

Travels with Charlie

A tribute to Charlie Halloran, aka Peter Pan, aka Chaz. By Christine Carraher and Philip M. Klasky.



From right to left: Charlie, Christine Carraher, and two British fellow travelers, somewhere between Greece and Spain, 1980.

When we met Charlie it was in a wintry orange grove outside the small ancient port of Nafplio in the Peloponnese, Greece, and we knew him as “Peter.” He wore the leather cap shown in the photo, decorated with a feather, like Peter Pan, and with his ever-ready flute he had busked his way from the subways of Paris. Charlie, the pied piper, was always leading the way to fun.

With his joyful spirit Charlie stood out even among the rather fantastical crowd of expatriates and vagabonds picking oranges that December, earning just enough *drachma* to buy the evening’s ouzo until the olive harvest should become ripe in Crete. He would suddenly break full-throated into show tunes in the fields, and tell us of how his whole big family in Delaware were always singing.

There were several colorful (orange) Rajneeshi in town and he had become close friends with two of them – not sure if he was flirting with spiritual philosophy or their followers.

When an untimely frost destroyed the orange and lemon crops in Greece, several of us crammed into a big red van driven by a couple Londoners and sang our way through snowy Europe all the way to Spain, to seek work in the orange groves of Valencia. But there was no work to be found, so the red van moved on to continue adventures in Morocco. There we left the group to travel on our own, and so did Peter Pan.

All the world meets on Haight Street, and it was in a drug store on Haight Street that Phil and “Peter” happily reencountered one another, opening the next phase of our friendship and artistic collaboration in San Francisco. We then learned that he had another name -- Charlie Halloran -- and another life. At that time Charlie was living in the upper Haight in a big old Victorian with ever so many wonderful women.

Circa 1984 we started an activist art collective with Charlie and others called “Fire in the Lake” to fundraise for Amnesty International with a series of performances and a book of political art (Conspire: To Breathe Together).



From left to right: Charlie; our only customer; Christine Carraher; Anonymous; Cynthia Wolterding; Robert Davis; and James Bergeron. Photo by Phil Klasky.

One of our more hare-brained schemes was to dress up like stereotypical San Francisco “natives” and charge tourists to take their pictures with us down at Fisherman’s Wharf. As our Polaroid broke immediately, we resorted to charging people to take photos of us with their own cameras. We did actually have a single customer, the gentleman next to Charlie holding the sign, “Hi Folks, I’m just hangin’ out with the locals!!” Charlie’s cowhide dress was a staple in his party wardrobe at that time.



From left to right: Charlie; Merle Bachman; Phil Klasky; Christine Carraher.

Clearly we had to find other ways to make money, but we refused to stop having fun. The collective held a series of performance benefits, and in this photo we’re prepping for a show on Capp Street. Different Bay Area artists contributed dance, performance art, music, and poetry, and the collective grew. We featured speakers from human rights organizations and eventually raised enough funds to publish the book, which includes Charlie’s artwork.



A benefit dance performance choreographed by Christine Carraher. Dancers: Ann Meisner; Anna Celeste; Charlie; Suzanne (Olive) Toscani; Jody Suden.

Notes on Charlie (by Phil Klasky):

It feels as though Charlie is still somehow with us. He was a dear friend with an ebullient spirit and a wonderful creative style -- all the way to the end. I recognize parts of him in other people who I love, but he was truly an original. I will never forget the way his sister Nancy organized his support team. It was a joy and a privilege to visit him on my appointed day and assist this gracious and lively artist seek comfort through his illness. I watched him become a rapidly aging man with dignity and style. I cherish our adventures and the special gleam in his eyes as he sought love and friendship, and created hats, clothing, dance, costumes and mischief. He sought human rights as both a personal and political goal. If only ...

Phil Klasky, July 2013

Notes on Charlie (by Christine Carraher):

We danced. Charlie danced for a small modern dance company and he danced for me, but mostly he danced spontaneously, always, and everywhere. I remember a party at our apartment on Oak Street where we had a dance contest; I can see Charlie on James Bergeron's shoulders, and if I'm not mistaken they bit the ankles of their closest competitors. They won.

He adored beauty. He wanted to learn to sew and I tried to teach him to use my sewing machine, but really he had no patience for those straight seams – his genius was in wildness, and shaping wildness. He struggled a little at fashion school with the pattern drafting and those dull technical requirements, but let him loose with fabric and paint and inks and glues, and he created magic.

I somehow came by a dress that we both loved – simple unadorned black silk with the subtle and sophisticated tailoring and drape of the 1940s. It had been made for someone tall and it fit us both. I know it inspired some of his own creations. He borrowed it from me for an occasion and at some point during the night, out on the street, some basher threw eggs at him and they broke on the dress. He flew upstairs and grabbed a bucket of red paint, and he ran through the streets barefoot, screaming for the bastards to come back and be marked with their crime. He never found them.

A version of that episode will appear in the novel I'm writing, a small but pivotal moment in a work that is both a relic of the epidemic and a meditation on the desert and the urge to disappear. I left San Francisco for the desert when Charlie was sick, and I realized years later that, after burying so many, I simply could not stay and watch Charlie die. I now understand my own trauma of that time, but I am sad that as his friend I could not stay by him and face what he was facing. Happily, he was surrounded by friends and loved ones who did not let him down. Charlie's birthday is still marked on my calendar. He still lives in my heart and in my work.

Christine Carraher, July 2013