

LU WATTERS' YERBA BUENA JAZZ BAND

MEMORIES OF THE BODEGA BATTLE Lu Watters Cotati, California — September, 1973

This LP was originally recorded ten years ago during the long struggle over the Pacific Gas and Electric Company's plans to build a nuclear power plant in Sonoma County, California. Contrary to what some old friends from the Dawn Club and Hambone Kelly days thought, this record did not win the Bodega Battle. But it did boost the morale of the people who were doggedly battling P.G. & E. against depressing odds.

The record was made in great haste, a circumstance that denied the players a fair chance to become acquainted with the tunes. As a result, rough spots on the record are not hard to find unless the listener is totally smashed. On the plus side, the band has spontaneity and a good reckless sound which, to me, are values essential to this kind of jazz. Also on the plus side, is the fine singing of Barbara Dane.

P.G. & E. was opposed by a motley group called the Northern California Association to Preserve Bodega Head and Harbor. Although small in number, the Association had considerable clout and, at times, made the utility company bark with rage. Leading the Association was Dave Pesonen, a resourceful and tenacious battler who had notable help from Julie Pesonen, Doris Sloan, Doug Hill, Burt Bean, Dr. Terah Smiley, Professor J.B. Neilands, Ray and Marion Ruebel, Ed and Chris Mannion, the DEDICATED Kortum families, the unsinkable Rose Gaffney, the fishermen from Bodega Bay, Dr. Pierre Saint-Amand, who made a seismic study of Bodega Head for the Association, Barney Dreyfus and his associates who donated their legal services, Dr. Joel Hedgpeth, a distinguished marine biologist whose caustic wit blistered P.G. & E. throughout the entire campaign, and the Honorable William M. Bennett who was No. 1 on P.G. & E.'s enemy list, and preceded Ralph Nader as a temperer of corporate appetites.

Like most other members, I joined the Association because I didn't want the wild beauty of the Bodega Headlands marred by a power plant complex. But, before long, all of us realized that the outcome would depend on how hazardous the reactor site was, rather than on esthetic considerations. Obviously, our best weapon was the San Andreas fault. While P.G. & E. attempted to minimize this threat, we contended that it would be hard to find a more dangerous trigger for a nuclear accident. We had a strong case, but no chance of winning unless we could get our message to the people.

P.G. & E.'s persistent advertising in all important Northern California publications gave it almost unanimous editorial support. And there was "Progress," a pamphlet P.G. & E. mailed to two million customers along with the monthly fuel bill. The editors of "Progress" used household hints, recipes, and other homey subjects to camouflage the obvious propaganda thrust of the pamphlet. Featured articles warned the readers about the energy crisis, portrayed life with and without the kilowatt, told how power plants fattened the economy, and even suggested that the proposed atomic plant at Bodega Bay would dress up the landscape.

The editors carefully avoided such subjects as the San Andreas fault, nuclear accidents, radioactive buildup in marine life, air pollution, and the significant fact that no insurance company would risk liability in case of an accident. Only the government would pick up the tab, and the coverage figure of five hundred million dollars is indicative of the havoc a major nuclear accident could create.

The Association, which P.G. & E. was fond of referring to as a "vociferous minority," had other problems besides a lack of funds and publicity. Super patriots, and quite a few less militant people, regarded P.G. & E. as a sacred cow — and a red, white, and blue one, at that. These derelicts from the McCarthy days described us as reds, pinkies, and crackpots, who, if allowed to run loose, would starve the wives and babies of the construction workers by shutting down the project, not to mention turning the country belly up to the Russians.

We were also disliked by General Electric and other giant corporations who manufactured atomic hardware for the power companies. An atomic gold rush was in full swing, government grubstakes were available, and these corporations became very unhappy when anybody threatened their profits.

Through the first quarter of 1964, P.G. & E. troops were carrying out their battle plan with an air of confidence reminding of a barracuda about to swallow an anchovy. They had shattered the original plan of the State Division of Beaches and Parks to make all of Bodega Head a state park. They had parried the erratic opposition from the University of California which was planning to build a marine biological laboratory on Bodega Head. They had the Sonoma County planning commission, the harbor commission, and four of the five supervisors cheering them on while they were digging the hole for the reactor, and building a two-mile road over the rich clam

beds of the tidelands. And they were constantly riding the old vice-presidential trail to the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Oddfellows, Rotarians, Lions, Eagles, Elks, and other fraternal organizations who, without exception, concurred with P.G. & E.'s plans.

The consensus of these organizations was that Sonoma County needed the atomic plant because it would broaden the tax base which, in turn, would ease the tax burden of the little man. This simple chain of logic is used with dreary regularity by utility companies, construction companies, and land developers whenever they need public support. Mr. Ernest Joiner, publisher of the Sebastopol Times, researched the matter and found that California's ten leading industrial cities — those with the broadest tax bases — had higher property taxes than the non-industrial rural cities. So much for the myth that has duped the taxpayers for decades.

The shorebirds of Bodega Bay witnessed some puzzling events in the early Sixties. They watched construction crews dig a hole almost 100 feet deep and 140 feet in diameter and, after fencing it in, abandon it. And they watched their favorite feeding grounds buried by the rubble taken from the hole, as P.G. & E. built its tideland road. Then, one foggy day, they saw the most curious event of all: winding its way towards the reactor site was a long caravan of cars filled with people protesting the power plant, jazz buffs who couldn't care less, excited children and dogs, 1,500 balloons, a TV crew, and Turk Murphy's Jazz Band. When the caravan reached its destination, P.G. & E.'s guards were even more startled than the shorebirds.

When Turk Murphy named his jazz club "Earthquake McGoon's," Celtic legends about provoking sleeping giants must have nagged his mind. Even so, he never dreamed that someday he would be stretching the luck of the Irish a bit further by playing "Shake That Thing" on the edge of the lethal San Andreas fault. Yet, that's exactly what happened when the Association's rally got under way that foggy day at Bodega Head.

After a twelve-year layoff, some very queer sounds came out of the trumpet when I sat in with Turk's band. But, as Louis used to say, "It was a gas!" — the band was stomping, the crowd was with it, and Turk and Helm sounded better than ever. The occasion brought back memories a quarter of a century old when the three of us would sometimes drive to one of San Francisco's cliffs and jam all night long.

The climax of the rally came when the 1,500 balloons were released and carried away by the prevailing northwest winds. Theoretically, fallout from the 300 foot stack of the proposed atomic plant would follow the course taken by the balloons. Each balloon had a returnable post card attached to it, along with the following message drafted by my former wife, Patricia: "WARNING! This balloon could represent a radioactive molecule of Strontium 90 or Iodine 131. It was released from Bodega Head on Memorial Day, 1963. P.G. & E. hopes to build a nuclear reactor plant at this spot, close to the world's biggest active earthquake fault."

We had better luck with the balloons than we had anticipated. About forty cards were returned and, in general, the balloons had followed the predicted course. A few cards came back from Petaluma, and from Richmond across the bay, about forty-three crow-flight miles from Bodega Head. But the majority were returned from the most populated areas in Marin County, between Novato and Sausalito. A whole cluster of balloons, which one of the children released by mistake, landed at the courthouse in San Rafael.

No cards were returned from San Francisco, but I did get an anonymous note from there which, in part, read like this: "Dear Comred, one of your balloons landed on a junk pile near here where all you m.f. jungle bunnies belong . . ." This friend had the right key, but the wrong keyhole blues.

Except for Pesonen, Hedgpeth, and Bennett, the San Andreas fault continued to be the utility company's biggest headache as the struggle continued. Hoping to counter public opposition to the reactor site, P.G. & E. hired a platoon of experts, including a seismologist. The only bone of comfort these experts could throw to P.G. & E. was a half-hearted suggestion that a nuclear plant, specially engineered for resiliency, could withstand any shocks the San Andreas fault could deliver. As fate would have it, an impending disaster 2,000 miles north of Bodega Bay would raise serious doubts about this conclusion.

On March 27, 1964, the most violent earthquake ever recorded in North America occurred in Alaska. Fortunately, the death toll was low because of the sparse population. A new ten story steel and concrete building — the only large modern structure in the area — was demolished. The quake changed ground levels, launched landslides and avalanches, ruptured the earth's surface in many places, made the ocean recede and then return with a vengeance and, finally, set a Tsunami wave in motion that killed ten people, and left seventeen unaccounted for, in Crescent City, California, over 1,600 miles from the quake's epicenter at Prince William Sound.

After the Alaskan catastrophe, public apathy began to change to public concern. Most people were to question P.G. & E.'s plans for Bodega Head — especially after they learned that the San Andreas fault was quite capable of duplicating the Alaskan earthquake, Tsunami wave and all. And nearly everyone except the utility company's engineers were becoming convinced that reinforced steel and concrete structures were not invincible against the awesome power an earthquake can generate.

On October 23, 1964, the United States Geological Survey released a final report on the reactor site — the gist of the statement declaring that it was a hazard. A week later P.G. & E. threw in the towel, after having squandered five million dollars on the venture.

The end of the Bodega Battle was as simple as that, so uncomplicated that it seemed out of character with the wild Machiavellian struggle it terminated.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Lengthy as these liner notes are, many items of interest were reluctantly omitted — the Association's fund-raising jazz sessions at Earthquake McGoon's, the "clambakes" at Bodega Bay, details on members of the Association who deserved mention but didn't get it, details on the incredible amount of work done by Dave Pesonen, greater detail on the music itself, Hedgpeth's diabolical thoughts about the utility company, and a hundred and one other incidents that gave us a few laughs during the dark days of the struggle.

When writing these notes, the thought crossed my mind that some people would think I was flogging a dead horse. However, the dead horse (or sacred cow) is still alive and kicking, as proven by P.G. & E.'s recent attempt to seize Pt. Arena. Two reasons why they failed were Dave Pesonen and Bill Kortum, both veterans of the Bodega Battle.

Another big reason for P.G. & E.'s failure at Pt. Arena is that the public is more concerned about ecology today than when the Bodega Battle took place. And, most important of all, the public is more conscious of the power it holds in its hands. To my way of thinking, P.G. & E. will tread less arrogantly in the future.