

# This land is my land (Newport, that is)

CHARLES PINNING

**D**eep in the summer of 1963, my world consisted of two things: baseball and cars.

I lived in Newport. When I was 11 years old and wasn't playing for my Little League team, I'd wend my way up to Vernon Playground, often stopping at my friend Buddy's house to snag him.

After several hours playing pick-up ball under the blazing sun, we'd backtrack down Bliss Road and head into Koozy's (Kuznit's), our neighborhood corner store, for sodas and packs of baseball cards with bubble gum. If the Newport Folk or Jazz Festival was on, we'd head up to Broadway to watch the cars rolling into town.

Between the Newport Hospital Nursing School and Rhode Island Avenue, there was a stone wall that rose up six feet above the sidewalk, shaded by two enormous beech trees. Buddy and I climbed the steps to the front lawn of the house and planted ourselves on the wall, our legs dangling over so we could get a good view of the cars coming down Broadway into downtown Newport.

"Porsche," intoned Buddy, making the first identification. The idea was to see how early you could tell what kind of car it was coming.

"Jag, XK 120," I jumped in. "Sting Ray . . . Sunbeam Alpine."

"Healey 3000 . . . Citroën."

Because of the festivals, you got a sudden influx of foreign cars, filled with kool kats, hep cats, berets, long hair, depending on whether it was the Jazz or Folk Festival.

We first spied the big-finned Cadillac as it passed DeCotis's Barbershop, steam billowing out from under the hood, and it pulled over right below us. It had New York plates and the driver, a solid, middle-age man with glasses, stepped out and popped the hood.

A skinny, college-age guy with curly hair that was almost fluffed up into a pompadour got out of the backseat. He looked up at us and then leaned against the wall, watching the steam rise out of the engine compartment.

The man in front of the hood called to us: "You boys know where there's a service station?"

"Yep. You just passed a Mobil station up there," I said pointing. "Right before that barbershop."

The man told the skinny guy that he was going up there. The skinny guy said, "OK. I'll wait here."

Then a woman, about the skinny guy's age, with long dark hair, got out of the back of the car. She looked up at us and said, "Hi." She had pretty eyes and a nice smile.

The skinny guy looked up at Buddy and said, "Kid, can I have a sip of your soda. I'm dying a thirst."

Buddy hesitated then said OK, and handed down the bottle of RC. The guy took a couple good slugs and handed it back. "That was good," he said. "Thanks."

The woman looked at me with her big brown eyes, so I handed her my bottle and she took a swig.

The skinny guy took out a pack of cigarettes and asked us if we wanted one.

We glanced at each other and said, sure. The skinny guy shook the pack and out popped a couple of Lucky Strikes.

Buddy took a drag and started coughing. I held my smoke in my cheeks. The skinny guy went to the car and pulled a guitar case out of the backseat. He and the woman came up and sat down next to us on the wall.

"You guys like folk music?" he asked.

"It's OK" I said. "But I prefer rock 'n' roll."

"No kidding? Electric guitar?" he asked, and looked hard at me with his blue eyes like he was actually thinking about what I'd said. Then he began playing a song. His guitar playing was good, but his voice was just terrible! Buddy and I looked at each other as he screeched, "The answer my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind . . ."

But when the woman chimed in, she had a voice like an angel, high and pure. Then he played "This Land is Your Land," and we had fun singing that together.

When the older guy got back with a jug of water for the radiator, the skinny guy put his guitar away and thanked us for sharing our sodas. So did the woman and she got back in the car.

Before the skinny guy got in, he turned to us.

"Hey, what are your names?" he asked.

I told him, "I'm Chuck and that's Buddy."

"Well, OK, Chuck and Buddy. I'm Bob, and I guess that's about it. Good luck."

With a blast of the Caddy's horn they pulled away and Buddy and I went back to our car spotting, making jokes about what a horrible singer Bob was. Of course, our estimation of him was destined to change over the next few years.

Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, is the author of the Rhode Island-based novel "Irreplaceable." While he is a fiction writer, he insists that the above story is true.



— JOURNAL ARCHIVES

Bob Dylan and Joan Baez at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963.