

FROM THE BULLPEN

Official Newsletter of the

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

2023: Our 39th Season

Edition No. 4



February 10, 2023

OWNERS:

Ted Bridges
("PAwesome")
Wahoos
Returning Champion

Jeff Bechtolt
("Screech")
King Billies

Jon Blongewicz
("Sunny")
Blues

Denny Bontrager
("SloPay")
Bears

Jim Buser
("Tirebiter")
Redbirds

Rick Drews
("Big Guy")
Red Ball Jets

Dave Ernst
("Skipper")
Senators

Bob Hurlbut
("Underbelly")
Tribe

Scott Krause
("BT")
Saints

Mike Morris
("Mouse")
The Huskers

Mitch Pirnie
("Magpie/Tricko")
Bums

Chuck Sinclair
("Shamu")
Cubs

John Thielen
("Itchie")
DFL

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PITCHERS AND CATCHERS REPORT

Gentlemen:

As we continue to suffer our way through the doldrums of another Midwestern winter,¹ we can look forward to those four beautiful words: *Pitchers and Catchers Report*, which will be on display next week. For most teams, it appears that February 15 is that magical day, which means that there will be Spring Training baseball being played in Florida and Arizona very soon. I, for one, cannot wait. In the meantime, a couple of suggestions for helping pass the time during this season of our discontent:

I. LAUREL CANYON

Last weekend while searching the Boob Tube directory for a documentary about David Crosby, we stumbled across a two-part documentary known as *Laurel Canyon*. If you haven't already seen it, I highly recommend it. The show is all about the music scene there in the LA/Hollywood Hills area in the 1960s and '70s, and focuses on all of the musicians who lived and performed there. The sheer number of uber-talented musicians who lived within just a few miles if not right next door is truly astonishing. It was a different time, that's for sure.

David Crosby was one of the '60s/'70s denizens of Laurel Canyon, first when he played with the Byrds and then later with Crosby, Stills and Nash, and later yet, with CSNY. There is a wonderful vignette about Crosby, Stills and Nash finding this perfect little run-down abandoned house that they used to film the below album cover sitting in the proper sequence. However, when they looked at the photograph proofs, they saw that they were sitting in the wrong order, Nash, Stills and then Crosby, from left to right. When they went back to the house a couple of days later to re-shoot the album cover,

¹ Well, most of us, that is. A few lucky birds are spending these winter months in warmer climes in Arizona and California, so none of this applies to you privileged 10-percenters.

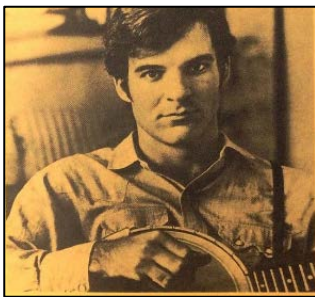
they found out it had been destroyed by a bulldozer since it had been condemned, and so they decided to go with the order of the three musicians as it was, group name be damned.



There is a lot of really great music and a lot of really good stories that are told in *Laurel Canyon*:



One of the most prolific proving grounds in the canyon was a place called the *Troubadour* (originally located on La Cienega Boulevard, then moved to its current location at 9081 Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood). A lot of really, really talented musicians got their start at the *Troubadour*, while others started elsewhere but eventually got their *bona fides* playing the venue.



Steve Martin was the warmup act there for Linda Ronstadt and others, and played his banjo and told jokes and made funny faces to get the crowd warmed up. In an interview which played in the documentary, Ronstadt said that she and Martin dated for about two weeks, and she couldn't understand why he didn't even try having sex with her during that time. It was the era of "free love," after all.

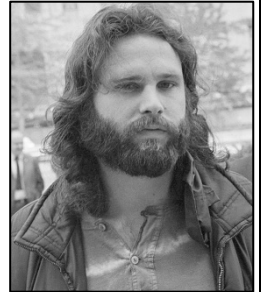


Jim Morrison and the Doors played regularly at the *Troubadour*, frequently, maybe usually, while he was drunk out of his gourd or tripping on acid or some

other illegal substance. Evidently a local talent scout brought a big shot record producer from the East Coast to see him at the *Troubadour* and Morrison was so out of his mind that he couldn't even sing or talk. As the story goes, it wasn't until something like nine months later that the producer was coaxed into coming back and watching Morrison perform again, at which time he blew his socks off and Morrison and the Doors became almost instantly famous.



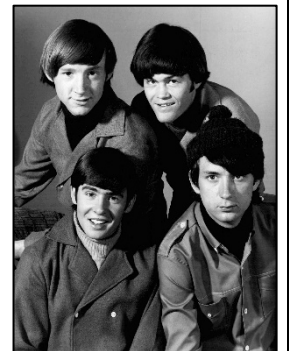
As you all know, Morrison had an incredible voice and was an extraordinary talent, but like an overheated comet, he flamed out way too early and far too young. The pressure of being expected to put out new hit after new hit after new hit proved to be too much, and when he went to Paris at the age of 28 to sober up and get himself cleaned up, he looked like he was in his 40s, drawn and haggard. Officially, he died of a heart attack, although many people believe it was a lethal drug overdose. If alive today, Morrison would be 79 years old and probably on the "geezer" tour with some of his contemporaries.



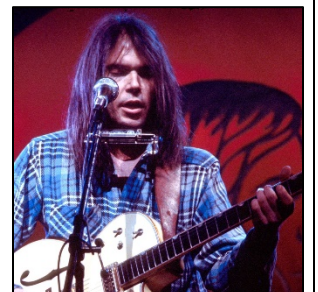
Mama Cass of the Mamas and the Papas was another Laurel Canyon dweller. The group made some really good music together during the brief time (two and one-half years) that they were together, before Cass and some of the others tried solo acts. Cass was only 32 years old when she died while in London performing at the *Palladium*—of a heart attack, not from choking on a ham sandwich, as legend had it.



All or most of the Monkees—Michael Nesmith, Micky Dolenz, Davy Jones and Peter Tork—lived and played in the canyon. While Tork played a shy, introverted goofball in *The Monkees* TV show, in real life he was quite the opposite, an outgoing, affable promoter of nudity who would just show up unannounced to friends' houses in the canyon who would surprise the owners when they would come in and find him—unannounced and uninvited—lying on a chair or couch buck naked.



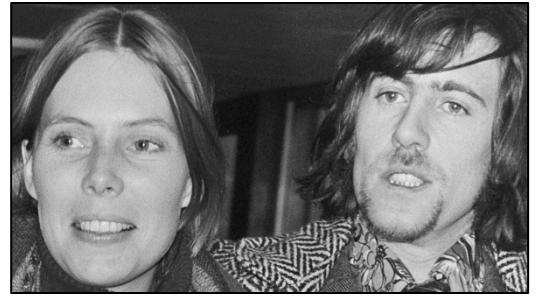
Canadian-born Neil Young lived in the canyon during his on-again off-again stints with Crosby, Stills & Nash. In the documentary, he appears almost subhuman, Neanderthal like. A weird, extremely intense dude. When the band traveled to Woodstock to play in one of their first, and ultimately most famous, gigs together, Young refused to consent to be photographed or filmed on stage. Hence, when



you watch their performance at Woodstock, you can hear Neil Young's voice, but you never see him. A strange ranger, that one.



One of my personal favorite Laurel Canyonites is Joni Mitchell, who was a songbird of extraordinary talent. I learned from the documentary that she was the lovmate of Graham Nash after he emigrated from England and joined up with Crosby and Stills. There is a sentimental scene in which she and Nash had breakfast together in the canyon and then buy a vase (pronounced "vozz") at a nearby shop, and then take it home. She then cut fresh flowers to put in the vase, as Graham Nash lit a fire and then sat down at Joni's piano and banged out *Our House* in something like forty minutes, according to legend:



I'll light the fire
You place the flowers
In the vase
That you bought today
Staring at the fire
For hours and hours
While I listen to you
Play your love songs
All night long

For me
Only for me

Come to me now (come to me now)
And rest your head for just five minutes
Everything is done
Such a cozy room (such a cozy room)
The windows are illuminated by the evening
Sunshine through them
Fiery gems

For you
Only for you

Our house
Is a very, very, very fine house
With two cats in the yard
Life used to be so hard
Now everything is easy
'Cause of you
And our

La-la, la-la-la, la
La, la-la, la, la, la-la, la-la
La, la-la-la-la, la-la, la
La, la-la, la, la-la-la-la
La-la, la-la-la, la
La, la-la, la, la, la-la, la-la
La, la-la-la-la, la-la, la

Our house
Is a very, very, very fine house (very, very fine house)
With two cats in the yard
Life used to be so hard
Now everything is easy
'Cause of you
And our

I'll light the fire
While you place the flowers
In the vase
That you bought today



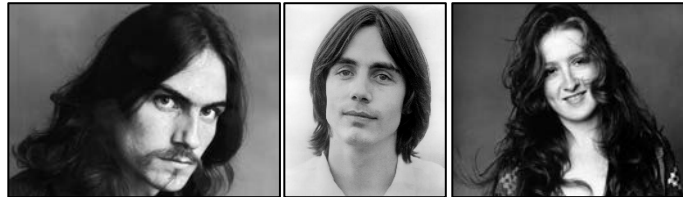
When the Beatles appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and became instantly famous and the heartthrobs of every teenage girl in America, many American musicians decided that they wanted to emulate their sound and try to get in on the fame so they chose to perform with elec-



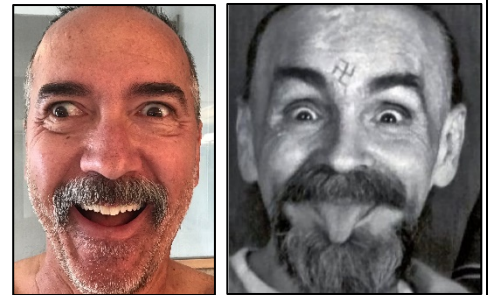
trified instruments, guitars, basses and what have you. One night the owner of the *Troubadour* heard the screeching of electric instruments in his establishment and immediately went to the stage and demanded that this musical heresy be immediately stopped, insisting that this was not the kind of music that was desired or would be tolerated by his patrons. For about a week or so, that is, until the trend spread like wildfire and there was no turning back.



Some of the other well-known and not-so-well-known musicians who were Laurel Canyonites in the '60s and '70s included the Turtles; the Eagles; Love; Eric Clapton; the Doors; Buffalo Springfield; Frank Zappa; Alice Cooper; Little Feat; the Flying Burrito Brothers; Canned Heat; Brian Wilson; James Taylor; Jackson Browne; and Bonnie Raitt.



One decidedly *unsuccessful* musician who went a different direction, to say the least, was a deranged hippie with a cult following by the name of Charles Manson. He threw the fear of God into everyone living in Laurel Canyon when he and his crazed followers murdered Roman Polanski's pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, and others, not more than about a quarter of a mile from the place where either Crosby or Stills was living at the time, according to the documentary. After that grisly and murderous night, people in Laurel Canyon stopped leaving their front doors unlocked and were much more circumspect about letting strangers into their homes and picking up hitchhikers.



The resemblance is a bit unnerving, is it not?

SUMMER ROCK II

Watching the Laurel Canyon documentary and listening to all of the music played by the Eagles, Jackson Browne and Linda Ronstadt, took my head space back to the summer of 1978 when a couple of my Theta Xi fraternity brothers and I trekked down to Kansas City to witness the much-ballyhooed *Summer Rock II* at Arrowhead Stadium on a hot July Sunday afternoon. Not only did we get to see the Eagles while they were all still alive and nearing their prime, we also got to hear Joe Walsh sitting in with them, as well as Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne and Dan Fogelberg. One heckuva concert. The only downside to the whole deal was that it was on a Sunday afternoon, and we weren't smart enough to stay over and simply take a day off work, but instead drove through the night and ended up back in Lincoln shortly after daybreak the following morning—just in time for me to be picked up by my old pal Larry Larson for a full day of work on a construction project with my summer employer, N.L. Cole Construction Co. Now *that* was a long day of work. But worth it.

But I digress²



Setlists

Eagles setlist:

[Play on YouTube](#)

[Play on Spotify](#)

1. Hotel California
2. Walk Away
3. Victim of Love
4. Doolin-Dalton
5. Lyin' Eyes
6. Desperado
7. Already Gone
8. One of These Nights
9. Turn to Stone
10. Witchy Woman
11. Life's Been Good
12. Life in the Fast Lane
13. Rocky Mountain Way
14. James Dean
15. Take It Easy
16. Tequila Sunrise

Linda Ronstadt setlist:

[Play on YouTube](#)

[Play on Spotify](#)

1. Lose Again
2. That'll Be the Day
3. Blue Bayou
4. When Will I Be Loved?
5. It Doesn't Matter Any More
6. Willin'
7. Alison
8. All That You Dream
9. Love Me Tender
10. Just One Look
11. Desperado
12. Mohammed's Radio
13. It's So Easy
14. Someone to Lay Down Beside Me
15. My Blue Tears / Poor Poor Pitiful Me
16. Tumbling Dice
17. You're No Good
18. Sorrow Lives Here
19. Back in the U.S.A.

² Funny how thinking about great old music sends me down one rabbit hole after another.

Jackson Browne setlist:

 [Play on YouTube](#)

 [Play on Spotify](#)

1. "The Fuse"
2. "Fountain of Sorrow"
3. "Here Come Those Tears Again"
4. "I Thought I Was a Child"
5. "Your Bright Baby Blues"
6. "Before the Deluge"
7. "For a Dancer"
8. "Just Like Forever"
9. Rosie
10. Cocaine
11. "Doctor My Eyes"
12. "Walking Slow"
13. "Rock Me on the Water"
14. "Sleep's Dark and Silent Gate"
15. "For Everyman"
16. "Nothing but Time"
17. "You Love the Thunder"
18. "Running on Empty"
19. "Love Needs a Heart"
20. "The Late Show"
21. "The Pretender"
22. "The Load-Out"
23. Stay

II. NATE BARGATZE



A second suggestion for all of you is to watch a couple of comedy specials featuring a comedian from Old Hickory, Tennessee by the name of Nate Bargatze, who Linda recently turned us on to. We watched one of his performances this past week, filmed in Phoenix, and I laughed the entire time while HQ drifted off to sleep. Some women have no sense of humor!³

Anyway, this guy is hilariously funny, and I can't even begin to describe the type of humor that he delivers in his stand-up acts, but it is very, very funny, and quite intelligent in some difficult-to-describe way. Do yourself a favor and watch one or all of these comedy specials:

2023: Nate Bargatze, *Hello World*, Prime Video (we watched this one)

2020: Nate Bargatze, *The Greatest Adequate American*, Netflix (Linda's favorite)

2016: Nate Bargatze, *The Tennessee Kid*, Netflix

³ I mean, can you even believe that HQ doesn't just love *Airplane*, *Naked Gun*, *Naked Gun II*, *Best in Show*, *Blazing Saddles* and *Spaceballs*? What's up with that?

R.I.P. KAREN (BERKA) OLSON



I found out last week that our old next-door-neighbor, Karen (Berka) Olson, passed away on February 1 after many years of courageously fighting multiple sclerosis. She was one of Kathi's closest friends—the matron of honor at her and Scott's wedding—and one of the nicest persons you would ever want to meet. I went to her funeral in Lincoln on Wednesday morning, and I don't know how anybody could have more nice things said about someone than were said about Karen. A lot of people owe her a lot. Both the pastor and Karen's daughter Janelle did a fantastic job of eulogizing this wonderful lady.

Karen was the oldest of five children of Donna and Mel Berka, and they lived right next door to us at 2520 N. 63rd Street. Mel was a history teacher at Lincoln Northeast, and Donna was a 1960s stay-at-home mom. After Karen, the next Berka in line was Regi, who is one year older than me, and then Doug, who was two years younger than me. After that was Diane, who is a couple of years younger than Doug, and then Brad, who is my brother's age. Growing up, Doug and Reg and I were practically inseparable, as were Karen and my sister, as were my brother Dan and Brad. Tons of great memories.



In the spring of my sophomore high school year, as Karen was getting ready to graduate, she came over to our house and strong-armed me into trying out for *Madrigals*, which was Lincoln Northeast's version of a "swing choir," consisting of eight boys and eight girls. I would never, ever have taken this step on my own, and thinking back, I'm still kind of surprised that I tried out, but Karen was a senior girl and a cheerleader, and, well, an uncultured, goofball sophomore boy just doesn't refuse such an entreaty. In any event, even though Mrs. Snook realized her mistake and only allowed me to sing harmony in a hushed tone, being in *Madrigals* was a fun, two-year experience, that I can say without reservation would never have happened but for Karen. I owe her a lot, as do many people.

At Karen's funeral I was looking forward to paying my respects to Doug Olson (Karen's husband), Donna and the four Berka siblings, and getting a chance to catch up with Reg and Doug. However, while in the reception line at the church, I heard the shocking and sad news that Doug Berka had just passed away⁴ early that morning at an ICU in a hospital in Kansas City, which was jarring news to everyone, and obviously a tragedy for the Berka family. I can't even imagine what it would be like for a parent like Donna to lose two of her children within a week of each other, or for the surviving three Berka kids to lose two siblings within a week. Awful, awful news.

The news about Doug's death was like a punch in the gut, and cast a lot of gloom over the room as people learned about it. Because of Karen's many years of fighting MS, I don't think that too many people at the funeral were surprised when they learned of her passing, but the news about Doug's death was quite unexpected, I think, to most people who were at the church for Karen's service.

I was pretty gloomy after I came back from Lincoln on Wednesday, as well as on Thursday morning, but then I got a chance to talk with BT about it and that definitely helped. We talked about the "Wonder Years" of being raised in the 1960s in Lincoln, Nebraska in *Leave It to Beaver* households, and how lucky our generation was⁵ to have experienced such idyllic childhoods, wherein we could wake up each morning during summer vacation and do nothing but play outside all day, every day with our neighborhood friends, without fear of death, kidnapping, mugging or parental reprisals. During grade school, Doug and Reg were my best pals, and if we weren't racing over to Lincoln Northeast for a game of baseball workup with anyone else who showed up, we were playing hide and seek around the neighborhood, playing pickle in the backyard,⁶ or sneaking into the Berka boys' secret hideout in their backyard where they housed their *Playboy* magazine collection.

THE "WONDER YEARS"

Thinking about Karen and Doug and the Berkas this week brought to mind lots of great memories from our childhood growing up on North 63rd Street. Here are a couple:

⁴ Doug was diagnosed with Lupus many years ago, and had a number of medical challenges, but I had no idea that his condition had deteriorated to the point that his life was in jeopardy, as Reg filled me in on when I talked with him on Wednesday.

⁵ I'm generalizing here. I realize that not everybody who was raised in the '60s had a *Leave It to Beaver* upbringing. But those of us who did were truly fortunate.

⁶ We must have played hundreds, if not thousands, of games of pickle. The most memorable one for me was when Doug and I were on the bases and Reg was running from base to base, and one of my hurried, errant tosses hit Reg squarely in the stones. Reg went down to the ground like a felled water buffalo; he immediately whipped his pants and his underpants down to his ankles, and began clutching his injured spheres while moaning and groaning and caterwauling so loudly that my mother, Phyllis, came racing out of the house to see what the heck was going on—an awkward encounter, to be sure, between a concerned neighborhood mom and a half-naked pre-pubescent neighbor boy. If my memory is correct, with some ice and a little TLC Regi was able to avoid a trip to the emergency department on that occasion, but he declared himself "out" of our pickle rotation for the rest of the summer.



One December evening Doug Berka and I were outdoors formulating snowballs for an epic neighborhood snowball fight when we got the bright idea to wait until nightfall and then launch a few of these spherical weapons at cars driving down North 63rd Street. On our very first attempt, as I recall, we both nailed a passing car solidly on the passenger side doors. Seeing the brake lights come on immediately, Doug and I bolted around the side of his house to the back door and then practically triple-jumped down the stairs to his room in the basement where we dove underneath his bed to avoid what was certain to be corporal punishment. Within about 30 seconds, Doug's bedroom lights flicked on and there was Mel Berka standing in the doorway with the driver of the vehicle—who was the supervisor for Doug's *Lincoln Journal Star* newspaper route. Fortunately, there was no permanent damage done to his vehicle, and we were let off with a moderate tongue-lashing and probation.



A couple of times every summer, our parents would allow us (at ages 9, 10, 11, 12, let's say) to walk unchaperoned down 63rd Street to Leighton Avenue, three blocks away, and catch a city bus and take it all the way downtown to the movie theater on O Street, where we would watch the Saturday afternoon movie. We would then walk over to the hobby store a few blocks away and spend our hard-earned newspaper route money purchasing rockets (this was mostly Reg, who went on to work as a PhD at NASA), model airplanes and cars,⁷ magic tricks and other items of fascination for boys of that age. Then we would get back on the bus with our treasures and our memories, and ride back to Northeast Lincoln where we would show off our purchases to the envious neighborhood kids who weren't along on the trip.



One of my favorite stories about Kathi is also a good story about Karen. When the two of them were probably in about 7th grade or so, the summer afterwards they got the opportunity to make some money hoeing beans on a farm in Iowa, somewhere near Karen's grandparents' home in Charter Oak, Iowa. At that time, it was common for teenage youths to be hired as farm laborers in the summer, with teenage boys typically being hired to detassel corn and teenage girls being commissioned to hoe the bean fields. At any rate, Karen and Kathi were going to spend two to three



Karen and Kathi, BFF

⁷ And glue to sniff. Kidding!

weeks at their first jobs as bean hoers, and were very excited about the prospect of earning scads of money. The two of them had calculated just how much loot they were going to have at the end of their three weeks, probably something on the order of \$100 or \$200, which must have seemed like a vast fortune to both of them. Kathi thoroughly enjoyed bragging to her younger brother, who was not yet eligible for employment, about how much money she was going to make and about all of the various cool things that she was going to purchase with her newfound wealth. Yes, there would be money for new clothes, the latest toys, some makeup, perhaps even enough left to allow her to shuffle a few crumbs her younger brother's way. Evidently neither Kathi nor Karen had been warned against counting one's chickens before they have been hatched.

Kathi and Karen departed our neighborhood in Lincoln for the three-week stint in Iowa riding high, their suitcases packed with the necessary clothing and gear, much of it freshly purchased for their use in this venture. There were, of course, snacks and treats packed by loving mothers for the girls to nibble on between bean rows. And so they left, after long and emotional goodbyes to their families, promising to return in just three short weeks in good health, wiser, and wealthy beyond imagination.

Alas, the first day of hoeing beans went poorly for the young Nebraska girls. As it turns out, the hoeing of beans for long hours on a hot summer day in Iowa is not everything that it's cracked up to be. As the story goes, the two neophyte bean-pickers from the Cornhusker State were not able to make it through their entire first day in the bean fields, and thus were not able to earn a full day's wages. It was hoped that a hearty dinner, courtesy of Grandma Berka, and a good night's sleep would refresh the young ladies and energize them for the work ahead on Day Two. Yes, surely Day Two would be better.

Day Two was *not* better. In fact, it was worse than Day One because the day was even hotter and the girls were tired out even earlier. Reporting to their supervisor that they felt dizzy, the girls were allowed to take a break from the bean fields and lie down in the back of the supervisor's pickup truck, where they were able to catch some shade. Unfortunately, as Kathi and Karen recovered from their heat exhaustion, their commiserating quickly turned into giggling and laughing, which their none-too-pleased supervisor overheard, leading to their expulsion from the farm crew and an abrupt end to their bean-hoeing careers. Humbled and humiliated, Kathi and Karen returned to their North 63rd Street neighborhood with only a fraction of the anticipated earnings in their purses, to the great delight of their much envious younger siblings. Although only marginally richer, the chastened girls were no doubt the wiser, leading them to tackle their schoolwork with new vigor with the aim of avoiding a lifetime of toil as a migrant farm worker.

IN CLOSING

As you all well know, I could go on and on and on about our glorious neighborhood "Wonder Years" in the 1960s, but I will instead close this issue out with one final memory of our Berka neighbors. We had so much fun together as kids that when the Berkas would go on their annual summer vacation, the Ernst children would mope around the house and constantly inquire of our mom or dad just when it was that the Berkas would return, and we would be forever peeking out the window just hoping and waiting for their station wagon to return from their vacation. When they would arrive, they were armed with souvenirs and trinkets that they gave us and Karen and Regi would hold court about their fantastic adventure, wherever it was that their vacation took them.

Those were good days.

R.I.P., Karen and Doug.

* * * * *

That's it for this issue. If you don't have anything else to do, it's never too early to start preparing for the Draft. Wise words to live by.

And last but not least, Happy Birthday to Jim Ed!

Skipper