

the florida digressions

Fock 1: Sarasota Noochin'

Those southerly rides that had passed through Tifton and Savannah and St. Simon's Island all had one thing in common: they were just pauses on the way to Florida. With Nooch having relocated from Boston to the suncoast city of Sarasota, with me having vacation time up the yin-yang, and with my concurrent propensities for both roadtrippin' and warmth, Florida became the destination of choice for many '80's and '90's excursions. Often they involved other people, such as when Cliff and I did the Boston-to-Sarasota run in 24 hours (1440 miles), or when eight of us converged on Nooch Manor for his summertime wedding weekend. But, sometimes they were solo rides too.



The Nooch years were good years indeed. He was a key catalyst in our party circle in Boston in the early 80's, and when he fled the northeast to kick-start his life in warmer climes, it gave us a place to come and play when we, too, sought respite from winter's wrath. Or summer's.

Nooch has a contagious good nature, and a sincere love for his fellow man. He made a brief and misguided venture into a seminary, but quickly came to his senses and returned to secular life as a religion teacher at Don Bosco, a now-defunct technical high school wedged into the crush of downtown Boston. He had a great impact on the kids, but the salary wasn't cutting it, and Boston itself was bringing the man down. When the house he was living in got sold, and he was forced to find a new place to live, he looked south. His parents had a place in Sarasota, so he picked that area to start over. Soon he met the woman of his dreams, Bonnie, in a club called Blueberry Hill (yeah, go ahead, sing the verse), and that, as they say,

was that.

The Nooch Chronicles would be a lengthy treatise unto themselves, but I couldn't help letting my mind slide into some of those Sarasota misadventures as the miles and miles of I-65 rolled on. Solo roadtrippin' is great that way; your van takes you so many places, but, on the way, your mind takes you to so many more, and you are unencumbered by modular time concepts.

Back in the summer of 1990 – Max did 15,043 miles in two months that summer -- on the weekend of Nooch's wedding, the five of us who comprised Party Boy, Inc.— Colyer, Cliff, Richie, Nooch, and I (see pic) – plus a couple of guests, were driving home from the Sarasota Brewing Company in Max. We were tipsy, and for some reason, the tunes were turned off. Somebody in the back – I think it was Cliff – bellowed, "How 'bout some music??"



In response, I began to vocalize a drum beat: *Ba-buppa-ba, ba-ba-buppa-boom, Ba-buppa-ba, ba-ba-buppa-boom*, repeating those bars in regularly varied tones. Colyer, who always clicked with my wavelength better than anybody – or did I click with his? – picked up on my beat and began his own

complementary rhythm: *Chhhh-ch-ch-chhhh, chhhh-ch-ch-chhh-CHHH, Chhhh-ch-ch-chhhh, chhhh-ch-ch-chhh-CHHH...*

One by one, each passenger joined the jam, some with a *weow-wowwww* of a guitar, others with a *du-du-dudu-dudidu* of some keyboardish thing, until we were all singing a great mesh of music.

Steve and I stuck to the spinal rhythms and let the others play off of it. We slowed the pace into a bluesy feel, then zapped it back up to a rockin' crescendo. I wish I had a tape of it; it was really, really good. For a while. Then we got kinda sloppy, and people got kinda obnoxious and silly, as drunks are wont to do, and we became just a chaotic clamor.

So then I turned the tape deck on.

In subsequent gatherings, I have tried to get similar jammings going, but it has never worked like that night.

That fivesome had damn good chemistry. And when we grouped together, strange things came about.

Booze was a factor, and so was what Nooch referred to as "The Eighth Sacrament." Being a religion teacher at the time, and having served some seminary time, we just took that in stride. It must have been a Rastafarian seminary though, if you drift my catch.

The Bahai Hut in Sarasota was a common launching pad for our nocturnal frolicking. Of course, we weren't shy about somersaulting our brains by Nooch's pool all afternoon either. But the Bahai Hut had Mai-Tai's that they claimed were legendary, and the house rule was that two was your limit. So, we would tumble in there, full of laughter and good spirits, make friends with our server, and order up a round of Mai-Tai's. They were large, and they were indeed strong. I thought there was supposed to be some fruit juice of some kind in that drink, but it tasted like all booze. I think they even made the ice out of rum somehow.

So, we'd pretty quickly be ordering up a second round, and if we could finagle it from a different server, or have somebody get it from the bar we would. That way, they might lose count of our rounds. *Let's see...they had onnnne, they had anotheerrr, that makes twooooo...*

Then we flagged down our server, and tried to scare up round number three. But she was on to us, and said no-go, bo-zo.

As we glumly began to shift ourselves into we're-outa-here position, she quickly added, "but you can get anything else, if you want."

We hesitated. "Can I get a Long Island Iced Tea?" I asked.

"Sure!" she replied, "Anybody else?"

Okaaaaay... there's a two Mai-Tai limit, but I can chase them with a nice, tall, FIVE liquor drink. We didn't have to open the door to leave later, we just flowed under it.

From there, it was off to the Quay, Sarasota's biggest social attraction. Such places can be found in most good-sized cities: upper-end clothing stores, gift shops, probably a Brookstone's, and several nice restaurants and cafés, and even a couple of hotels. Being a coastal city, Sarasota's Quay had the added feature of a large and beautiful marina. Boaters could pull in, dock, de-boat, and shop. Nice.

Nooch and I used to go down there sometimes around 5:00 in the afternoon, just as the Happy Hours were getting underway. The booze wasn't the main lure, to be honest. We could have found better HH deals at ChaCha Coconuts on St. Armand's Circle or at The Sarasota Brewing Company, which was one of my personal favorites for their delicious Ya Mills Honey Mead Ale, and the cranking live music of The Telephone Kings.

No, the extra lure of the Quay was the food. A few of the lounge areas of the nicer dockside restaurants – The Chophouse & Down Under, and Ripples, for instance – put out a fantastic spread for the after-work crowd. The Quay is a classy area, and they are classy places, intended for classy clientele. Most people there were well dressed. I was just, well, dressed.

I couldn't believe my eyes when the complimentary food was brought out. Hot, steaming turkeys fresh from the oven, and a huge roast beef, just as freshly roasted. A chef stood in attendance at the table, eager to carve however much of whichever you desired. Freshly baked bread accompanied the meat, as did a veggies-and-dips tray that would make even Rolando Machichi envious, whoever the hell he is.

I ate my fill. It was excellent! And free! I mean, I bought a cocktail – OK, more than just one – but that was over on the table; the chef had no way of knowing whether I had bought anything or not. A small jazz ensemble played some head-nodding tunes to keep everyone in the movin'-easy mood, and, just outside, the sun slowly drifted down into the Gulf of Mexico.

Scruffy people would certainly stand out here – I bordered on self-consciousness myself, and that's rare for me on the road – but anyone with a decent appearance and a quietly confident demeanor could survive quite well on these Happy Hour feasts. There was another place that had free slices of pizza! Mama Mia, man, go Italiano tonight!

If I ever find myself homeless, the Quay would be a good place to try to hang.

Anyway, later that particular night, after the Bahi Hut swillfest, we went down to the Quay to check out Club Bandstand, their large and well-to-do dance club. Colyer had to buy a sleeved shirt in order to get in – similar to Pink Cadillac in Hilton Head -- but apparently he didn't even have to wear it once he got through the door, as a number of studly guys were struttin' their pecks and such shirtless, and posing with attitude. Richie got bounced from the club, though. Not that he was missing much. Except for Colyer and his Intercourse Shuffle, none of us were really dance club types.

Colyer took George Bernard Shaw's comment to heart – "Dancing is the vertical expression of a horizontal desire" – and used an unmistakable hip thrust and arm pump throughout his gyrations as he danced close with his chosen lady.

Anyway, at the Bandstand that night, Richie may not have been any worse than the rest of us, but he and his brother Dan both had the unfortunate characteristic of becoming quite rubber-faced when they reached a certain state of inebriation: the jaw kinda hangs, the eyes sag open as if the bottom eyelid is too heavy, and the head does the noddy-dog thing a lot. Well, Richie found himself faced with two bouncers, and he cut to the chase: "Ammm I beeein' throwwn owwwt?" Oh ya. Bye bye.

Of course, we didn't know this right away, so eventually I went out to look for him. He had found Max, and had settled into a nice spot by the rear bumper, half under a very neatly-trimmed bush, half on asphalt.

We conversed, after a fashion. I unlocked Max, and suggested that, when he felt sufficiently rested, he relocate himself onto the soft and comfortable bed inside. With the reassurance that he only needed a few more minutes where he was, he agreed, and bid me TTFN.

I went back inside, informed the group that Richie had indeed been found, and that all was under control. We resumed our foolish revelry.

An hour or so later, as we departed the club, there was no Richie. We looked everywhere. The parking lot was right next to the harbor, and we could easily picture him bubbling over to the wall to look at the pretty water, and falling into it. We had little confidence in his swimming ability at that point. Or walking, for that matter.

We searched all around the lot, in all the bushes, with no luck. We theorized that he had hailed a cab and gone back to Nooch's house, but we doubted that, since no cabbie would know how to respond to "*Take me to Nooooooch's*". Calling the local police was the next option, since he may well have been whisked away in their dustpan with the rest of the rubbish as they did their sweep through the parking lot.

Then, he appeared. A good two hundred yards away, he came walking through the now-empty lot from around the building. We knew it was him. We all recognized the tipsy walk. Takes one to know one, after all. And, of course, he had a good tale to tell.

For some reason, when he stirred from the bush, he walked away from my van, a tad disoriented. As he zigzagged through the large parking lot, he spied a black Pontiac Fiero. In those days, Nooch drove a black Pontiac Fiero. Temporarily losing sight of the fact that the seven or eight of us (Linda, Laurie Mac, and Bonnie were with us too, I think, but I'm not sure about that either) could not have fit in that two-seater, Richie opened the passenger door, and settled in for a snooze.

When the car's owner showed up, opened his car and saw Richie in there, he was livid. "What the FUCK are you DOING in MY CAR?!?!?" he roared. We could all picture Richie looking up all googly-eyed, taking a quick but blurry reconnoiter, then spilling out of the car with a simple, "Sssorrrry," and walking unsteadily off.

A day or so later, we all took Nooch's dad's boat out to this sandbar area on the outer edge of Sarasota Harbor. Deep water all around, but only about waist deep for an area about the size of a baseball diamond. We parked and de-boated into the warm Gulf water. Tunes blasted out of the

boombox, and the cooler kept us supplied with beverage as we danced and dug the sunshine and the shiny city skyline.

It wasn't long before another boat caught our happy karma and came over to join us. They even brought "extra beer"! I don't know if I've ever had "extra beer", but these folks openly bragged about it, so we availed ourselves of it.

Soon a third boat pulled up, with a tall, tall tower used for spotting poor little fishies before killing them. They parked on the edge of the sandbar, where the water went from three feet deep to about twelve feet deep right away. So, I climbed their tower while nobody was paying attention, and hurled myself off the top. Fortunately, I was sober enough to leap to the correct side.

But the day climaxed when this huge bull of a racing boat, called a Scarab, pulled up. I mean this thing was a quarter-million-dollar rocket ship on the water: it was about 30 feet long, had two huge and shiny V-12 engines, and was as sleek as a surfboard. The owner/driver was this stud of a 25-year-old man, with model good looks and weightlifter's physique. You know, the type of guy who's going nowhere in life.

He hung out with us for a little while before asking, "Anybody want to take a ride in the Scarab?" Colyer and Laurie Mac and I leaped at the opportunity.

Beers in hand, we boarded the racing boat. It felt heavy and strong in the water. Biff, or whatever his name was, told us he'd be taking it slow till he cleared the harbor, and slowly accelerated. It didn't feel slow to me! The nose of the boat lifted out of the water, and all we could see was Biff's back silhouetted against the afternoon sun. We were zooming.

Then, with a quick look back, he warned us, "Everybody hanging on?" We, of course, assumed he meant to our beers, so we said "Oh ya" and casually laid a hand on a rail or chair.

He gunned it. The boat stood straight up with a roar, and exploded across the water. The three of us were on our asses in the back, thrown back by the blast-off. We looked at each other and laughed, because all three of us had crushed our beer cans in our hands as we fell backwards. Our instinct was to clutch for something, but it competed with our more powerful instinct of not letting go of our beers, and the result was hand-crushed beer.

We regained our composure enough to scream out a few *Wooooooo's*, settled in, and relished the roaring rush of wind past our faces.

"Everybody OK back there?" Biff bellowed.

"Yup. Just fine!" we called back, thinking that it was nice of him to be so concerned.

"Okayyyy..." he said.

Then he CUT the wheel hard and jacked that boat into a hairpin turn. It was downright sideways. Seated on the left hand side of the boat (fuck that "port" and "starboard" shit), my port ear was just about in the water. Colyer and Laurie Mac toppled down onto me as the boat bit into the turn. We were howling. Beer was all over us, but we still clutched our crumpled empty cans.

The boat straightened out and we were flung to the other side. The Scarab roared an angry curse at the water and blasted ahead again. We were hysterical with laughter. Buzzed bigtime anyway, the sensory overload was tremendous: the deafening engines, the flying spray, the physical beating.

When he glided the boat back to the sandbar, we pretty much fell out into the water. Gasping and laughing, hair in electrified disarray, and beer cans still clenched tightly, we looked like we had been taken to the Island Of The Insane and back.

Best ride ever.

Great group of friends that was. But time moves lives in different directions.

Enjoy your friends while you got 'em.