

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



NoDa Soda

Random Recollections of the 1990s on North Davidson

by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) May
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Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) moseyed over to The Smelly Cat coffeehouse on East 36th Street in NoDa (North Davidson, Charlotte, NC, USA), after having eaten a tasty Sunday brunch at Cabo Fish Taco. I ordered us a pair of Monique's favorite: caramel-flavored black coffee, extra sweet, lots of whipped cream. 600 calories to burn.

We found a cozy table outside. The April morning air was pleasantly dry and mild. I began to tell Monique about NoDa in the 1990s, starting out with 1991 – the year I arrived on the scene under the nom de brosse of m. van tryke.

Monique had virtually no knowledge of NoDa's history, as she didn't live in Charlotte prior to 2011 (when we got married). I told her that this energetic guy from the Boston area named Terry Carano got smitten by the art bug late in life and decided to go for it, all out. (Rest in peace, Terry.)

"So, where did Terry go to art school?" Monique asked.

"Carano graduated from the School of Naïveté with honors. He was determined to create the most famous co-op art gallery in the world: Absinthe."

"Absinthe? What is Absinthe?"

"It's a liquor drink made from wormwood, Monique. Artists would claim that it would help to inspire them. The green fairy, they would often call it."

"Oh, did you drink any?"

"No, I've never tried it, but you can buy it at the ABC store. Terry just wanted an art-related name, I guess."

“Did the gallery become world famous?” Monique asked with raised eyebrows. Cute eyebrows.

“Uh, not exactly, 32. It’s now the place where we just ate.”

“Cabo Fish Taco?”

“Yeah, that would be the space. Actually, that space became 23 Studio during the summer of ‘92. Another artist named Lepton Neutrino – or more commonly known as Steve Holt – kept the ship off the rocks until the fall of 2002. Then the old Woolworth Building was felled, and the Cabo edifice was built.”

“I see.” Monique was genuinely intrigued by the history.

“We had quite an amazingly improbable run. All kinds of art and artists passed through there over those 11 years. There were some monumental turnouts on Gallery Crawl nights.”

“Gallery crawl nights?”

“The first Friday of every month. And later on, the third Friday was added, though it was always much smaller than the first Friday.”

“Was any art being purchased, or was it just a drunk fest?”

“Art was actually being bought and sold. Just ask Jerry Kirk (Agent 51). And, no, it wasn’t just a mindless drunk fest. Well, not in the beginning.”

“How about the artists ... did any of you become famous?”

“No, not that I am aware of. But Joe Behm would announce to everyone that came in the door that we were the best artists in the world.” I chuckled. “It made us feel good. What a showman that guy was.”

“Where are Terry and Joe now?”

“Uh, they’re dead.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s ok. They weren’t spring chickens when they checked out. They had an honest go at it.” I watched some cyclists pass by. “Those early Gallery Crawls were something else. They were pack-a-zoid, Monique. The sidewalks were so jammed; strollers were forced into the street. Bands – like The Ravelers and Tranzend – would play behind the gallery. Eventually, Pat’s Tavern was internally connected to 23 Studio to facilitate alcohol transit. We even shot Z-Axis public access videos in the gallery. Fun times. Great memories.”

“Wow! Wish I could have been here then.”

“Well, I was looking for you, Agent 32.”

“I bet you were, 33.” She laughed.

“Oh, and we had this lounge-like setting inside 23 Studio.”

“Really?”

“Yep. The artists and their friends would sit on the couches and chairs and chat about art – and non-art – matters.”

“A salon?”

“Of sorts. Of odd sorts. Yeah, it was whey kewl.”

“Parkaar, [my ailing alias] I don’t trust your spellings.”

“Are you seeing my words again, you synesthesiatic one?”

Monique laughed for a few seconds. “No, I just know your word games, 33. Remember, I’m your <poof> weeder.”

“Oh, yes. Now, how could eyes forget?”

“I don’t know. How could you?”

“Well, I seem to forget many things in my old age.”

“You’re not that old!”

“I’m ancient history, Agent 32. I’m yesterday’s slightly emetic aftertaste.”

“You’re making bizarre statements again for the audio recorder, aren’t you?” Monique asked with a stern look.

But, before I could respond to Monique’s question, an early 40s Latino hipster dude stopped at our table. “Hey man, I heard you guys talking about the NoDa scene in the ‘90s. I was there, too. I was even there in 1990 when it was known as the Historic North Charlotte Arts District.”

“Yeah, I remember that mouthful of an appellation.”

“Appalachian?” Monique asked, looking confused.

“Well, it sounds like that, Monique, but isn’t quite as inclined. Hey, who coined the term NoDa anyway?”

The Hispanic hipster groomed his goatee. “Boy, I’ve heard that debate many times. One time back in ’94, this guy asked me at 35th and North Davidson: ‘Is this NoDa?’ I just said: ‘No dah. Not, no duh, dude.’ I even repeated it for emphasis.”

“And what happened?” I asked, intrigued by his anecdote.

“He just kept walking up the sidewalk,” the hipster said. “Not sure if it sank in with him. He seemed pretty focked up.”

The Latino hipster dude then moved along towards Yadkin Avenue. Twenty seconds later, and he was gone. *Wonder where he’s going? To get a fix?*

Monique looked across East 36th Street at the Neighborhood Theater. “What is that over there?”

“Well, it was once a movie theater. Then it was a church. Now it’s a music hall. Bands play there. Todd Rundgren played there. And supposedly when Mr. Rundgren saw the marquee sign with his name in assorted letter colors, fonts and sizes, he exclaimed: “Jeez-us effing Christ, what the hell happened to my career?!”

Monique had a quizzical look. “He’s a famous artist?”

“Yes, a musical artist.”

“Did he stop in 23 Studio?”

“I don’t think so. I think he just played, then split for the next town.”

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