinement sometimes comforted by sexuality or even love but inevitably succeeded by a death sentence. In all of American popular music, only the blues spoke truthfully of love and death. Enthralled, Jerry absorbed not only chords and rhythms but a certain vision. It was not the psychopathology of Norman Mailer’s “White Negro” that he acquired, but hipness, the authentic wisdom eternally found at the edges and bottom of the social pyramid.

In 1955, rock and roll—rhythm and blues with a backbeat—emerged to enliven a torpid America. First came Bill Haley and the Comets’ “Rock Around the Clock,” a no. 1 hit a year after its release when it served as the theme song of a classic film of youthful rebellion, *Blackboard Jungle*. The producers of the film displayed their understanding of the music’s importance and violated film custom by mixing the song at high volume. The audience grasped that decision perfectly. The resistance to adult authority depicted in the film and in the contemporary career of James Dean attracted Jerry, though not the song itself. Most of the early rock tunes were the product of small regional labels, like Little Richard Penniman’s bizarre, manic “Tutti Frutti” on Specialty. Inevitably, the larger companies moved to co-opt the rock and roll fad, releasing Pat Boone’s acceptably bland cover version of “Tutti Frutti” among many other covers to even greater commercial success. It was a critical moment for Jerry, who swiftly came to understand that there was frequently an authentic black version, and then “there’s the lame white version.” Two unquestionably genuine tunes from Chicago’s small Chess Records caught his ear. Bo Diddley’s self-named tune established the fundamental shave-and-a-haircut beat, and Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene” melded country guitar riffs with the backbeat and melody of rhythm and blues and defined rock’s fundamental structure and attitude. To Jerry it seemed like a cowboy song, “only nastier,” and to a thirteen-year-old with surging hormones, nasty was very, very good. For the first time in history, large

masses of young white Americans were listening and dancing to black musicians.

Another aspect of black American life stirred at this time, the precise connections to the music uncertain but impossible to dismiss. In December 1955, a young Birmingham, Alabama, minister named Martin Luther King Jr. united his passionate nonviolent moral leadership with the organizational genius of the city's local civil rights leader and the communications system of television to sustain an antisegregation bus boycott. It would trigger the greatest American social movement since the organization of labor. Not least of the civil rights movement's effects would be to give the future politics of American protest a spiritual rather than an ideological base. And the spirit was in the songs.

Jerry had been a bright but fairly indifferent student to this point, excelling in art and the occasional subject that took his interest, but an underachieving "wise guy" the rest of the time. He seemed to his friend Mary Brydges to be pretty much "in his own world," doodling skulls and crossbones and monsters, always funny and fun, sarcastic but not cruel, somehow "more worldly, faster" than the rest of the kids, but also a little lonelier. Then in the fall of 1955 he entered the Fast Learner Program in the eighth grade at Menlo Oaks school. His new teacher, Dwight Johnson, an iconoclastic bohemian who was regularly in trouble with the school administration, was the perfect inspiration for students like Jerry. When Mr. Johnson roared up to school on his Vincent Black Shadow motorcycle or MG TC, he instantly drew his students' attention, and when he threw open the class to discussion and introduced them to D. H. Lawrence and George Orwell, Jerry delightedly followed him into the intellectual world. Johnson noticed Jerry's facility as an artist, and soon the boy was absorbed in murals, the sets for school plays, and the school newspaper. He did not exactly become a well-behaved Good Student, however, and continued with one of his favorite games, mock switchblade duels in the school corridor with his buddy Laird Grant. When he dug in his heels over retaking certain tests toward the end of the year, he was required to repeat the eighth grade. Finally, in June 1957 he graduated from Menlo Oaks and moved back to San Francisco, where he lived some of the time with Nan and Pop and some of the time with his mother and stepfather at their new apartment above the new bar at 1st and Harrison.

Bobbie's fifteenth-birthday present to him that summer would turn out to be quite special, although at first it was a giant disappointment. She'd purchased a lovely Neapolitan accordion for him from one of the sailors at the bar, but after plenty of adolescent moans and whines, she

agreed to swap it for the Danelectro guitar he'd spotted in a pawnshop window at the corner of 3rd and Folsom, a few blocks from the bar. He'd had years of piano lessons before the move to Menlo Park, but his personality resisted formal teaching, and he'd lost interest. Now music consumed him. Whatever his other deficiencies were, Jerry's stepfather happened to have mandolins and other stringed instruments around the house, even electrical instruments, amplifiers, and a rare (for that time) tape recorder. Mr. Matusiewicz tuned the Danelectro to some odd open tuning, or perhaps it merely became that in Jerry's hands. Working only with his ear and the Chuck Berry tunes on the bar jukebox, Garcia began the practice that would turn out to be the focus of his life.

His cousin Danny saw him with the guitar and followed suit, going to the same pawnshop for his own. Though Danny, Joe's brother Manuel's son, had been part of Jerry and Tiff's life from their earliest days, music proved an especially unifying common bond in their mid-teens. Jerry's father had not been the only musical Garcia. Their grandfather "Papuella" (Joe's father) had insisted that his sons and grandsons learn to play an instrument and sing, and though, as Danny recalled it, "it wasn't an option," the boys liked music anyway. Jerry, Tiff, and Danny would spend a good part of their teens singing on street corners, learning how to harmonize. Now Danny, who knew some music theory, taught Jerry the conventional tunings for rock, and he found them "a revelation . . . the key to heaven." He began to gobble up the styles of Eddie Cochran, Jimmy Reed, Buddy Holly, Bo Diddley, and, as always, Chuck Berry.

The summer of 1957 was a memorable one. In addition to the guitar, Jerry discovered cigarettes, a lifelong habit, and marijuana, two joints shared with a friend that sent them laughing and skipping down the street. Tiff had graduated from high school in 1956 and enlisted in the Marine Corps, so Jerry was more on his own now, and his world began to expand. He and Danny would take the 14 Mission bus downtown to see movies, go shopping at the Emporium, sometimes with a "five-finger discount" (shoplifting), or out to the Cliff House, a restaurant and sight-seeing complex that overlooked the ocean, and the Playland amusement park down the hill. Jerry spent the ninth grade at Denman Junior High School in the outer Mission, and then in the fall of 1958 began tenth grade across the street at Balboa High School. Balboa was frequently a rough place, filled with Barts ("Black Bart" Italians with "greaser" haircuts) and Shoes (Pat Boone white-shoe-wearing prep types). Later, Garcia would tell more than a few tall tales about his career as a street fighter, but his family and friends of the era didn't recall it that way.

His more natural environment was at Joe Garcia's, where he worked "pearl diving" (washing) dishes and "decorating" (stocking) the joint with beer. Music remained his passion, and he often worked with a transistor radio earplug wedged firmly in his ear. Just as often he'd take a break and play along to the jukebox with his guitar. Although the old-fashioned original Joe Garcia's had been replaced by a modern fifties circular bar with mirrored columns for glasses, slick Naugahyde booths, and chrome fixtures, it remained a lively place, its clientele a mixture of longshoremen and sailors from the Sailors Union of the Pacific on one corner, and Union Oil executives from the other corner. It was a verbal ambience, one that welcomed Joe Garcia's son as an equal. He was gregarious by nature, but this aspect of his personality was greatly encouraged by example. "I've always wanted to be able to turn on people," he said later, "and also I've always taken it for granted that if I like something, that other people will like it, too . . . the bar world established that kind of feeling; it engulfed me like a little community." He joined the conversational mix with pleasure, listening to tales of the 1934 general strike, Harry Bridges, and other local legends. The founder of the Longshoremen's Union, Bridges was an Australian and former Communist Party member who was a hero in San Francisco, but only there, and only in San Francisco were the latest rebels, the members of the Beat Generation, a source of civic pride.

In fact, San Francisco had an institution that served as a direct channel into this alternative world, the California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute). It was the only school Garcia would ever be proud of attending. On Saturdays the school had an extension program, Pre-College Art, taught by its regular faculty. Garcia's teacher was the well-known funk (assemblage) artist Wally Hedrick, who would serve Jerry as a model not only as a painter but as an expositor of a way of life. He taught the boy, remembered Garcia, that "art is not only something you do, but something you are as well." A working-class military veteran who'd once, on the strength of his beard, gotten a job sitting in the front window of the Beat North Beach bar Vesuvio's, Hedrick had found his first conventional job as a teacher at the School of Fine Arts. It was he who had asked poet Michael McClure to organize the 1955 Six Gallery reading that introduced Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" to the world. Struck by Garcia's native intelligence and sense of hipness, Hedrick told Jerry that he and his friends were the real Beat Generation, and sent them down the hill to North Beach and its coffeehouses to, as Garcia said later, "pick up my basic beatnik chops," listening to Lawrence Ferlinghetti read at the Coexistence Bagel Shop, along with other poets at other clubs.

And on the way, Hedrick sent Garcia over to City Lights Bookstore to pick up Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a book that changed his life forever. Kerouac's hymn to the world as an explorational odyssey, an adventure outside conventional boundaries, would serve as a blueprint for the rest of Garcia's life. And it plugged him consciously into a continuous line of alternative American culture going back to Thoreau and Walt Whitman and up through the current eminence of Bay Area bohemia, Kenneth Rexroth, the master of ceremonies of that seminal Six Gallery reading. As McClure, one of the other Six readers, put it, Rexroth promoted "serious Buddhism, Eskimo poetry, radical social movements, physics, and even esoteric Christianity. He was a mountain climber, a hiker, and he knew how to fix his own car." It was a very different vision of life and culture than one might find in the heavily intellectualized New York City of the same period.

As one of Garcia's classmates in Pre-College Art, Ann Besig, would later recognize, he was more mature and "comfortable" in the bohemian environment than most of the other students. Hedrick described Garcia's work as "figurative but with freewheeling brushwork . . . strongly painted, heavily textured . . . not talented, but [he had] understanding." To Laird Grant, Jerry's best painting was of a man sitting destitute in the gutter, a jug in his hand. Aside from introducing the exalted mysteries of art, the school was a direct connection to fun, like the costume party they attended, Jerry as a vampire and Laird as a monster. They arrived in time to see a young woman, nude under a fur coat, step out of a limo to enter the gathering. The raisin in her navel identified her as a cookie.

Despite the stimulation of art school, Garcia continued to get into trouble. Many of his friends from before Menlo Park were now hoodlums, and though he probably wasn't all that involved in violence or crime, he was certainly diverging from the straight and narrow. More often than not, his journey to Balboa High School concluded instead downtown at the movie theaters on Market Street, where he stoked his lifelong fascination with film. Formal education became increasingly irrelevant, and his rare appearances at Balboa were chiefly punctuated by getting caught—for smoking in the boys' room, minor fights, or cutting classes, all the usual dreary detritus of high school life. In the summer of 1959, Bobbie Garcia made a last-ditch effort to restore her son to conventional behavior and moved the family to Cazadero, a tiny town in the redwoods eighty miles north of San Francisco. It was futile, of course. Garcia's problems were centered on his boredom with regimented life, and adding a lengthy commute to his day at Sebastopol's Anly High School did not help.

However, Analy did have a band called the Chords, and Jerry soon joined it. Their business card read “featuring the Golden Saxes,” and their material was largely 1940s big-band tunes, including “Misty” and songs by Billy Vaughn. It was, Garcia would say, “kind of easy-listening stuff. Businessman’s bounce, high school version.” They played at youth canteens, high school dances, and once at a Sea Scouts graduation ceremony. With only limited experience at playing with others, Garcia was an extremely primitive musician, so crude that his bandleader had to shift the capo on his guitar so that he could transpose keys. Jerry’s attitude didn’t always help, either. He played a great deal with his cousin Danny at this time, and Danny was a sober, steady influence who wanted to rehearse regularly and learn chords and structure. But Jerry’s invariable response was “Let’s just play, man.” Years later Garcia would, inevitably, regret his lack of formal knowledge and discipline. But even in 1959 he showed an ability to play convincing rock and roll on the Chords’ occasional contemporary tunes. The band even won a contest and got to record a song, Bill Doggett’s “Raunchy.”

Garcia’s facility with rock was ironic, because the form was at a low ebb, with each of its creators distracted by circumstances: Elvis Presley was in the army, Chuck Berry was on his way to jail for a Mann Act violation, and Little Richard had entered the ministry. The predominant institution in pop music at the time was Don Kirshner and Al Nevins’s Aldon Music, which focused on the songwriting of Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill, Gerry Goffin and Carole King. Highly professional New York City production-oriented pop had replaced the original performer-created rock.

Early in 1960, Jerry got into his final bit of trouble, as he would recall it, by stealing his mother’s car. In the tradition of the era, his options were simple—jail or the army. Though Tiff begged Jerry to delay his enlistment until he could get home from the marines and talk his younger brother out of it, Jerry was in no mood to wait; he decided to join the army and see the world. He got about 150 miles away from San Francisco, to Fort Ord, near Monterey, where he endured basic training. Somehow, it was not terribly surprising that his squad leader turned out to be a jail veteran who happened to be able to fingerpick acoustic guitar. Jerry had first heard acoustic music from Jimmy Reed on the radio, and then again when Wally Hedrick played Big Bill Broonzy during class, and now he started to listen to Joan Baez’s incredibly beautiful voice, which sent him into old-time southern white music. It was a move in line with hip taste.

Folk music had entered the American mainstream a year before in San Francisco, at a club called the Purple Onion, with a group of good-looking college boys in striped shirts called the Kingston Trio. With five no. 1 albums and hits like "Tom Dooley" and "Scotch and Soda," they knocked off traditional tunes with smooth harmonies and good humor, and started a rage. Rock had been professionalized and made boring, whereas folk was direct and authentic, seemingly the genuine product of a community rather than a manufactured commodity. It was part of a continuum that included the New Deal, Woody Guthrie, and the ongoing civil rights movement, and it swept the country.

It was easy for Garcia to observe the San Francisco folk scene, since it had moved to North Beach's hungry i, the hippest club in America, and after basic training at Fort Ord he'd landed in the choicest duty in the entire United States Army, the Presidio of San Francisco. He might just as well have been back hustling on Mission Street, because the army was just a party. In between working at menial tasks, he would sit up all night with the armorer filing the serial numbers off .45 automatics in order to sell them. Surrounded by old army characters now safely ensconced in the heavenly confines of the Presidio, he correctly saw his military career as a joke best expressed by the old saw "the incompetent leading the unwilling to do the unnecessary in an unbelievable amount of time." His inglorious military career revealed an utter lack of talent for either mindless obedience or artful dodging, and it was bound not to last. His friend the squad leader had taken up with the sister of one of Garcia's former girlfriends, and late in 1960 he was holed up in a Palo Alto hotel threatening suicide as well as trying to sell Garcia a Fender Jazzmaster guitar he'd stolen somewhere. Garcia spent more time sitting up with his friend than making it back to the Presidio in time for roll call, and he began to collect multiple counts of AWOL (absent without official leave).

As his life slid further and further out of control, music became the only stabilizing force available to him. The one thing that he could hold on to was the guitar, which he played constantly. But his music was handicapped, and not by the missing portion of the middle finger on his right hand; almost from the first, he'd chosen to use a pick (although he did acknowledge later that with a full hand he'd have played piano or classical guitar). No, his limit as a musician at that time was his lack of a partner. Very early on, he intuitively realized that he needed someone else to play with, a companion, a musical cohort. Over the years he would have many collaborators, but in terms of playing music, as apart from composing it, there would be one supreme pal, and he hadn't met him just yet.

Phil Lesh found his future one Sunday in 1944 at the age of four, when his grandmother discovered him intently listening from the next room to the New York Philharmonic's broadcast. Having already taught him to read, she was happy to expose her grandson to more. The next week she inquired, "Philip, would you like to come and listen to the nice music on the radio?" Bruno Walter conducted Brahms's First Symphony, and from then on, Lesh's life had focus. His father, Frank, was an office equipment repairman, and their lives were generally comfortably middle-class, except for a rather rarefied taste in music. From the third grade on, Phil took violin lessons, and when his braces were removed at fourteen, he took up the trumpet. Except for a fascination with racing cars, music occupied most of his life. He was not athletic, and his intelligence had set him apart from his peers. In the second grade, word had gotten out at a PTA meeting that Phil Lesh had the highest I.Q. in school, and more than a few of his classmates were asked why they couldn't be as smart as he was. He would never hear the end of it, and it made for an extremely difficult adolescence. The incident turned him inward, and the combination of brilliance and isolation made him focus powerfully on his own values, in the tradition of an elite artist.

His parents, Frank and Barbara, supported the musical ambitions of their only child, and in the middle of his junior year in high school the family moved so that he could transfer from El Cerrito High School to Berkeley High School, where the music program was infinitely better. He seized the opportunity, joining the band, the orchestra, the dance band, and the Pro Musica. He also acquired an affectionate surrogate musical father in Bob Hanson, the conductor of the distinguished Golden Gate Park Bandshell unit. Eventually, Lesh would play second trumpet for Hanson in the Oakland Symphony and earn the first chair in Hanson's Young People's Symphony Orchestra. Hanson would remember a thin, restless boy with a marvelous ear who lacked wind, but not persistence. By graduation in June 1957, Lesh's ability to transpose keys on sight would earn him the first chair at a high-quality college-sponsored music camp and send him that fall to San Francisco State University. Less developed as a personality than as a musician, he soon dropped out of State and returned home.

As demanding and critical of the world as he was of himself, Phil was troubled by what he perceived as the raw deal that life had given his father, who had worked brutally hard and had little to show for it. At

this juncture Lesh was certain that whatever he did with his future, he didn't want to be stuck in his father's trap. Commitment to anything conventional was to be avoided, and he fully identified with the artistic tradition.

A year later, in September 1958, he resumed his studies, this time at the College of San Mateo (CSM), on the peninsula twenty miles south of San Francisco. An eccentric, intellectual loner, Lesh found his first good friend in a local young man named Mike Lamb, the son of a Stanford administration staff member who had become acquainted with the local cognoscenti. Lamb groomed him a bit socially, and then a succession of intellectual encounters further opened Lesh's life. First, Morse Peckham's *Beyond the Tragic Vision* defined the philosophical underpinnings to his inner certainty that only the arts could be free of the fraud that was society: "Absorbed in the work of art, we can for a moment experience life as pure value . . . Aesthetic contemplation is our only innocence." Then Peckham made these words visible by introducing him to the pre-impressionist English painter J. M. W. Turner, whose hellish, prophetic *Rain Steam and Speed* depicted light as a shining thing in itself, the music of the spheres put down on canvas. When Lesh's student job turned out to be evaluating new records at the library, his intellectual menu was complete. He discovered the experimental *Music Quarterly*, and learned that music could be created, stored on tape, and fully controlled by the author. Beethoven and Charles Ives were his heroes. He wanted to be a Komposer.

Meantime, he was caught up in the highly competitive world of the CSM music department. The school's contest-winning jazz band, a powerhouse group that played the cool West Coast jazz exemplified by Stan Kenton's arranger, Bill Holman, featured five trumpets, saxophones, and trombones each, plus four rhythm instruments. In his pursuit of the first trumpet chair, Lesh generally found himself behind William "Buddy" Powers, who would take eight years to graduate from CSM due to his habit of dropping out to work with groups like the Woody Herman and Benny Goodman bands. Still thin and lacking the blasting lung power the genre demanded, Lesh increasingly experimented with composition. Fortunately, the band's rehearsals were wildly open. He would create ten-bar exercises for bizarre orchestrations like the "mother chord," a dissonant blast that included all twelve chromatic tones, or his first chart, in which the bass player had to tune down his instrument for the first line and then retune it for the remainder, while the brass players began in the highest register, and each section of the band was in a different key. He would

recall the piece as resembling “blocks of granite sliding together . . . pretty weird for a junior college.”

His best exercise title, at least, came from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*: “The Sound of a Man Being Habitacularly Fondseed” (i.e., being tapped upon the third eye). Lesh had gone down the coast to Partington Ridge in Big Sur to look for Henry Miller, but the master proved not at home. In a ritualistic way, Phil decided to pay homage to the act Miller described in *Big Sur and the Origins of Hieronymus Bosch*, and pissed off the ridge. Standing in Miller’s metaphorical shoes, he experienced an epiphany, one that he was able to replicate aurally in a four-bar exercise for the largest orchestra he’d ever get to write for. After writing out the parts on tiny exercise pages, he brought it to the band, which, after protesting, “Fuck you, Lesh, we need a magnifying glass on this stuff,” fought through it, produced an obscene chord, and received his thanks. He’d been able to hear what he’d written, and that was a singularly fulfilling experience.

His jazz composing career peaked in May 1959, when the annual CSM jazz band “Expressions in Jazz” concert at San Mateo High School featured his lead on the Bill Holman chart of “I Remember April” and “Jeff’s Jam,” and the band’s performance of his own tune “Wail Frail.” Shortly before this time he’d encountered a diminutive ex-convict blues poet named Bobby Petersen, who turned him toward poetry and Allen Ginsberg-style illuminated (spiritual) politics, essentially inducting him into the Beat Generation. Petersen was an experienced hipster who wrote poems about Billie Holiday and the “high sad song of spade queens / in pershing square / hipsters of melrose fade / into wallpaper.” They became roommates, and their first sharing came when Bobby stole a volume of Henry Miller from City Lights Bookstore, and they went home and read it aloud to each other. Petersen introduced Phil to pot, and to the broad sweep of avant-garde and Beat literature. Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” so consumed Lesh that he began to set it to music. They also studied James Joyce, which gave Phil the title for his last tune at CSM.

In spring 1960, Lesh at least mentally completed his stay at CSM when the band performed his tune “Finnegan’s Awake.” He had moved up to the first chair by then, but would later admit with his typically brutal self-honesty that he never played as well as Powers, and consequently quit playing the trumpet after his graduation in June. He celebrated his graduation in the tradition of another of those City Lights authors, taking a Kerouacian journey to Calgary in search of work in the oil fields. Though he made it only as far as Spokane before riding the rails back to

Seattle and then taking a bus home, the experience confirmed for him his place outside the conventional American life. He was a part of the Beat Generation, too.

Back at the Presidio in December of that year, Garcia's multiple absences caught up with him. An army psychiatrist decided that his priorities were neurotic, and a superior officer asked him if he'd like to leave the army with a general discharge. "I'd like that just fine, sir." It marked his last attempt to fit in.