



Where Were You? 2009

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Well?

“Where Were You?” is an ongoing series of notations concerning high-profile or otherwise notable deaths: Basically, I record “where I was” when I learn about such passings, along with whatever thoughts I have about the person who has died. I’ve been doing this since 1992, although I did not begin to make it available for others to read until a few years ago, when I began compiling entries into once-a-year print zines. Now, as you can see, I’m switching to a digital zine, with the help and encouragement of Mr. Harold Check. (You’re always welcome to print it out, of course.) This volume covers deaths that occurred in 2009.

After three years in which I produced those physical zines, I had pretty much decided not to bother this time around. And yet I never stopped recording the entries themselves; after all, I did this for about fifteen years without making a word of it available to anyone else. Which might lead one to ask: Why?

Well, two things. First, I don’t really know why I started this project. I was 23. I believe I had the vague sense that this was the sort of exercise that really wouldn’t be interesting for years, if ever. And since I’ve never been able to maintain a traditional journal for longer than a few weeks, I’m pleased that this thing has lasted, because now I’m 41, and it contains a (somewhat eccentric) record of my life. Second: This project began in the pre-Web era, when doing something without regard to an immediate audience was the default. For the first few years, it was actually a series of physical scrapbooks. Later it transitioned to just words in a digital file, and I think I decided to make the zines because I wanted to go back to something that was partly a series of objects – plus I was ready to experiment with having an audience (however modest) for this material.

While I had mixed feelings about compiling another batch of entries in “one year” form, I’m *really* glad to have done it, whether anybody reads anything that follows or not. I realized this time through that pausing on a regular basis to review the material is better than simply typing up these entries and flinging them into the memory hole. (Or the forgetting hole.) I don’t know about you, but I spend an awful lot of my time focused on the now, and on the near-term future. This project makes me stop and look back in two ways: At my own my life, and at the lives of others.

In the process, for me at least, it prods me not just out of the now, but out of the most familiar self-deception: The fiction that I'm not really getting older because age is *a mindset a point of view a way of approaching life*. That mindset has its advantages, but it's good to recall: We're mortal, you and I. You already knew that, but sometimes I forget. As for what the following material offers readers ... well, perhaps there are some facts of interest here, some moments of amusement, some recognition, some surprise. I guess I could say that I hope you find it diverting. But that's not the right word.

— rw / March 2010 / Savannah

January

ASHETON, RON

Asheton, 60, was found dead in his Ann Arbor, Michigan, home. He was a guitarist, and a founder of the Stooges. E mentioned his passing to me; I had not heard about it. It's perhaps surprising how often Iggy Pop comes up in our random conversations. Just recently E had gotten the song "The Passenger" stuck in her head, after coming across a clip of it on YouTube. We discussed Iggy's dancing style, or non-style, and debated whether it would be preferable to have lunch with him or with Lou Reed. (I would definitely choose Iggy over Lou Reed; I would choose a lot of people over Lou Reed.) So, back to Ron Asheton. I actually could not have told you the name of anybody in The Stooges besides Iggy, which is lame, I know. But the obit says Asheton and his brother and Iggy were the founders, but later Ron was demoted to bass, and when the band broke up he apparently didn't see Iggy Pop for about 20 years. Then they all got back together did a bunch of shows, and I suppose made more money on any given night than they made throughout the band's creative heyday. [1/8]

MONTALBÁN, RICARDO

Montalbán died in Los Angeles, where he lived, at age 88. E and I were chatting during the *Newshour* and she overheard them saying he'd died, and pointed it out to me. Like everybody else my age, I associate him first with *Fantasy Island* and those old "rich Corinthian leather" car ads. And to a lesser extent with the villain Khan, from *Star Trek* (one episode of the show, and then of course the movie.) We had just been talking about *Fantasy Island* a few weeks ago, how bizarre it was. I totally loved that show. I was completely fascinated with Mr. Roarke, and whether or not he was some sort of super-human. I'm pretty sure there's one episode where he openly displays some manner of supernatural power in an unusual battle with a villain. I can't prove it and have no intention of doing any research into the matter whatsoever. As I say that, I should clarify that even as kids everybody knew it was an absurd and corny show. But that doesn't mean we couldn't like it, too. Regarding Corinthian leather, the obit says the "phrase that became a campy giggle-inducer, especially after it became known that there is no such thing as Corinthian leather, from Corinth or anywhere else: the description was just a marketing invention." I didn't know that! Also the obit quotes a Janet Maslin review of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, which was released in

1982. Maslin says Montalbán looked “like either the world’s oldest rock star or its hippest Indian chief.” I guess in 1982 we weren’t yet used to the notion of “old” rock stars, who are now legion. Actually after reading that I did quick Google image searches for Montalbán-as-Khan, and for recent Keith Richards: Quite similar. Though Khan looks younger. [1/15]

WYETH, ANDREW

Wyeth died at age 91, in his sleep, at home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. I caught this on the *Newshour*, where they emphasized that he was the son of N.C. Wyeth – basically making it sound like N.C. was a significant painter, whereas Andrew was known for merely being his son-who-was-also-an-artist. But it was Andrew who painted *Christina’s World*, which is a pretty iconic image. And it wasn’t that long ago that all those “Helga” paintings surfaced and there was huge publicity about them. In the *Times* obit Michael Kimmelman asserts: “A virtual Rorschach test for American culture during the better part of the last century, Wyeth split public opinion as vigorously as, and probably even more so than, any other American painter.” Really? That’s interesting, I’d have to think about it. Kimmelman’s writeup goes on to make a pretty decent case for the assertion, but at the moment I don’t buy it. [1/16]

NEWMAN, DAVID (FATHEAD)

Newman died at age 75, of pancreatic cancer, in Kingston, New York. I can only assume that I’m no different from many music fans who have noticed the name David “Fathead” Newman. I mean come on – *Fathead*. How are you going to miss that? To be perfectly honest, the only reason I noticed the *Times* obit was the name. I couldn’t have told you off the top of my head if I own any music that includes his sax-playing. I think I did know that he’s originally from Texas. But somehow it took the obit to either tell me or remind me that Newman was closely associated with Ray Charles (meaning that I do own a number of songs with his playing). I honestly associated Newman with jazz more than R&B. He played both, but it seems clear the Charles stuff is what most people would be likely to recognize. [1/22]

UPDIKE, JOHN

Updike died of cancer in Danvers, Massachusetts, at age 76. I noticed this on the Yahoo most-emailed-news page. I’ve read a few Updike novels. In college I took the position that I preferred Cheever, and I suppose I’ll

stick with that. Also in college, however, I was introduced by a friend to the Updike essay/criticism collection *Hugging The Shore*, which made a very positive impression on me. There's one book of his on my to-read list right now, *Self-Consciousness*. What I probably admire most about Updike is the combination of quality and volume: He wrote a lot, published a lot, he never stopped, and he was (from what I read) always in fairly good form or better. I'm guessing that even now there is at least one piece of his that's complete and will pop up in *The New Yorker* or *The New York Review*. That's the way to go out: With your latest work ready to run. [1/28]

BRADY, JAMES

Brady died at age 80, at home in Manhattan. I caught this on *The Times'* online obit page, where I recognized Brady's picture: I'd seen it many times accompanying his column in *Parade*. I always found that column, "In Step With," to be incomprehensible. According to the obit, Brady is one of these guys from the outer boroughs (Sheepshead Bay, specifically) who worked his way from the bottom to the top of the old-school world of print journalism. He seems to have specialized in gossipy celeb stuff, writing the original *Intelligencer* column for *New York*, and helping create Page Six, among other achievements. If that's the right word. [1/29]

GRACIE, HELIO

Gracie, 95, died in Sao Paulo, of pneumonia. He was an inventor of Jiu-Jitsu, and his son Rorion was a founder of the whole Ultimate Fighting thing. I learned all about that last year in the course of researching a column. The Gracie family pulled out of its association with mixed-martial arts leagues in the U.S. when their partners decided to institute a few actual rules to cut down on the horrifying-spectacle aspects of the sport that were getting them in trouble with politicians. [1/30]

February

INTERIOR, LUX

Interior died of heart failure, at age 62, in Glendale, California. I was sad to learn about this, via BoingBoing. The Cramps were definitely in the life-changer category of music for me – many fond memories of listening to *Bad Music For Bad People* in high school. They were an excellent example of non-mainstream culture when that idea still meant something. There was, after all, no way to learn about the Cramps from the radio. They got little play in the music magazines of the time. Basically you heard the Cramps because a friend told you about the Cramps. After reading the obit, I ended up downloading several Cramps songs, and I'm pleased that "Garbageman," my personal favorite, held up extremely well; I think it's in the pantheon of strutting rock tunes. ("Do you want the real thing, or are you just talking?") Plus the man born Erick Purkhiser came up with the best the fake name ever. A quote from him, from the *Times* obit: "Rock 'n' roll has absolutely nothing to do with music. It's much more than music. Rock 'n' roll is who you are." I only saw the band live once, in about 1990 I guess, which is a bit late — but the show did include Mr. Interior climbing the amps wearing only women's underwear and high heels. I was writing for the *Austin Chronicle* a little bit then, and managed to get in free, plus one. My friend L— was my plus one. As was always the case in those situations, I didn't really know whether I was actually "on the list" until I showed up. In this instance I was. Good times. [2/6]

COVER, JACK

Cover, 88, died of pneumonia at a retirement home in Mission Viejo, California. I read about this in *The Los Angeles Times* (online). A nuclear physicist who worked in the defense industry, he often tinkered with gadgets and inventions on the side, and his most successful such project was the Taser. That's why this obit caught my attention – I did a column last year about the Taser company's recent strategy of "fashionable" designs, including leopard-pattern and hot pink options. More consumer-friendly, it seems. As expected, I got a little bit of an angry response from Taser foes. The name of the device, I learned from an A.P. obit I read later, apparently derives from a book Cover enjoyed as a child: *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle*. Cover arbitrarily added a middle initial "A" to the character's name and thought of his product as the Thomas A. Swift Electric Rifle – Taser. The obit pegs the current number of

Tasers sold to private citizens at 180,000. [2/15]

EAGLIN, SNOOKS

Eaglin died of a heart attack in New Orleans, at age 72. I learned of this from the blog of the *Gambit*, which served up the news in my RSS reader. I of course quickly posted something on the no notes blog, where I'd written in the past about Eaglin's version of "St. James Infirmary." From the *Gambit* and the A.P. obit I learned that Eaglin had, at the age of 13, formed a band with Allen Toussaint and Ernie K-Doe, who were similarly young. It was called The Flamingoes. Astonishing – and I'm embarrassed that I never knew that. I'm also a little embarrassed that I never saw Eaglin perform live. I *do* have a memory from our first year or so in New Orleans, I think our first Jazz Fest: C— G— was in town, and of course she's an N.O. veteran, and I distinctly remember her saying she wanted to make a point to catch "Snooks." Though he'd been around forever, she seemed to feel his time had come. I thought that was interesting. And yet, I didn't go myself. I'm not sure why. [2/19]

K-DOE, ANTOINETTE

Antoinette, as everybody seemed to call her, died at age 66, of a heart attack, on Fat Tuesday. I learned about this from C—, who emailed me that day with the news. Very sad. We have many memories of Antoinette presiding over the Mother In Law Lounge, both when Ernie K-Doe was alive, and after he passed away. I've written about it extensively elsewhere, so I won't go on here, but that place was one of a kind. I must admit I was skeptical that it would persist after Ernie died – and even more skeptical that it would return after being flooded after Katrina. But it did, it did. According to the *Times-Picayune* piece that C— sent, her daughter and son-in-law plan to keep the place going. I hope they do. [2/24]

March

HARVEY, PAUL

Harvey died at a Mayo Clinic Hospital near Phoenix, where he lived in the winter months, at age 90. I think I saw this in the local paper. By the time I became familiar with Harvey, it was very late in his career, and I really didn't have the slightest understanding of how he was supposed to fit into the media landscape. He seemed to have a lot of fans, but when I would randomly come across his "The Rest of the Story" bits on the radio, invariably on a road trip, I just couldn't figure him out – he seemed to be broadcasting through some sort of flaw in the space-time continuum, a voice from either an era or a geography that I couldn't get a handle on. Interestingly, Harry Shearer noted Harvey's passing with some respect – and then proceeded to play a blooperish recording of Harvey cracking up his own live announcer, who could not stop laughing through a subsequent segment about car accidents. It was incredibly pleasing to listen to. [3/2]

FOOTE, HORTON

Foote, 92, died in Hartford, Connecticut, "after a brief illness," according to the *Times* obit. He lived in Pacific Palisades, California, and Wharton, Texas. He had temporarily set up in Hartford to work on an adaptation of his work scheduled for production in the fall. I caught news of his passing on *The Newshour*. His impressive body of work included *A Trip To Bountiful* and *Tender Mercies*, but I was a little surprised at how much emphasis the death notices put on his adaptation of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. (Somehow I never knew that Robert Duvall played Boo Radley in the film.) Foote was born in Wharton, and evidently kept close connections to Texas throughout his life. I would be curious to read (as opposed to see) some of Foote's plays, which I've never done. [3/5]

SILVER, RON

Silver died of esophageal cancer at the age of 62, at home in Manhattan. What I remember him from most vividly is *Enemies: A Love Story*, the Paul Mazursky film, as well as *Reversal of Fortune*. He was also pretty well known for his politics. Basically I missed the news of his passing completely until a few days after it happened. I guess I'd been in Texas, and a little out of touch with the news. When I got home I was going through old email, including this email I get that has *Los Angeles Times* headlines, and that's where I saw his obituary. I'm still not sure why it is

that he makes me think of *Enemies*; I really don't even remember the movie all that well, I just remember him, being in it. [3/17]

LEWIS, CHARLES "MASK"

Lewis died in a car accident, at age 45, in Newport Beach, California. This is the only time I can think of when I learned of a death through a press release. Lewis, known as "Mask," was a co-founder of a brand of mixed-martial-arts-related clothes that I wrote about last year. While researching that column, I watched the silly reality show that starred him and the other two co-founders – they were more like characters than people, with crazy outfits and all that. I remember making a conscious decision *not* to interview them. In any case, I guess I was still on the company's press list, because I got the blast email about his death. An *L.A. Times* story that I looked up to get some of the details for this entry specifies that Lewis died "when his Ferrari collided with a Porsche on Jamboree Boulevard." [3/19]

RICHARDSON, NATASHA

Richardson, who was 45, died in a Manhattan hospital after a skiing accident near Montreal. I may be misremembering, but I believe I heard about her death by turning on the television and finding it to be the topic of discussion on Larry King's show. Kenneth Cole was one of the guests. I had read the day before that she'd been in a skiing accident and things looked bad, so I wasn't all that surprised. I also wasn't totally sure who she was – an actress, yes, but beyond that I was a little hazy. So I learned that she was mostly a stage performer (and the daughter of Vanessa Redgrave, something I definitely didn't know before). She was also in a number of movies, but skimming the obit, it seems that it's largely stuff I haven't seen. [3/19]

BO, EDDIE

Bo, 78, died of a heart attack. I learned about this through a D— D—status update on Facebook, although I had to go elsewhere to get the facts. (D— had a headline along the lines of "Eddie Bo, R.I.P." but then a link to a YouTube video of one of his performances.) Early in our time in New Orleans, well before I'd sorted out the who's-who of local musical stars, our friend A— was in town, and was given a business card by a guy named Eddie Boh. Later during that visit A— and I were out at Snake and Jake's, and she mentioned this to some woman she'd struck up a conversation with, a local. The local looked at the card and basically

said: “Oh, I thought you meant Eddie Bo. That would be a pretty big deal around here.” In time, I realized she was quite right about that. [3/22]

GOODY, JADE

Goody died of cervical cancer at age 27, at home in Essex, in England. I really didn’t know who she was, but read the obit online. It explained that she was a reality TV star who converted her fame on whatever show she was on into “a career as a full-time celebrity,” spending six years selling “the most picayune details of her life” to tabs and gossip magazines. Apparently she was pretty obnoxious on the show (*Big Brother*). Last year she learned (while being filmed for a different reality show) that she had cancer – and sold the media rights to her wedding, for \$1 million. She is quoted as saying: “I’ve lived my whole adult life talking about my life. I’ve lived in front of the cameras. And maybe I’ll die on front of them.” I found this more than a little chilling. [3/22]

LEVINE, IRVING R.

Levine died of complications from prostate cancer, at age 86, in Washington, D.C. Usually I skip middle initials in this project, but I remember this guy, from childhood, specifically as Irving R. Levine: That’s how he identified himself at the end of his television news reports. I didn’t remember which network (NBC, the obit says), but I do remember his grating voice, his vaguely stern demeanor. That’s what national TV newspeople were in the 1970s – serious, older, white guys. His main beat at that time was economics, meaning he was the guy bringing in the bad news every night about stagflation or whatever bummer was happening on that front. The obit says he was actually the first full-time economics reporter on network news. I learned about this passing via *The Newshour* – a Friday night episode that we didn’t watch until Saturday evening. E had never heard of him. [3/28]

April

CHAMBERS, MARILYN

Chambers, 56, was found dead of as-yet-undetermined causes, in her Santa Clarita, California, home. She was a famous porn star. Specifically, she was in a film I just recently read about, from the 1970s, called *Behind The Green Door*. Although I wasn't familiar with it, the book I learned about it from, Thomas Hine's fantastic *The Great Funk*, puts it on a par with *Deep Throat*, in terms of pop-culture impact and notoriety. Hine describes the plot, as it were, this way: Chambers' character is kidnapped and brought to a "live sex theater," where she "has a series of athletic encounters" with many men, and women. "What added an extra, delicious kink to the whole thing was that Chambers, a sometime model, had earlier posed for a photograph that was, at the time, on display on the Ivory Snow soap powder box, one that promised a product '99 and 44/100 percent pure.'" The *Times* obit notes that P&G "replaced her" on the box, not surprisingly. It also quotes a porn-film-maker saying of *Behind The Green Door*: "It was a movie that really dug deep into sexuality, psychologically. It took you to a place that no other adult film had gone before." [4/14]

BALLARD, J.G.

Ballard died of cancer in London, at age 78. E told me about this. She had in effect introduced me to Ballard's work years ago; I suppose I was dimly familiar with him by way of the movies adapted from his novels, but I hadn't really paid much attention to who he was or what he wrote. At one point (in the Jersey City era), we traded off reading *High Rise* to each other – very enjoyable. Funny to have a fond memory around such a grim work, but... that's how it is sometimes. [4/21]

ARTHUR, BEA

Arthur died of cancer at age 86, at home in Los Angeles. I noticed two status updates of friends on Facebook mentioning *Maude* – one said, "And then there's Maude," and the other said, "Maude was my role model." Neither had an explanation or link, but I assumed that the coincidence of two such entries must mean: Bea Arthur has died. I was not, myself, a big fan of *Maude*, although I liked the theory/idea of it. (I just found the reality/practice was not all that funny, most of the time.) E noted this morning that obits online were identifying her as a star of *Golden Girls*. That just seems wrong. *Maude* was a big deal. I still wonder

how they got away with that show. The character was on her fourth marriage, and in the very first season had an abortion – before *Roe v. Wade*! (I'm not old enough to have seen that in real time.) Amazing, really. [4/25]

May

KEMP, JACK

Kemp died of cancer, at home in Bethesda, Maryland, at age 73. This came up on *The Newshour*, and I was surprised I hadn't heard anything about it during the day. I recall, without a lot of specificity, Kemp's runs for the presidency. I never really knew what to make of him. He came across pretty well on television, but in a way that made me think, "Yeah, this is a guy who comes across pretty well on television, but actually sucks." And there was the whole "ex jock" thing, which always bugged me. Basically I was happy to see him on a chat show, but didn't want him to have any political power. At all. [5/3/]

DELUISE, DOM

DeLuise died in Los Angeles, at age 75, after a "long illness," according to the *Times* obit. I heard about this on the radio, probably NPR, as I was driving on Victory one afternoon. I forget where I was going. They played a weird audio clip of DeLuise telling an interviewer that his goal was to be seen as a nice guy. Yeah? Anyway, he was a pretty big star when I was a kid, vaguely associated in my mind with Burt Reynolds. He was the jolly fat funnyman. One of those. He was show people. Skimming the obit, it looks like his big film roles pretty much ended by 1981 or so. Why is that? [5/7]

DALY, CHUCK

Daly died of pancreatic cancer in Jupiter, Florida, at age 78. This happened while I was on a trip to New York, and I believe I learned about it from reading *The Times* one morning in the coffee shop next to the Ramada that I tend to stay at when I'm there. One of the most exciting sports spectacles I can remember was the Pistons' consecutive championships back in the late 1980s, with Daly as coach. I was in college, and had a friend I admired quite a bit named D— W—, and he was from Detroit and a hardcore sports fan. So that was an influence. Another influence was that the Pistons were rivals to the Jordan Bulls, a team I detested. And their first championship victory was over the Lakers, another team I have loved to not-love through many iterations. Daly's Pistons were mean, dirty, and petty, but in a sense it was all theater. The whole "bad boy" idea in sports always strikes me as comic – I mean, come on, it's professional sports, how "bad" can they really be? They're perhaps showing poor sportsmanship, or saying mean things, or committing

fouls. They're not robbing banks. They're not blowing up buildings. I also love it when a team image lines up with a city image – the notion of Detroit “toughness,” for instance. Anyway, they were a wildly entertaining team, and I enjoyed watching them. [5/9]

BENNETT, JAY

Bennet, died at age 45, of causes not known at the time of the obituary, in Urbana, Illinois. He was a member of Wilco. I heard this on the radio one day as I was driving over to that recycling center on the west side, to see if they take Styrofoam. (They don't.) I'm not a huge Wilco guy, so I wasn't really sure how he fit into the group, or if I would include his passing in this project. Then they played that song “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart,” noting that Bennett played the toy piano that tinkles through it, and that is certainly the best thing about it. Since that had made an impression on me, I headed over to his obit. Here I learned that he and Wilco leader Jeff Tweedy were apparently the two main combatants in the band disagreements that led up to the release of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*; and indeed, Tweedy fired Bennett before that record came out. [5/25]

MCNAMARA, BROOKS

McNamara, 72, died of pneumonia, in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. I had seen this listed on the *Times* obit page for several days before I finally realized where I knew the name. It seemed familiar, but the description “theater historian” just didn't sound like something I'd have any personal connection to. Finally it sunk in: He wrote the book *Step Right Up*, about medicine shows. Obviously that's connected to theater (influencing what eventually became vaudeville, for example), but my interest in medicine-show culture is related to my interest in snake oil in general, not to performance. It was a really useful book, and is where I learned the most about Hamlin's Wizard Oil and Kickapoo Indian Sagwa, two of the biggest patent-medicine brands. *Step Right Up* is cited in *Buying In*, and possibly even quoted. The obit mostly focuses on McNamara's role overseeing something called the Shubert Archive, millions of theater-related items focused mostly on the 1900-1940 period. In the obit, his wife is quoted saying that their home is “a veritable museum of ephemera.” Sounds cool! [5/26]

June

TAYLOR, KOKO

Taylor, who was 80, died in Chicago after surgery for gastrointestinal bleeding. I caught this news online somewhere, but now I can't quite recall the details. I had some familiarity with Taylor's work – "Queen of the Chicago Blues" – but not all that much. I'd never heard anything that really blew me away, frankly. I can't think of anything else to say. [6/4]

BUTERA, SAM

Butera died of pneumonia at age 81, in Las Vegas. This I learned of from the *Times-Picayune* website. Butera was from New Orleans, and closely associated with Louis Prima. I really knew nothing about Prima (or Butera) until we were in New Orleans, and there was a screening of a documentary about him, at the Shim Sham as I recall. I think that Butera was actually on hand for that. The thing that stuck with me from the *Times'* obit is that Butera did the arrangement for Prima's "Just A Gigolo/I Ain't Got Nobody" medley, which as Butera correctly noted, David Lee Roth covered note-for-note in the 1980s with great success. Butera said that because of this slight, "there wasn't an act in Atlantic City or Las Vegas that would do that song, out of respect for me." [6/5]

CARRADINE, DAVID

Carradine died in a Bangkok hotel room, under somewhat mysterious circumstances, at age 72. I was in Oakland, on a story, and talking on the phone with E when she gave me this information. At the time it seemed that he had hung himself, but later the details were a bit more murky. The hanging part still seemed to be true, but new details suggested that he also had a rope "around his genitals." And somebody dug up court papers in which an ex-wife (he was married four times) claimed that he had a taste for "potentially deadly" sex. The *Daily News* helpfully explains: "The location of the ropes suggested Carradine died while attempting autoerotic asphyxiation — cutting off oxygen to the brain to enhance sexual pleasure." Too much information? You bet! Anyway, *Kung Fu* was a major part of my childhood TV-viewing, often watched with my brother R—. There was discussion of the total non-Asian-ness of the star, but really it was just fun to watch for the balance of philosophical hoey and rapid-fire beat-downs. I wouldn't mind seeing an episode again, just to see how it holds up. But now of course I'll be unable not to recall somewhere in my mind all this stuff about his sex habits. And

perhaps, after reading this, you'll be in the same boat. Sorry. [6/6]

BERNSTEIN, PETER

Bernstein died of pneumonia at age 90, in a Manhattan hospital. I think I saw this on the *Times* site; the obit there makes immediate mention of the book *Against The Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*, which is how I know of Bernstein. I read it when I was involved in financial journalism in the 1990s, and particularly fascinated with the idea of risk, or really risk tolerance. Unfortunately I remember nothing of the book. I'm pretty sure I enjoyed it, though. [6/7]

BRINKER, NORMAN

Brinker, 78, died of pneumonia while vacationing in Colorado Springs, Colorado; he lived in Dallas, Texas. I was drawn into his obit while updating this project on a Sunday afternoon, and was interested to see his named connected to Steak and Ale, Bennigan's *and* Chili's. It seems that he was president of the Jack in the Box company, and then quit and moved to Dallas and in 1966 created Steak and Ale – that's when he "hit on the casual-dining format that has attracted millions of Americans eager for a budget meal with full service." Then, in the mid 1970s, "another of his concepts" debuted: Bennigan's. Bennigan's was pretty huge, take my word for it. The obit describes how it introduced "the hanging plants and brass rails of 'fern bars,' popular with young urban professionals, to restaurants priced for a mass audience." When I was a teenager, that mass audience included me. I remember Bennigan's advertising, fuzz-line animation that projected a certain "sophistication," almost certainly drawing on a famous-ish illustrator of the time. It was a Bennigan's that I took my high school girlfriend to, to have a serious discussion about some stuff I'd found out about my family that had thrown me for a loop at the time. It was a quasi-grown-up place to go. Anyway, so then this same guy, Brinker, apparently bought a small chain of Texas burger restaurants called Chili's, and blew it out into the huge chain it would become; evidently, he added fajitas and so on to what had originally been a burgers and chili lineup. I've eaten fajitas at Chili's more often than I care to admit. Even today, I eat at Chili's, sort of – when I have dead time and I'm hungry at the Atlanta airport, I go to "Chili's, Too," and get a burger. It's in terminal A. [6/9]

HOUGHTALING, JOHN

Houghtaling died at home in Fort Pierce, Florida, of complications after a

recent fall, at age 92. He invented the Magic Fingers Vibrating Bed. I'd never heard of him, but I'd heard of the bed. Unfortunately for me, I've never actually experienced one. I believe at one point I was in a motel somewhere that had such a bed, but it didn't work. That may be a faulty memory. According to the *Times* obit, there were many precursors to Houghtaling's creation, but his innovation was "to separate the motor from the bed," as opposed to having both in one "integrated unit." His creation came on the market in 1958 and by the 1970s "millions" of such beds filled hotels and motels all across America. The product started to fade in the 1980s, although today the company that bought the rights to the name apparently sells to people for use in the home. I think some hipster hotel should bring it back. I'd check that out. [6/19]

MCMAHON, ED

McMahon, who was 86, died in a Los Angeles hospital, after suffering from a variety of health problems such as bone cancer and pneumonia. I believe I learned about this from the local paper – I'm not sure how I'd missed it the day before. In any case it wasn't a big surprise, McMahon seemed to have a lot of problems lately, with his health and otherwise. The obit notes he'd been in the hospital for several months. I saw him on TV last year when the housing crisis was becoming the financial crisis, talking to Larry King about his house getting foreclosed on or something. He looked bad. Then he ended up doing these ridiculous ads for that "Cash 4 Gold" company, whatever that is. He just seemed pathetic. So it's refreshing, right now, to be looking at this picture of McMahon as I write, a picture taken in the early days of the *Tonight Show*: He's actually rather handsome, and certainly has a winning smile. Watching the *Tonight Show* growing up, I didn't really get McMahon, but accepted that it was part of the premise that there was some big blustery guy who would say "Here's Johnny!" and emit a phony-sounding guffaw in response to every Carson quip. At that age, you don't question things like that, even if you don't understand them. Meanwhile, I was astonished to learn from the obit that *Star Search* (the talent show McMahon hosted after the *Tonight Show* ended) was on the air for *twelve years*! As for his later financial troubles, here's how he explained it to King: "I made a lot of money, but you can spend a lot of money." Prolly so. [6/23]

FAWCETT, FARRAH

Fawcett died of cancer, in Santa Monica, California, at age 62. E told me

about this after I got back from a short trip to Austin. We chatted about it for a minute – how Fawcett, though widely known to be quite ill, just somehow seemed like the sort of celebrity who would pull through. I don't know that I had a particularly intense relationship with the idea of Farrah Fawcett – she was pretty, I remember the famous poster but never owned it, I watched *Charlie's Angels* some but was never really that caught up in it. The hair was something, I'll say that. Reading her obit, I see she was born in Corpus Christi, I hadn't known that. I remember a few months ago E and I watched her infamous Letterman appearance on YouTube – she did seem really wacked out. In any case, news of her death was almost immediately overshadowed by the death of Michael Jackson. The coverage of the latter was wall-to-wall, and at one point some relative of Fawcett's was brought out to be asked ... how he felt about Jackson getting all the attention. Absurd.[6/25]

JACKSON, MICHAEL

The fact of the matter is I never really gave Michael Jackson a lot of thought. I never bought one of his records, and never really considered doing so. I found him somewhat interesting as a cultural phenomenon – and of course I was aware of his various really strange behaviors. The last time he drifted across our radar, it was in connection with a sale of some of his collection of paintings and so on, and someone who went to the auction put on Flickr a completely amazing painting depicting Michael Jackson, the Mona Lisa, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, ET, and Albert Einstein – all wearing Jackson-style shades, and a sequined glove. Anyway, so I was just home from Austin and sitting with E in the living room. She started to read me an item off her laptop about Jackson, who was known to be hospitalized at the time. Then she abruptly stopped and said, “Oh my god – he's dead!” We were both *really* surprised. Not in a logical way – I mean, he was in the hospital – but just in the sense that it didn't really seem possible that Michael Jackson would be dead. Which is weird given that, as noted, he's not really somebody I thought about. Just a figure, a presence, I took for granted, without a strong opinion one way or the other. Needless to say the days that followed brought a surreal outpouring of media coverage – formal media and informal media alike. The most startling thing to me was hearing a podcast I normally listen to, hosted by a young guy, about 28 years old, who makes a lot of cracks about fuddy duddy mainstream media and humorless oldsters with outdated sensibilities and so on. But in this instance he was all emotional, because he really *loved* Michael Jackson.

And then he mentioned the first Jackson album (cassette) that he bought – *Bad*. Seriously? [6/25]

MAYS, BILLY

Mays died, probably of a heart attack, at home in Tampa, Florida, at age 50. E told me about this, by way of an email sent from downstairs. A couple of other people emailed me about it later, because I'd written a column about Mays last year. He was a yell-and-sell infomercial guy, and quite successful for reasons that seem elusive, given how annoying he was. I actually spoke to him for that column, although by the time he called me back it was too late to include anything he said in the actual copy, which was already with the editors. He seemed like a pretty nice guy – and spoke in a completely normal tone of voice. Later I saw a picture from his funeral, where the pallbearers were all wearing the blue-shirt-and-chinos that Mays favored. Appropriate? [6/28]

July

MALDEN, KARL

Malden died of natural causes, at age 97, at home in Los Angeles. This came up on the *NewsHour* – the opening summary said that night’s episode would include a “look back” at Malden’s career. We discussed our vague sense that Malden had died years ago. (Perhaps he had, but the *NewsHour* was just taking a “look back” for the hell of it?) Mostly I remember him as the American Express spokesman, those “don’t leave home without them” ads having been ubiquitous throughout my childhood. I wouldn’t mind seeing some again, as my memory of them is that they were really severe: Malden telling a scolding tale of a young couple too stupid to use American Express travelers’ checks or whatever. He was also in *The Streets of San Francisco*, which I don’t think I saw more than once or twice, and of which I have zero memory. And – *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He was excellent in that. [7/1]

MCNAIR, STEVE

McNair died of multiple gunshot wounds, in a Nashville condo, at age 36. E asked me if I knew who McNair was and I said, “ ... A quarterback?” Correct! Well, he’s dead, she added. Right at that moment the story came up on CNN (or whatever news channel was on). He played for the Titans. The Titans were the former Houston Oilers – the name the team took when it moved homes, and at which point I stopped paying any attention to them. On the radio this morning they still didn’t know exactly what had happened, just that he was found with a 20-year-old “friend,” a woman, who had also been fatally shot. [7/4]

MCNAMARA, ROBERT

McNamara died in his sleep at age 93, at home in Washington, D.C. I remember noticing several references to McNamara that I didn’t bother to read before it sunk in that he had died, and that’s why he was getting mentioned everywhere. Progressive boomer types always seemed to have a unique loathing for McNamara that I guess you had to be there (there being the Vietnam era) to understand. We saw the Errol Morris movie about McNamara when it came out, which was enjoyable, but I remember a vague sense of not really getting the degree of interest in this man. It must drive his enemies crazy that he died peacefully, at such an advanced age. [7/6]

CRONKITE, WALTER

Cronkite, 92, died at home in New York of “complications from dementia,” according to the *Times* obit. He’d been ailing for some time, and I remember being somehow pleased that he held on until the whole Michael Jackson thing was over, so that news of his passing wasn’t reduced to a footnote. He’s a pretty interesting figure, maybe more for the way his role in the culture was remembered than for what it really was. My parents watched NBC when Cronkite was anchoring at CBS, so I don’t have specific memories of his broadcasts. And in fact he was replaced by Dan Rather 1981, so for most of my life he’s been a *former* anchorman. Now that I think of it, he spent more of *his* life as a former anchorman (about 28 years) than he did being the actual anchor of the *CBS Evening News* (roughly 20 years). Of course all the obits ran through the basics, namely the Kennedy assassination, and his souring on Vietnam – Walter supposedly told America what to think. The country was different; we trusted this man; etc. I guess there’s some truth in that, although predictably there were analyses noting that the whole “trust” thing was a bit cooked, and based on a poll in which his competitors for American trust were mostly politicians. On the other hand, what’s interesting to me is that in general we seem to celebrate the idea that Americans no longer take their cues from Cronkite-type people. The idea is we have more choices for information, and thus we are better equipped to think for ourselves. But if the primary example of Cronkite turning public opinion with a pronouncement is the (probably exaggerated) instance of him turning on the Vietnam war – isn’t that a *good* thing? Wouldn’t it have been *good* if there was a figure like that, who could sway public opinion in defiance of what the government was claiming, in the runup to the Iraq war? Instead we just section off and listen to whoever agrees with us – or, even more to the point, we simply tune out. It’s never been easier to be well-informed. But it’s also never been easier to ignore the news altogether. [7/17]

McCOURT, FRANK

McCourt died of metastatic melanoma, in Manhattan, at age 78. I think I missed this until noticing a short item in the local paper. I never read any of McCourt’s books, though I did read a story about him once, and of course found it interesting that he’d come to his mega-selling career late in life, after decades of teaching in a public school. That said, I get tired of the whole Irish thing. (No offense!) [7/19]

CUNNINGHAM, MERCE

Cunningham died at home in Manhattan, at age 90. I guess I should admit that dance is an art form that has never really grabbed me. But Cunningham was part of a circle of creative thinkers who interest me quite a bit, so I ought to be more knowledgeable about him than I am about any other dance figure. I happened to hear a few minutes of an interview with him on *Studio 360*, being replayed because of his passing, that was actually pretty intriguing – he was talking about how the way we walk is all the same, yet always unique, and how that informed his thinking about movement and dance, and so on. But just now, writing this, I started to watch a short video about him, with footage of his dance and choreography, on the *NYT* site, and I immediately got bored. Ah well. [7/27]

AQUINO, CORAZON

Aquino died in Manila, the Philippines, at age 76, of cancer. I learned of this while watching the *Newshour*, downstairs for some reason. I certainly remember her rise in 1986, after a coup. Although maybe what I really remember better is the Marcoses, particularly whatsername with all the shoes. [7/31]

August

SCHULBERG, BUDD

Schulberg died at age 95; he lived in Westhampton Beach, New York. I really didn't know that much about Schulberg, beyond passing familiarity with his name, until I read a submission to the Significant Objects project that's been taking up so much of my time lately. The writer (a design writer whose work I really don't know) spun a short tale about visiting Schulberg and stealing a plate from him, a plate decorated with a Star of David pattern. The piece mentioned a few facts about Schulberg's life: He wrote the screenplay for *On the Waterfront*, he "named names" for HUAC, he arrested Leni Riefenstahl. So I made my suggestions on the story, and then less than a day later the writer emailed my collaborator J— to say Schulberg had just died. So that's how I learned of his passing. The obit explained the Riefenstahl thing: Schulberg was working for the government creating propaganda films, and then, after the war, he "helped put together filmed evidence against the Nazis for the Nuremberg trials." It was in the course of this that he located Riefenstahl, served the arrest warrant, and brought her to Nuremberg. The obit also notes that he wrote *What Makes Sammy Run?* and some other novels. Interesting guy. [8/5]

HUGHES, JOHN

Hughes died of a heart attack, during a visit to Manhattan, at age 59. E told me about this – just before bed, she came into the room and mentioned it matter of factly. I saw *The Breakfast Club*, in a theater, when it came out. My immediate reaction: I liked it a lot. But within days I pretended *not* to like it – I remember a comment from my friend at the time A— B—, who found the thing ridiculous and was particularly dismissive of the "which one do you identify with" conversations the movie inspired. So I did I like or not? As an objective matter, it's probably a bad movie, but that doesn't answer the question. It's actually one of the more vexing taste dilemmas of my life. Am I the kind of person who *actually liked The Breakfast Club*? I think I shouldn't like it, but I do. Or I did. Maybe it doesn't matter. In any case, apparently Hughes stopped making movies in the early 1990s, and there's even a documentary about some young filmmakers trying to track him down and figure out what happened to him. Maybe that's worth seeing. [8/6]

DeVILLE, WILLY

DeVille, 58, died of pancreatic cancer, in Manhattan. He was the singer for Mink DeVille. I only know one song by Mink DeVille, "Spanish Stroll," but I really like it. Odd, then, that I've never bothered to try to hear more. The obit suggests that DeVille continued to make interesting music after the band broke up, including a "startling mariachi version" of "Hey Joe." The obit is where I learned of his death. [8/7]

PAUL, LES

Paul, 94, died of complications of pneumonia, in White Plains, New York. We heard about this on NPR as we were driving to dinner. This is definitely one of those cases where I thought the guy was already dead, and I was wondering, "Why the Les Paul feature?" In fact I was about to say that to E when the piece concluded with the somber, "Les Paul died at age 94," etc. He was playing regularly in New York the entire time I lived there, and I feel stupid for never having bothered to go see him. The truth is I've never really been drawn to the music of his that I've heard, but over the years I've learned more about his technical inventions and found that pretty interesting. [8/13]

DICKINSON, JIM

Dickinson died of complications from heart surgery at age 67; he lived near Coldwater, Mississippi. I noticed this in a newspaper, I want to say that it was *The Wall Street Journal*. Dickinson was a semi-legendary Southern rock guy, as a musician and as a producer (Big Star, etc.). About ten years ago now, I guess, I happened to interview him. He was producing a record by a Little Rock band called The Boondogs, who had emerged from a then-hyped Web startup called Garageband.com. I don't really know whatever happened to the band. I do know that Garageband.com didn't make it, it was absorbed by some second-generation Web-music company. Dickinson was a nice guy in the interview, very helpful. I think it was in the course of that call that I learned his sons were the core of the band The North Mississippi All Stars. Popular group at the time, although to be honest I've never cared for them. [8/18]

NOVAK, ROBERT

Novak died at age 78, of a malignant brain tumor, at his home in Washington, D.C. I learned of this indirectly somehow – a reference somewhere to him with his years of birth and death. I remember Novak's column with Roland Evans being in *The Houston Chronicle* when I was a kid, and then later I read about him in *The Boys On The Bus*, which

indicated that he was actually a tireless reporter, and described his partnership with Evans, who was more the smooth insider. Of course in his later years Novak became known, really, for being unbelievably obnoxious – and for being obnoxiously attacked by his enemies. Another detail I recall is Michael Kinsley saying somewhere that he enjoyed sparring with Pat Buchanan on *Crossfire*, but did not enjoy those installments when Novak filled in as the voice on the right. At the end of his life Novak was best known for his dodgy role in outing a CIA agent, and for embracing his nickname, “The Prince of Darkness.” [8/19]

HEWITT, DON

Hewitt died of cancer, at home in Bridgehampton, New York, at age 86. He was of course the creator of *60 Minutes*. I always enjoyed listening to him talk about news, journalism – I think he really did have pretty high standards. That said, hearing his name always makes me think of this one incident with David Letterman. Letterman had done something or other to make fun of Hewitt, then ended up calling him on the air; Hewitt got mad and hung up. Letterman seemed baffled and delighted, and was fake-growling, “I’ll just fly into a rage and hang up!” Etc. He had a lot of fun with it. I think I heard about Hewitt’s passing by way of the *Newshour* – just from the opening summary, I didn’t watch the remembrance segment. [8/19]

KENNEDY, EDWARD

Kennedy died of brain cancer, at age 77. E told me about this, checking her laptop for the news as she does every morning, on the green couch downstairs. It wasn’t surprising. Still: An above-the-fold death. We chatted about Kennedy for a bit, his interesting life. That night, we were going to watch a DVD, but ended up deciding to “Ted out,” watching a CNN special consisting largely of clips of Kennedy, over the years. Then we watched Larry King. He had an array of guests, but none of it was really very interesting until, toward the end, he had Nancy Reagan via phone. She said some ho-hum things about the Reagan-Kennedy friendship, then Larry asked some throwaway question about how she was doing, and she said not so great: She broke her pelvis, she has to use a walker. She sounded completely miserable. And she also sounded like maybe she wasn’t thinking about the fact that she was kvetching to her friend while on live television. It was weird. Larry brought it to a close quickly. And we went to bed. [8/26]

DUNNE, DOMINICK

Dunne died of bladder cancer, at home in Manhattan, at age 83. I learned of this while watching the *Newshour*. It followed a long segment about Ted Kennedy. I always feel bad for famous people who die at around the same time as massively more famous people: Dunne got short shrift. On the other hand, in this case: Dunne was described as writing about “the intersection of law and high society” or some such. This means he wrote about celebrity trials. Notably O.J. We should all hope for such a lovely gloss on our more pointless but lucrative activities. The *Times* obit says a “family spokesman” had “initially declined to confirm the death, saying the family had hoped to wait a day before making an announcement so that Mr. Dunne’s obituary would not be obscured by the coverage of Senator Edward M. Kennedy’s death.” Okay, well, I know I just said I feel bad about notable dead people being overshadowed by the more-notable deceased – but gaming the system for a little more coverage? That’s gross. [8/26]

GREENWICH, ELLIE

Greenwich, who was 68, died of a heart attack, in Manhattan. I didn’t know her name, but I saw it mentioned somewhere, and a day later happened to be leafing through *The Wall Street Journal* at lunch and decided to read the obit there. I’d already absorbed by this point that she wrote “Be My Baby,” which is one of my favorite songs. But I was surprised to learn how many other pop hits she wrote or co-wrote, including “Do Wah Diddy Diddy,” “The Leader of the Pack,” “Chapel of Love,” “River Deep, Mountain High,” “Da Doo Run Run,” etc. Apparently she got into it when she heard how lucrative songwriting royalties could be – and she just happened to have the gift. Later she did ad jingles – “Ooh, la la, Sasson,” for instance. She made “earworms,” as Oliver Sacks calls them: Melodies that stick in your head. [8/28]

September

SCHUR, SYLVIA

Schur, who was 92, died in Chicago of respiratory failure. The truth is I didn't notice the obituary, and didn't recognize the name. The headline in *The Times* described her as the "developer of Cran-Apple and Metrecal," which didn't do a lot for me. But then, a few days later, I got an edition of an email newsletter sort of thing I subscribe to, associated with a Web magazine that I think is just called *Obits Magazine*, or something similarly unimaginative. The headline there said she created Clamato. Now that interested me. I became familiar with Clamato by way of a writeup years ago in Paul Lukas's *Beer Frame* zine – well before I knew him. It was hilarious, and a great example of deconstructing the absurdities of consumer culture that are right there in plain view, eye-level at shelf. Specifically Paul's piece noted a new-and-improved Clamato version that contained "less clam juice," or something similar to that. Obviously it's preposterous to have a product based on clams boasting about reduced clam content. So I went back and read the *Times* obit to see what it had to say. Some expert described Schur as "a pioneer of modern food usage," which seems pretty creepy. There was one sentence about the product that interested me: "Clamato, the highly unlikely combination of clam broth and tomato juice, saw the light of day after Duffy-Mott, one of her early clients, acquired a small business on the Eastern Shore of Maryland that sold packaged clams and bottled clam broth." Okay, then. Also, Paul happened to email about something else and I told him that the creator of Clamato had died. He hadn't heard. Also, to be honest, he didn't seem that engaged by the news. I think I should get over my interest in Clamato. [9/8]

GELBART, LARRY

Gelbart died of cancer, at home in Beverly Hills, at age 81. I suppose I most closely associate him with *M*A*S*H*. Although I was aware that he'd been involved in all manner of comedic entertainment – a very successful guy. I learned of his passing from the blog of the radio show *The Sound of Young America*. It surprised me to see it noted there, because just days before I'd listened to an interview on that show with some guy who'd written a book that involved interviews with 21 comedy writers. One was Gelbart, and the author, whose name escapes me, made some remark that made it clear that he saw Gelbart as a true giant, and profoundly fascinating. And the host moved it right along, to get to other

subjects in the book. (Younger ones, I guess.) [9/11]

CARROLL, JIM

Carroll died at home in Manhattan, at age 60, of a heart attack. I believe I actually saw this referenced on Twitter, while updating the Significant Objects account early in the morning. Carroll was a poet, and author of *The Basketball Diaries*, which is better known as a movie (that I never saw). What I know about him and have direct experience of is the song "People Who Died." The lyric I recall is, "They were all my friends / and they all just died." [9/14]

SWAYZE, PATRICK

Swayze, who was 57, died of pancreatic cancer, in Los Angeles. I learned of this when checking Facebook before turning in. Someone linked to the news as their status update, saying something about him being too young. Fair enough. Swayze's illness was widely reported, both in the profile-of-bravery way, and also in grim photographs on the cover of various tabloid-type magazines at the supermarket. Obviously I remember him from *Dirty Dancing* most of all. Or maybe that's not obvious, maybe it's a generational thing. I have weirdly fond memories of that movie. I doubt I could sit still through it now, but my girlfriend in high school really loved it. And I'm pretty sure I did too. He was also in *Ghost*, but I never saw that. Sometime within the last year however I saw (again) that uncomfortable skit with him and Chris Farley competing to be Chippendale's dancers. [9/14]

TRAVERS, MARY

Travers died at age 72, of complications from chemotherapy, at a hospital in Connecticut. She was the Mary in Peter, Paul and Mary. I learned of this while downstairs with the cable news on. I can remember Peter, Paul and Mary from way back, when I was a child. I don't know that I had any particular opinion of them. Folk music of that sort always seemed a bit corny to me – still does, really. It's interesting to read the obit (or to read other stuff about that time) and hear it all described as this really exciting, edgy music. Maybe a year ago I was watching a documentary, I think about Bob Dylan, and it came up that Peter, Paul, and Mary had been put together by Albert Grossman. The *Times* obit notes this – as well as Mary's role as the group's "sex appeal," and the fact that she never spoke onstage because Grossman wanted her to seem mysterious – but at the same time dodges the implications by focusing on the

“authenticity” of her, the group, the early scene. Reading the obit made me wonder about what seems edgy today that will appear thoroughly hokey to kids born ten years from now. [9/16]

KRISTOL, IRVING

Kristol died of lung cancer, at age 89, in Arlington, VA. I think I learned of this simply by checking *The Times*' online obits page early one morning. I can't claim much direct familiarity with Kristol's writing, but anybody who pays passing attention to politics knows his influence, by way of acolytes from William Buckley and David Brooks to, obviously, his son William. Apparently the cliché that a conservative is a liberal who has been “mugged by reality” belongs to Kristol. To have coined a durable cliché! That's something! I also am pretty sure he was in the documentary *Arguing The World*, with Nathan Glazer and others – I think there were four figures, and they'd known each other their entire adult lives, and their once-similar politics diverged. I wish I could remember it better. Not mentioned in the obit. [9/18]

SAFIRE, WILLIAM

Safire died of pancreatic cancer in a Rockville, Maryland, hospice, at age 79. This was a surprise to me, when I saw it leading the page on the *Times*' online obit list, on a routine Sunday check. I hadn't known he was sick. I never had any dealings with Safire. Despite my dislike of his politics, I thought he was quite a good writer. Someone told me a story about him, talking to Joe Nocera, who had started writing a weekly column for the *Times*. Apparently Safire asked Joe what *else* he did – after all, Safire was writing a couple of op-eds and the On Language column every week. Most people don't talk to Nocera that way, so I found it pretty amusing. [9/27]

FISHER, DON

Fisher died of cancer, at age 81, at home in San Francisco. I learned of this while leafing through the *WSJ*. A few years ago I was doing a lot of research on the Gap, planning a story that in the end didn't work out (about their attempts to revive the brand, blah blah blah). Interesting fact from the *Times* obit: Fisher's wife came up with the name (which was meant to reference the generation gap), and if she hadn't, “It would have been called Pants and Discs.” They sold music, as well as Levi's, at the original store. Many people don't even realize that the original Gap store was basically a Levi's outlet; the Gap-branded stuff came a bit later.

While I was researching that potential article, one of the ad guys I talked to put it really well by saying that in its 1990s heyday, the Gap *almost* became an iconic brand. It's floundered ever since. [9/28]

October

SOSA, MERCEDES

Sosa died in Buenos Aires at age 74, following struggles with kidney disease and other ailments. She was a singer, and I was introduced to her music by my friend J—, who is an Argentine as well. Sosa's music was often political, and J— was extremely political. She gave me a tape, which I imagine I still have somewhere, though it's not something that became a favorite. I was learning Spanish from J—, but was always fascinated with her actual life, before she left Argentina to come to New York. I never really learned all that much, just bits and pieces. [10/5]

PENN, IRVING

Penn died at home in Manhattan, at age 92. I learned of this from a headline on *Slate*; oddly the item was tagged "Recycled," which *Slate* uses when it's reprinting a piece that ran in the past – the last time Penn died? Anyway, I knew his name, and read the *Times* obit, which said his photography style was "recognizable to magazine readers and museumgoers worldwide." It was a long obit. I couldn't get into it. [10/8]

WASSERSTEIN, BRUCE

Wasserstein died in Manhattan after being hospitalized for an irregular heartbeat, at age 61. I think I saw this online, probably the *Times* site. I was always vaguely aware of Wasserstein as a Wall Street guy who dabbled in publishing, for reasons I always wondered about. I guess the bottom line is he just found it interesting. Certainly there are better ways to make more money. He bought the *American Lawyer* mini-empire from Steve Brill, I think not so long after I left that fold. The thing I remember is J— M— talking about Wasserstein's assessment of *AmLaw*'s Internet spinoff Counsel Connect. Brill always said it was "no-brainer" moneymaker. Wasserstein apparently said it was in fact "a money barbecue." Heh. More recently he bought *New York Magazine*, and a lot of the coverage of his illness, and then his death, centered on what would happen there. [10/14]

MIZZY, VIC

Mizzy died of heart failure, at home in Los Angeles, at age 93. I doubt I would have included this passing if it wasn't so widely noted, from blogland to NPR. (Is there a difference between blogland and NPR anymore? Never mind.) His claim to fame: He wrote the theme to *The Addams*

Family. Which is indeed a catchy theme. And the line “they’re altogether ooky” is particularly inspired. Also he wrote the theme to *Green Acres*, which is great, too. So finally I read his *Times* obit, which struggled to imply that he’d done lots of other things of note, but really, what he did is he wrote those two theme songs. And maybe that’s enough. [10/21]

SALES, SOUPY

Sales died in a hospice in The Bronx, of a variety of ailments, at age 83. The *Times* obit ID’d him as a “flinger of pies.” This seems a little insulting, somehow. But I guess it’s fair. Pie-flinging really *was* a big part of his act. He embodied a vision of showbiz in a particular cultural moment, and thus is an example of how embodying a moment eventually turns you into a relic. The moment always changes; if you exemplify the now, it is inevitable that you will exemplify the then. What I always want from people like Soupy Sales is to understand: What was it like to experience this when it was new? And when all that would come later was unknown and unknowable? The obit is not clear on how he ended up in a hospice in The Bronx. Annoying. [10/23]

BROWNE, RAY

Brown died at home in Bowling Green, Ohio, at age 87, of natural causes. I noticed his obituary online somewhere, and although I didn’t know the name, I was interested to see him described as a “founder” of pop-culture studies. In fact the obit credited him with coining the term “popular culture,” which seems astounding. (Another obit says that in fact the term goes back to 1854.) He taught at Bowling Green State, which I did know as famous for its popular culture department. I gather this guy founded that department back in 1973. I remember an article I read in *Rolling Stone* about the Bowling Green pop culture program and I thought it sounded incredible. (Actually it might have been in the *Times Magazine*.) My Radio-Television-Film “critical-cultural studies” degree is in effect a pop culture degree, or I think so at least. He also founded *The Journal of Popular Culture*. A quote from him: “Culture is everything from the food we’ve always eaten to the clothes we’ve always worn.” [10/28]

November

LÉVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE

Lévi-Strauss died at age 100, of cardiac arrest, at home in Paris. Here's another case where I had no idea the man was still alive. I learned of his passing from a headline in the *L.A. Times's* email newsletter thingy. I happen to be reading *The Gift*, by Lewis Hyde, I'm less than a hundred pages in and so far there's a lot drawn from anthropological and ethnographic studies of "primitive" cultures, which of course means Lévi-Strauss has been cited at least in passing. I read the *NYT's* obit with interest, to get a better handle on him and his contribution. The obit says that Lévi-Strauss championed the idea that tribal mythologies displayed a "subtle system of logic," which I take to mean that prior to his work they were just considered a jumble of backwards nonsense. He's also credited with the idea of "structuralism," identifying recurring patterns of thought and behavior and narrative across cultures. A background theme of his work was concern about modernity obliterating tribes, language, distinct cultures (which in fact was happening). (This concern about a "monoculture" is less common today, seems to me, when commentary often focuses on excitement about cross-cultural pollination in the global village – "transculturalism.") On the flip side, he apparently wrote a *NYR* essay (no date given) which argued the West was, the obit summarizes, "'allowing itself to forget or destroy its own heritage.' With the fading of myth's power in the modern West, he also suggested that music had taken on myth's function. Music, he argued, had the ability to suggest, with primal narrative power, the conflicting forces and ideas that lie at the foundation of society." [11/4]

December

CLANCY, LIAM

Clancy, 74, died in Cork, Ireland; he had suffered from pulmonary fibrosis. He was the last of the Clancy Brothers. I see the Clancy Brothers from time to time on this or that documentary about music – for example I'm pretty sure they came up in that Dylan thing that was on TV a couple of years ago. My reaction to the Clancy Brothers is the same as my reaction to Peter, Paul, and Mary, only more so. They're always cited as an example of folk music that's described as being really un-pop, having an anti-the-mainstream sound that mesmerized people like, well, like Dylan. Then we'll see a clip and it's these four guys in big white sweaters who strike me as possibly the most toothless and sachharine thing in the world. They look like a bunch of phonies, and a bit of a joke. And the music sounds, to me, incredibly tepid and safe. I don't say of this to rag on the Clancy Brothers. I say this because I assume that in real time, it would have felt, looked, sounded, very different, because of the contemporary context. It's nearly impossible to comprehend ground-breaking culture from before you were born, because, you know, you never knew the world in which that ground was broken. For me, the Clancy Brothers are a particularly stark example. [12/5]

HOVING, THOMAS

Hoving, who was 78, died of lung cancer at his home in Manhattan. We were in New Orleans when I noticed this online, the headline as well as the *NYT* byline (a friend's). I figured this was the Hoving of John McPhee's "A Roomful of Hovings," an old *New Yorker* piece and the title of one of McPhee's collections. It was a pretty long obit, so I made a note to get to it later. As it happened I ended up killing time in a mall Starbucks later that day (long story) where the *Times* was for sale. It was another one of those moments when I reflected on how much more of the paper I read when I'm reading it on paper. I don't know if that's because of the physical form, or because when reading online, there are always so many more choices just a click away, and it feels urgent to get on to whatever's next. Anyway I read the whole thing, and it was quite interesting. Most notably Hoving, who was director of the Met for a decade, among other things, was responsible for the famous touring King Tut exhibition from the 1970s. It's hard to believe what a huge deal that was at the time. Also, McPhee's piece is mentioned in passing. So, yeah, same guy. [12/10]

ROBERTS, ORAL

Roberts died of complications from pneumonia, at age 91, in Newport Beach, California. We heard this on the radio, somewhere in Florida, driving home from New Orleans. Roberts was quite well known even when I was a child, a giant of televangelism. I guess I hadn't realized he was a pioneer of the modern iteration of "prosperity gospel." I can't remember a time when I didn't assume that guys like him were (are) total charlatans. Apparently his involvement with modern media came about when he started bringing cameras to film his traveling tent services, which involved laying on of hands and the whole nine yards. Of course he was a massive success, making enough money to found his university and generally live like a lord. From time to time his schemes collapsed – there's a bit in the obit about a hospital project that ran aground – and his son died of a self-inflicted gunshot. In the car, E remarked at what a strange name Oral is. "Better than Anal," I said. I wonder how many people have made some version of that exact same joke? [12/15]

MURPHY, BRITTANY

Murphy died at age 32 at home in Los Angeles, of causes not immediately clear. (She apparently simply collapsed, and some reports said she'd been ill.) An actress, she was pretty successful, and I particularly remember her as being quite good in *8 Mile*. That said, I didn't initially recognize the name when E, on the couch with her laptop, told me this news. I read the obit, which said she was often cast as "ditz with an edge," in *Clueless* and various other movies and TV shows. Most notably from my point of view, she contributed the voice of Luann in *King of the Hill*. Anyway, rather sad. [12/21]

CHESNUTT, VIC

Chesnutt, 45, died in a hospital in Athens, Georgia (where he lived), after overdosing on muscle relaxers. I was more familiar with the *idea* of Chesnutt than with his music – a guy critics referred to, and who always seemed to be giving an interview on NPR. That sounds dismissive, but I don't mean it that way: I just recognized his name on the *Times'* obit page, without having a very good handle on his music, let alone a real opinion about it. Even having read the obit, I can't say I recognized any of the titles. I'll have to check out his work some time. [12/25]

LEVINE, DAVID

Levine died of prostate cancer and other illnesses, at age 83, in Manhattan. I think I first noticed this on the *Design Observer* site, during a morning sweep through Bloglines, where I found it noted many places. At first I wasn't sure if I should really include it, since I'd never really thought about Levine all that much. But upon reflection, I've been subscribing to the *New York Review* for many years now, and whether I thought about Levine or not, I sure have noticed his work. I can't think offhand of another example of a publication I associate so strongly with one artist. It's hard for me to imagine the *NYR* without Levine's drawings, actually. According to the *Times* obit, he did something like 3,800 drawings for the *NYR*, starting in 1963, the year it was founded. While the *Times* piece addresses the elements that made his style unique, it didn't deal with the question I often had about his work, which was whether or not his drawings were influenced by the review or essay they accompanied, or if they simply reflected his own views and interpretation, purely. I can't think of a specific example, but at times his work seemed to reflect a view quietly at odds with the accompanying piece. As a writer I'm often annoyed when that happens to me, but then my work is rarely paired with that of someone like Levine. As it happens, a few days later I was going through some old issues of the *NYR*, throwing them out. And there was a Levine rendering of Matt Klam from about ten years ago, right around the time I edited and was somewhat chummy with him, back when I worked for the *Times Magazine*. I'd just recently gotten Klam to write a story for the Significant Objects project, and had a nice experience re-connecting with him. This old illustration reminded me that when I was younger I had fantasized about being a successful and important enough writer to be caricatured by Levine some day. Now I know that will never happen. But don't misunderstand: I also know it wouldn't have happened if Levine had lived to the age of 200, and I've known it for years. It's okay. [12/29]

Lastly

"Where Were You? 2009."

Unlimited Edition

All this stuff was written by R. Walker

Feedback: murketing@robwalker.net

Notes:

1. The date at the end of each entry refers to the date on the obituary or news story I was looking at when I wrote the entry.
2. Names of acquaintances who are mentioned here through no fault of their own have been disguised.
3. Illustrations (except for Toolman) from *Pictorial Archive of Quaint Woodcuts in the Chap Book Style*, by Josheph Crawhall, selected and arranged by Theodore Menten (Dover); and *Handbook of Pictorial Symbols*, Rudolf Modley (Dover).
4. Thanks, Harold Check, for making this happen, doing the hard stuff, making me think, and introducing me to the actual music of Vic Chestnutt.
5. Thanks of course, most of all, one more time, for everything and forever, to E.

SFN PRODUCT 013

From the same author on Feedbacks

Where Were You? (2010) (2011)

The latest in an ongoing series of notations concerning high-profile or otherwise notable deaths. Since 1992 have I recorded “where I was” when I learned about such passings, along with whatever thoughts I have about the person who has died. The present volume covers deaths that occurred in 2010.



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