



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Cities
Hollywood**

Hollywood, California Report One

February 23, 2005

This is Your on the Street Reporter, reporting from Hollywood, California. The reason you are receiving reports from Hollywood is because I'm continuing my nation-wide investigation into the price of Hennessy XO. Hollywood is a fine place for doing research on expensive brandies. Like Las Vegas, it's famous for its excess.

Upon arriving at Los Angeles, the American Airlines flight attendants requested we passengers remain seated until military personnel had exited the aircraft. Everyone gladly waited for these folks to leave the plane. As they walked down the aisles toward the exit, they were greeted and bade farewell with applause from passengers. The looks on their faces conveyed their thanks to us, and our applause conveyed our thanks to them. A nice moment. A moment we Vietnam Vets wished we had received upon our return.

Ambience, American Style

I am staying at the Grafton Hotel, on Sunset Blvd. Today, I strolled up and down this street for several hours. During the lunch hour, I encountered numerous sidewalk cafes. Their customers were dining a few feet away from a semi-freeway, Sunset Blvd. It was a scene of contradictory ambience: Caesar Salad and Oysters on the half-shell, mixed with the exhaust of speeding Mercedes, Lexuses, Porches, and occasionally, a Chevy. Music from the café's speakers were drowned out by eight-cylinder engine noise.

I thought of Europe's small sidewalks, of cobblestone streets populated with pedestrians, of bicycle riders, and an occasional car passing by that resembled an oversize motor scooter. In America, a sidewalk café could be located on the center meridian of the New Jersey Turnpike and people would flock to it.

The Unemployed Employed

My son Tommy is a musician. He lives in Hollywood. He's a talented man but must compete with thousands of other musicians in this city for a rare opportunity that might lead to fame and fortune. In between his gigs, Tommy keeps bread on the table by working at the Viper Room. River Phoenix frequented the place and died outside the club in 1993 with overdoses of heroin and cocaine. Johnny Depp once owned it. The club was a subject for Parade's Personality Parade not long ago.

The place starts rocking about the time I start rocking in my rocking chair. It closes down close to the time I get up. Tommy and I are 180° from each other in our sleeping habits, but we still manage to connect with each other during the late afternoons and early evenings.

Speaking of rocking, to give you an idea of the musical vibes at the Viper Room, the first thing Tommy did upon my arrival at the club was to give me a set of ear plugs. A present greatly appreciated.

As with many citizens of Hollywood, the bartender at the Grafton Hotel bar makes his living by doing part time work. The people around here aspire to hit it big time with a smash movie or record. Their chances of success are slightly better than the odds of the Hubble telescope falling on my car while I navigate an Interstate. But it's the belief in oneself that counts, as these Hollywood citizens keep plugging away at their unemployed employments. I take my hat off to their tenacity.

Unlike many people in Hollywood, who are struggling actors or musicians, this bartender makes some money with a side-trade. His other job is building handmade guitars. As I sampled my Hennessy XO (which sold for \$26.00), he described his techniques for making guitars.

I asked him, "Have you read about how Stradivarius designed his violins? He had an uncanny sense for tones and frequencies. I understand he varied the type and thickness of his wood to produce a purer sound. How do you go about doing that?"

He answered, "Man, are you kidding? I make electric guitars!"

His customers must want cool looking guitars that make noise. But this opinion is coming from a crabby 65 year-old man who had trouble discerning the subtleties of the tones, pitches, and frequencies coming from the bands playing in the Viper Room. I had little trouble picking-up on the volume of their renditions.

Hollywood, California Report Two

February 24, 2005

It's Your on the Street Reporter, once again on Sunset Blvd. in Hollywood. For the past three days, I've taken several walks up and down Sunset Blvd and side streets. Overall, it beats a treadmill.

Some impressions I have gathered about Hollywood.

- Pedestrians are oblivious to cross-walks and traffic lights. Vehicles stop on a dime for any transgressing jaywalker. The tolerant attitude of drivers is an amazing situation to someone living on the East Coast. In South Jersey, Philly, DC, and Manhattan, the mantra is *Run that sucker down!*
- Street people are up-scale; motorcycles have spoilers; most cars are foreign-made, except those driven by immigrants.
- 99 percent of the population are aspiring actors or musicians, but are not working in their trade.
- This same 99 percent are waiters.
- Hollywood is populated with many people who, over the long haul, are unemployable.
- Which has led me to understand why America's movies and music are full of angst.

A Walk on Sunset Boulevard

Today, I walked west on Sunset Boulevard from my hotel. I came across a nightclub named the Whiskey a Go-Go. People were lined-up in front and to the side of the club (see Figure1). They were dressed mostly in black, many of them held guitars. They sported an out-of-work, rock musician look. They had snaked themselves around the block of this club. The time was 10 AM, twelve hours before rock and roll fans would be queuing up at a Hollywood nightclub's entrance.

- Suspecting their Circadian rhythms had been disrupted by recent mudslides cascading into their bedrooms, I asked the Whiskey a Go-Go queue management person, "A bit early for a show, isn't it?"
- "They're not here for a show. They're here to audition for a band that lost its singer and guitarist last week."
- I thought, *a two-thirds reduction in the band's work force.*
- I asked, "So the band's drummer is having trouble keeping the audience jumping and jiving? I can just hear him now, 'Any requests?'"
- "Ha! I don't know about that. And the band also has a bass guitarist. But at dawn this morning, there were over 200 people in this line, waiting for the audition."

I snapped the picture in Figure 1 several hours after this interview, which shows the remains of the queue. A snapshot of life: Aspiring hopeful kids, looking for a break.



Figure 1. Queuing for a job.

As an older person who still considers The Modern Jazz Quartet's pieces and Beethoven's violin concerto the pinnacles of musical excellence, I do not relate to the tunes of the modern times. But I hope I speak for all of us by saying to our young, "Dream on. Give it your best shot."

Nonetheless, as I trudged off to see more sights, I uttered a silent prayer for my son.

Beverly Hills

A few blocks from the Whiskey a Go-Go is the 38th Parallel for LA's socio-economic pecking order: Beverly Hills. Upon encountering the street sign shown in Figure 2 announcing I was entering Beverly Hills, I found myself in a different world, a stark change from its funky neighbor.

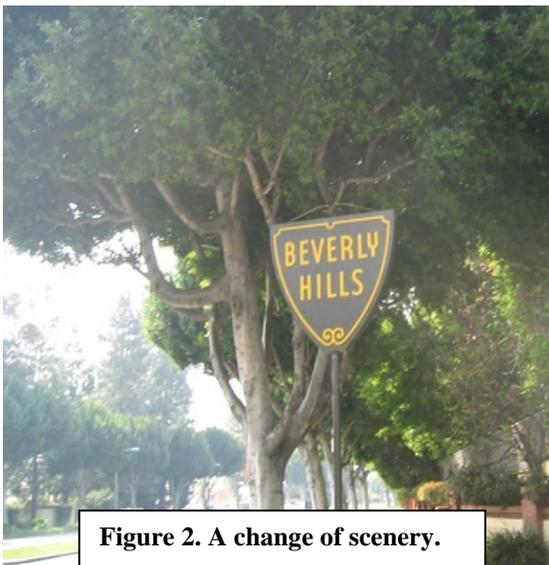


Figure 2. A change of scenery.

Gone were earthy Hollywood with its gargantuan movie billboards, casual newsstands, and sidewalk cafes featuring carbon monoxide *a la carte*. As I walked down Sunset Blvd., adorned with verdant, manicured grass and shrubbery, I was reminded of the Augusta golf course: pristine and immaculate. The homes and surrounding landscape were stunning, adorned with cool looking houses, tennis courts, and swimming pools. Mexicans mowing grass. Salvadorans trimming shrubbery. Panamanians digging Lilly ponds. Lovely. Beautiful. Peaceful. The place to raise children and let property values take care of your IRA.

The San Andreas Fault. There goes the neighborhood.

The Hustler Store

Switching to the other side of Sunset Blvd., I make my way back to the hotel. I came upon the Hustler store, the famous (or infamous) shopping place owned by Larry Flynt, founder of the *Hustler* magazine.

I walked around the store, taking in the wares. Its layout was similar to a Border's Bookstore: a book section, a video section, a magazine section, T-shirts, a help desk (?). A coffee bar, where one could relax with an espresso while reading Mr. Flynt's biography.

As I was meandering around the shop, I noticed several clerks displayed a body piercing ornament: a metal ring split their lower mouth. Not their lower lip itself; *below* their lip. I bring this subject up because I think a lot about eating and drinking. I wondered how they executed these important functions, and the apparatus looked as it would be painful to wear. Forgetting I was in a store selling sex and its associated palliatives, I asked two clerks, "Did it hurt?"

Clerks, "Huh?"

Pointing to the parts of their faces below their lower lips, I answered, "Your piercing must have hurt. Did you use pain killers?"

In hindsight, and after I had left the store, I realized the clerks had looked at me as if I were a character off the cover of one of their magazines. They were thinking, *Boy, the weirdoes you get in a sadomasochistic sex store.*

They felt obligated to respond to a customer, "Didn't hurt a bit sir. By the way, can we interest you in our weekly special of...?" Sorry, I can't mention the name of the special in this report.

Hollywood, California Report Three

February 25, 2005

The Oscar ceremonies are airing this weekend. Hundreds of people are arriving for the show. The hotel employees tell me they are geared up for a hectic two days. Fortunately, my departure is the night before hotel, food, and drink prices increase.

A few more observations before I close the Hollywood reports. Hollywood has more stretch limos than Washington, DC, and a lock on Hummer stretches. I snapped the photo (Figure 3) of a Hummer stretch as it disembarked passengers near my hotel. A sign on the rear of the car issued a 16-wheeler warning, "This vehicle makes wide turns."



Figure 3. A Hummer stretch is stretched even more.

What You See is not What is Seen

That Hummer is stretched out a long way. I aided the process by using Photoshop to stretch it out even farther. It only takes up two parking spaces, as seen by the parking meters in the photo. Of course, my rendition is amateurish. Hollywood's genius with digital video techniques could make the vehicle more realistic-looking. The animation in movies today is increasingly blurring the distinction between what images are real and what images are manipulated pixels.

Hollywood is growing fond of digitization. After all, binary 1s and 0s do not go on strike and do not command big fees for their performances. Nonetheless, I have an uneasy reaction when I watch a special action scene in a modern movie. Those B-17s peeling-off over Berlin are not real, and I must trust the integrity of the movie makers to get it right.

A few weeks ago, I watched a modern western movie with scenes of falling horses and stampeding cattle. They were spectacular and they were phony, all made with digital technology. Whatever we may think of the oldies (*How the West was Won* comes to mind), their special effects were aptly named. Today, they are no more special than the ingenuity of the software engineers. I admire the brilliance of these people, and when I watch movies today, I hope their simulations of real life are accurate.

However, before long, a full-length motion picture of digital pixels will be up for Oscars. How to discern best actor and actress? How about that important reward, film editing? Or cinematography? Comparing these new movies to the old analog films makes no sense. I think we will need different categories of Oscars. We'll see.¹

It was time to leave Hollywood. My room was soon to be occupied by Oscar groupies. Later, I'll report on Tommy's musical work and other aspects of the Hollywood culture.

Death to bin Laden

During a layover at the Dallas/Ft. Worth Airport:

- I had an hour or so before my next flight.
- I was hungry, and sat myself on a bar stool at a TGIF café.
- I ordered the Iron Plate Platter (a BBQ steak.)
- The bartender/waiter placed my "silverware" before me (a plastic knife and fork). I asked myself, *How am I going to cut a steak with a plastic knife?* As I sipped my Margarita, I cursed Osama bin Laden.
- The order was delivered, and I began to apply the post 9/11 culinary instruments to my meal.
- The steak was uncuttable with a plastic knife. It might well have thwarted a Swiss Army blade. The menu accurately described my meal: "*Iron Plate Platter.*" Not the plate, but what was on the plate.
- After several unsuccessful attempts to cut the semi-leather sides of the steak, I attacked its interior, the part that would be the softest and offer the most flavor.
- My plastic fork broke. One of its prongs lay lodged in the meat. A remarkable feat on the part of the prong, in that my plastic knife had made no such progress. (*bin Laden, if I ever meet you in an alley, you're like this steak: dead meat.*)
- A fellow diner, sitting on an adjacent stool, heard the sound of my breaking fork, "Here, use mine. I didn't need it for my buffalo wings."
- "Thanks," and I once again attacked my potential meal.
- After several attempt of unsuccessful dining, I was becoming ...well irritated. I called the bartender over, "Miss, I can't cut this steak with a plastic knife, and I'm not sure a machete will be of much help."
- Responding immediately, but with no solicitations of *Jeez, I'm sorry*, she walked away from me, "I'll get the manager."
- The manager appeared and said, "Sir, no problem, I'll get you another steak."

Another steak I didn't need! I was reminded of a TV commercial, "Don't forget folks, if you are not satisfied with our product, just call in, and we'll send you another one."

I responded, "Just look. This knife won't cut it." As I began the carving attempt once more. Applying even more pressure with the knife, I grunted for effect, "Ugh!" like a pro tennis player. The knife broke.

¹ After writing this essay, in 2010 I watched a movie named *Avatar*. Its main characters were binary pixels, but boy, could they act! The film won three Oscars and was nominated for nine.

Without the tension of the knife holding up my arm and wrist, my right hand smashed onto the front edge of a plastic bowl of BBQ sauce. It hit with such force that the bowl sprang from my plate as if it had been launched from a trampoline. Executing several flips, its twirling momentum propelled BBQ sauce onto my face, throat, shirt, crouch, pant legs, shoes, the manager's blouse and skirt, the table, my stool, and the floor---where its 10-point gymnastics stunt had it landing perfectly---face up (and empty of sauce).

How a few ounces of BBQ sauce could have covered so much territory was a mystery. Anyway, the manager was looking at an unhappy, yet colorful customer. She said, "OK, no charge sir. The meal and drink are on us. Or anything else you want...it's on the house. What can we do to make this up to you?"

I sometimes wish I could be quicker with an answer to a question and respond with a clever come-back; to be cool under fire---like Clint Eastwood. For this situation, if I had possessed an ounce of composure, I would have answered, "Yes. Bring me a Hennessy XO."

I didn't think of this retort until I was on the plane. But then, I'm not Clint Eastwood.