

Johnnie Ray on Twenty-Fourth Street

It was one of those balmy evenings when I was browsing through the books at Cover to Cover. I was weaving my way through the aisles searching for I don't know what when - BAM! the book I didn't know existed reached right up and grabbed me by the eye balls. I whipped the book up in a frenzy because it was the only copy and because my harrowing thoughts were that someone else would get it first. This was probably unlikely since the young woman with the baby in a stroller was eyeing a murder mystery and the man in front of the store was searching the bargain shelf.

The book is CRY, The Johnnie Ray story by Johnny Whiteside (Barricade Books, NY, 1994). I walked slowly down 24th - headed for Rory's for a peppermint ice cream fix. I pass the large African American man who sings cacophonously at passersby. He sings about Jesus. I find his swollen ulcerated ankles worrisome. I put a coin in his styrofoam begging cup because I appreciate that he is at least making an effort to create music.

Johnnie like many other white boys of his time, slipped into jute joints to watch and listen to black performers. This is where he learned style and rhythm. His voice could have been male or female. He tore at his clothes and fell to his knees in gospels to love.

We were not allowed to listen to the likes of Johnnie Ray or Elvis, the white boy who followed his lead. I went to a boarding school in the Excelsior district and Sister Consuella was horrified that such debauched people were allowed to perform and cut records. But what did she know she was our music teacher. I was a Chuck Berry fan, myself. I liked rock and roll and men with long hair and women draped in love beads who danced to heavy metal. My real introduction to Johnnie Ray was right here on 24th Street when I was joined on the bench out

side of Noe Valley Bakery & Bread Co. by a woman from London -- that's England - I say that because the last time I booked a flight there - the person I was booking the flight with didn't know what country London was in - "Spain? Italy? Germany?" "England," I replied imaging the woman on the phone locked in a basement her entire life and being forced to answer phones for the airlines.

So there we were Jennie, my new friend, and me sitting on the bench outside of the Bakery gobbling pastries, shamelessly stuffing our medically rebellious bodies with fatty starches and letting the crumbs fall to roving gangs of pigeons.

"I always loved groups when I was a teenager," Jennie told me, "Any kind of groups. I even joined *the sewing circle* which was at a Methodist church. God knows why they called it *the sewing circle*. There were boys and girls involved and we never sewed anything. Then the next thing I knew I was organizing tours for Johnnie Ray and making money from his fan clubs. The first money I received I lost. I was riding my bike through London and it fell from my pocket."

According to Jonny Whitesides' book, Johnnie Ray was bisexual. He had a long term relationship with Dorothy Killgallan, a journalist. He was arrested in Detroit for asking a plain clothes cop up to his apartment. This may seem a bit over the edge to people who are now in their twenties. - But then it wasn't too long ago a girl could be arrested for carrying a condom in her purse - after all only prostitutes did that.

Jennie told me she was known as Johnnie Ray's number one fan. She lived in a one room apartment over a wash shop - known in these parts as a laundromat. The clubs were run by different boys and girls who were rivals with one another. "We were all around 15 years old." Jennie had a few run-ins in with law. "I remember being at the back of the stage door at the

London Palladium," she confessed, "There was something that was binding the door together and we wanted to get in to see Johnnie, so we started to flick matches to burn off the binding and nearly started a serious fire." The Palladium did burn down years later, hopefully it had nothing to do with Johnnie's number one fan.

"We use to hang around in the West End going from place to place - what happened was one night when we were hanging around the streets - It was real late - 2 or 3 in the morning. Johnnie Ray would not get to the hotel until early morning. We would hang around until he got back and then we would go home. One night we were picked up by the police. They questioned us as to how old we were. Most of us were under 15. There was no curfew after age 16. My friend Maggie was 16 and the cop said she could go home but she insisted on staying with us, her friends, and rode to the station in the *black maria* (Paddy wagon). They wanted to know who our parents were. All I could think about was *I haven't done anything wrong*. I said I was staying with friends and my parents knew about it. We all said we lived with Maggie. So Maggie's mother and brother walked from North London to the West End to collect us from jail at 4 O'clock in the morning. Maggie's mum embraced us and said, 'Hullo my darlings. Now, they've not been beating you have they?' I was in awe of the cheek she gave to the police."

It seems that most of the kids in the clubs were marginal, shoplifting, running away, breaking windows, that sort of thing. Johnnie Ray was a rebel because, "He was gay and would always have his boyfriends around. Plus the boyfriend of the moment," Jennie told me through bites of another large bit of pastry she'd just pulled from her bag. "I remember one we use to call Della. One night we watched Johnnie and Rudolf Nureyev go into the hotel together. When they saw us watching them, they did a little show. They stood by the window. First Johnnie took his

watch off then Rudolf took his watch off. Then Rudolf took his tie off - then Johnnie took his tie off - then they closed the curtain.

"Johnnie was blond with blue eyes and a really beautiful smile. He seemed very Californian to us. He was tall slim and real sweet. He was a man who actually sang out his emotions. He didn't mind when his fans would run up and give him a kiss. Poor man was so violated by all these fans. He never got angry, although the people around would get angry with us. He never went out of his way to loose us. He knew we were following him. Occasionally reporters would follow him but they wouldn't stay all night like we would. They were always there at the Airport. The airports were a real scene. He use to come to parties we arranged for him.

"He came to my friend Jimmy's council flat (housing project). It was located in the worst part of London. Maggie wouldn't come because Jimmy was a rival fan club member. One friend made a beautiful yellow dress for the occasion. We were all busy with our hair and stuff. The whole council block was a mass of people wanting to see and party with Johnnie Ray. He came and mingled with us. He had such an easy manner. He was not in the least bit arrogant."

According to Whiteside's book, Johnnie had an operation to correct a hearing loss in one ear and was left with an 80 % hearing loss. He wore a very large hearing aid in one ear. His records and performances made millions over the years and he ended up broke. His manager ripped him off - plus Johnnie was a bit of a lush. He died of liver disease in 1990.

Jennie went back to England and I wondered about her on this day as I headed for Rory's with Johnnie Ray's life clutched to my bosom. After ice cream I will go to Lamplighters and see if they have his old records like "The Little White Cloud That Cried."

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