



Suburban shtetl

The Kassak family lived at 23 Cloverfield Road South, diagonal from the Ottinger homestead. Bert (Bertram Max), his wife Rita, and their two children—Estelle and William, lived at 26 Cloverfield. The Greenes, Weiss' (later Weinstains), Jacobs, Berdachs, Flanzigs, Gibels (later Rosenblums), Kimmels (later Dicklers), Glickmans/Walls (later Grauers), Lagins (later Laskys), Zuckermans, and Zimmermans, completed our little world—an en mass migration from Brooklyn to suburban shtetl. The years were 1952-1953.

I called him Almond

Bert (1910-1986) and Rita (1912-1998) were significantly older than my parents (as were a good many of our neighbors in the early years). “Rita had a magnificent voice and could be heard singing opera,” remarked Jeff Glickman Barrie (31 Cloverfield). For most of their working lives, Bert, a patent attorney, carpooled to the Valley Stream train station with my father, Ira; Max Jacobs; Fred Berdach; and Armand Flanzig, whom I called Almond (we were on a first-name basis with most elders). The Ottingers attended brother Jonny’s bar mitzvah, but because of the age gap between the Ottinger and Kassak children, our recollections of Estelle and William (Willie later Bill) are slim.

Before moving to Green Acres, the Ottingers lived in a Kew Gardens apartment near Rufus King Park. Estelle (1938-2023) was around 14 years old when the family moved to Valley Stream. She attended Central High (1956 graduate), as South High did not exist at the time. Willie, born 1942, sampled a variety of Valley Stream public schools for similar reasons: Clear Stream Avenue, Forest Road (opened '53), Memorial Junior High, and South High (opened late '55)—from where he graduated in 1960. Ottinger earned a business degree from Lehigh University in 1964.

Recollections

I have memories of Estelle taking me to the Long Beach boardwalk and out for ice-cream. On the ride home, I was tired and laid my head on her lap as she drove (no seatbelts!). Sister Marian recalls: “Willie gave me a copy of ‘Pretty Ballerina,’ the 45. I can’t remember if it was signed. You probably have it [I do!]. He had a cool red sports car. I liked him.”

Jonny shared: “I played a game at the Ottinger house with Lewis [22 Cloverfield] where Willie bounced the ball off his roof and Lewis [Weinstein] and I took turns catching it.” Although we lived on the desirable south side of Cloverfield, creek-side, many of the backyards had steep, man-made embankments that were put in place by the builder, Irwin Chanin. The embankments were engineered to keep the creek from breaching the shore line and flooding the house during high tide or extreme weather. But, the hill made the backyard shallow—no room to run around. In contrast, the homes on the north side of the street were known for their large and level backyards that bordered the properties on Forest Road. The Ottingers, in particular, had a great one—large and flat!

“I had a ringside seat next to Willie’s basement window, where I listened to a new wave blend of classical baroque style rock music, recalls Steven Zuckerman (21 Cloverfield). “The band played their entire collection, polishing each song for an upcoming concert somewhere on Long Island. I just sat out there under the stars on a warm spring night and got to hear some great rock music. Free ticket. That had to be around 1966.”

The hearse

Jim Berdach (32 Cloverfield), an international environmental and natural resources consultant, also has fond memories of Willie: “I remember playing Frisbee with him on the front lawn of our house, during which he taught me the finer points of

how to flip the disc properly. He was a very nice guy, and for someone several years older, he seemed to be quite considerate of younger kids like me.”

Gibsonite Bern Cohen was Willie’s classmate and friend. Cohen, a former off-Broadway actor turned high school principal, who later became a character actor (he appeared in “Norman,” with fellow Streamer Steve Buscemi), remembers: “He motivated me to join the wrestling team.” (Willie received the Most Valuable Player award in his senior year.) “He was always so positive and the best poker player in our group! He loved the game.”

Gail Bittman Schwartz (40 Brook Road) was another Class of 1960 South High graduate and buddy. “He was always fun to be with. One of us, part of our group. Great personality!”

More from Berdach:

I guess when he became the manager of The Left Banke [Left Banke], the entire neighborhood got wind of it. One day—I must have been alerted by others who had heard the news—I learned that the Left Banke was in Green Acres! I walked down to the Ottinger house to find a group of kids gathered around a black car with "The Left Banke" lettered across one of the windows (my brother Howard recalls the car was a converted hearse). While we were standing around, I heard a live band rehearsing, the sound was coming from the Ottinger basement. After a little while, the band members came out to where we were gathered in the street. We stood around saying hello to them, asking questions, and mostly just gawking. My most vivid memory was that one member of the band was holding a pet Chihuahua—named Pepe or Pedro? After a while, they got into the car and off they went. That was our big brush with fame... (Jim Berdach)

The Left Banke and how it got its name

Established in 1965, the Left Banke gained fame as a baroque-pop band with “heart-tugging three-part harmonies and emotionally resonant songwriting.” A harpsichord, string quartet, and alto-flute gave the band its signature symphonic flavor.

Left Bank is the English translation of Rive Gauche, the southern bank of the river Seine in Paris. After WWI, the area became a haunt that appealed to artists, writers, and American expatriates. The term Left Bank morphed into a phrase associated with counterculture, bohemianism, and creativity. The band added the letter “e” to bank, which is not French (bank in French is banque).

The musical group came together at World United, a New York City recording studio owned by Harry Lookofsky, a well-known session violinist. The Left Banke included musicians from the Morticians and the Magic Plants, two local garage bands. Originally, there were five members, all teens: George Cameron, Tom Finn, Steve Martin Caro, and Warren David-Schierhorst. The last member in the line-up was Lookofsky’s son, Michael, a classically trained pianist who also wrote songs and played the harpsichord. Once Lookofsky heard the musicians play, he took over as their manager, producer, and publisher. He ousted David-Schierhorst for attempting to take his son to California. The underage duo (Michael was 16 at the time) never made it to the West Coast—Lookofsky thwarted their plans. David-Schierhorst was replaced by guitarist Jeff Winfield.

In 1966, Smash Records, a subsidiary of Mercury Records, produced the band’s two hits: “Walk Away Renée” and “Pretty Ballerina.” Michael wrote the lyrics for both songs (with a little help from others), expressing his unrequited love for Finn’s girlfriend, Renée Fladen. Smash’s other talent at the time were James Brown; Frankie Valli, who recorded his version of “Walk Away Renée” in 1975; and Jerry Lee Lewis. In 1967, the LP “Walk Away Renée/Pretty Ballerina” was released:

*“And when I see the sign that points one way,
The lot we used to pass by every day.

Just walk away, Renée,
You won't see me follow you back home.
The empty sidewalks on my block are not the same,
You're not to blame.”*

Fame came fast and furious and didn't allow time for the young musicians to hone their skills—they thought they sounded terrible! The band performed only three original songs live due to their lack of practice and self-confidence: "Walk Away Renée," "Pretty Ballerina," and the 1967 tune "She May Call you Up Tonight" (another Fladen-inspired single). They rounded out their concerts with Beatles, Temptations, and James Brown covers—a safer route performance-wise. Shortly thereafter, within a year, maybe sooner, the group split up. Other bands had better equipment—there were disagreements with Lookofsky concerning money and how they were treated. Lookofsky's multiple roles created conflicts of interest that held back the Left Banke's success, despite his initial support in advancing their careers.

Undeterred, Lookofsky assembled a new group for touring, keeping his son in the mix. Young Michael McKean, age 18, joined the new Left Banke—he later found fame as an actor/comic on *Laverne & Shirley* and *This is Spinal Tap*. The "old" members, the originals, re-assembled as a studio band—they didn't perform live. So, for a short while, there were two Left Banke bands, which confused the radio stations that aired their tunes. Disbanding and reuniting went on for several years.

In November 1968, yet another reconfiguration of the band, featuring three of the original musicians, sans Lookofsky's son, released an album—"The Left Banke Too." Paul Leka, the producer, added vocals by a young Steven Tyler, who was 20. Tyler, a member of the Chain Reaction, his band before Aerosmith, shared management with the Left Banke. It was during this heady time that Willie, now known as Bill, was appointed co-manager of the group with his good friend Roger Rubenstein (1944-1998) who lived on Brentwood Lane. The "boys" were 26 and 24 years old at the time. Scott Schinder, a veteran music writer for over 30 years, penned the following:

Although *The Left Banke Too* had shown the Left Banke's creative batteries to be fully charged, the band experienced a new set of demoralizing conflicts with its new management team. Finn says that managers Bill Ottinger and Roger Rubenstein kept the band on the road for extended periods, with little financial reward and no discernable career benefit. (Schinder, Scott. "Going For Baroque: The Left Banke Story." *Please Kill Me - This is What's Cool*, 25 August 2020, <https://pleasekillme.com/the-left-banke-story/>)

Included in Schinder's piece was an interview with Finn that took place in 2011, the year both albums were re-issued by Sundazed Music. Riding the wave of sixties nostalgia, Finn and others launched the umpteenth (it's hard to keep count!) iteration of the band, leading to interviews about their history:

We really started to fall apart after the second album. Our management had us out there milking the hits to pay their bills, and it just felt like we were getting nowhere. Bill was hired by Harry Lookofsky as our road manager after he got rid of Steve Jerome. Bill knew we were gonna break with Harry, and he said, 'OK, I'll be your new manager.' He'd never been a manager before, but we said ok. So he and his partner Roger opened an office, and we ended up paying the bills. They [Ottinger and Rubenstein] also took on Steve Tyler's group the Chain Reaction and two other groups, so they kept us out on the road and used that money to pay their bills and promote their other groups ... We'd go out on the road, and we'd come back and there wouldn't be any money. It just got worse and worse. We really started to fall apart in early '69, and then we were done. (Tom Finn, 2011)

1968 was a momentous year for Bill Ottinger! In addition to managing the band, he tied the knot with New Jerseyite Susan Wayne. (Her father Justin, a Dachau concentration camp survivor, received the Israeli Prime Minister's Medal for his work on behalf of the State of Israel.)

Rubott Publishing Co.

In March 1969, Ottinger and Rubenstein brokered a deal with Unart Music, a subsidiary of United Artists Records. By then, the duo was working for Rubott Publishing Co. (formed 1968), the music publishing arm of Rubott Management Agency, Inc. Unart Music acquired 50 percent of Rubott Publishing. Under the agreement, Unart Music was to place Rubott-owned material (lyrics and arrangements) with artists not managed by Rubott. Tom Feher, a frequent collaborator during the Left Banke's original run, was one of those artists.

Billboard Hot 100

In 1966, the *Billboard* Hot 100 (which charts songs by record sales) ranked “Walk Away Renée” and “Pretty Ballerina” at numbers 5 and 15. The LP “Walk Away Renée/Pretty Ballerina” was considered to be a remarkably accomplished debut album; and “The Left Banke Too” was “full of musical riches”—so said the band critics of the time. In 1967, the Four Tops recorded their version of “Walk Way Renée,” hitting number 14 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. In 2004, Rolling Stone placed “Walk Away Renée” at number 220 on its list of “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” Other artists who recorded the harmonic hit: Herman’s Hermits (unreleased album); Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes (live); Ricki Lee Jones; David Cassidy; Linda Ronstadt and Ann Savoy; Jimmy LaFave (my favorite); and a slew of others.

Music to fashion

In 1975, Bill and Susan moved to Pine Brook, New Jersey, where they raised three children—Jennifer, Jessica, and son Jaime. Pine Brook is a quiet suburb in the unincorporated Montville township of Morris County—similar to Green Acres, although lot sizes and homes are slightly larger. It’s located about 27 miles from New York City. Around this time, Bill switched gears and moved into fashion. Built of short stature, but elegantly fit (South High’s elite wrestler in the 110 pound weight class), Ottinger was a natural leader for two well-regarded garment industry businesses. First was Daniel Hechter, the respected French fashion design firm that manufactures apparel, furniture, linens, and tableware. During Ottinger’s tenure as president, their flagship U.S. store was located on Madison Avenue.

Next, Ottinger assumed the role of President and CEO of Marcraft Clothes (now known as Marcraft Apparel Group), a company that sells wholesale men’s and boy’s clothing. Marcraft enjoyed some notoriety as the manufacturer of the (Donald) Trump Signature Collection: high-end menswear bearing the Trump family crest. Suits sold for \$575 and Trump had a “major say” in the design of the garments. Additionally, Marcraft manufactured the men’s clothing line for Tommy Hilfiger, Karl Lagerfeld, Bruno Magli, Jones New York, and Kenneth Cole.

Motown to Cajun

Bill died of a heart attack in 1990. He was 47. And the Left Banke musicians, the originals, have all passed away, forgotten by most. The exception, of course, being family, neighbors, contemporaries, and a few artists partial to that genre of music. And, in a wink of the eye, we’ll all be gone, too. Yet, “Walk Away Renée” endures, beating to its own drummer. Proof of its durability as a pop classic is the myriad of covers—from Motown (Four Tops) to Cajun (Linda Ronstadt and Ann Savoy). And, as creative as many of the covers may be, the original is the greatest of them all (not uncommon!). For many of us who came of age in the sixties, the song hits home. The elegance of three-part harmonies, the elegiac energy that sprung forth from the wind and string instruments, was novel and fresh to the mainstream youth of its day. The melancholy lyrics—poetry really, suffused with sorrow, angst, and lovesickness, bore deep into the teenage heart, expressing thoughts we didn’t know we had.

*“Just walk away, Renée,
You won't see me follow you back home.
Now, as the rain beats down upon my weary eyes,
For me it cries.”*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDfrW5cWqMU>

Special thanks to:

Jim Berdach, Gail Bittman Schwartz, Bern Cohen, Jeff Glickman Barrie, Jonathan Kassak, Marian Kassak Laken, Arnie “Tokyo” Rosenthal, Laura Schwartz Hirsch, Ryki Zuckerman, and Steven Zuckerman.