

Ben Johnston
about
Harry Partch

So, you were one of HARRY PARTCH's best friends dating his time here in Illinois. What do you know about him before he was a hobo in the thirties?

Actually I'm not sure WHERE he was born really. He may have been born in China. I think he was, because his parents were missionaries in China. And they left on account of the BOXER Rebellion. They more or less had to. They barely escaped with their lives. And he was either conceived or born or both in China. And he was brought up therefore in a household..... By the way they left the Protestant Church, and the father became a real militant atheist, and the mother became a suffragette, a real women's lib. She became a politician, and her interests religiously were still there, but they were very radical. So he was brought up in that kind of atmosphere and with Mandarin Chinese one of the languages that was spoken around him.

There were numerous Chinese people dropping in and out. He was brought up in Arizona in the middle of Indian country. And he has said many times how deep an effect that had on him, how much he felt the presence of those incredible ragged, tattered people in the middle of something that they seemed to have no place in and no part of, and which seemed not even to tolerate them, hardly even to notice them.

And he had ah I guess a typical small town American Southwestern upbringing, but it wasn't typical in the sense that he didn't fit. He really was a dropout almost from the time he was a small child. And he did alternately drop out of school. He didn't finish high school. He worked at all types of odd jobs, everything from waiting on tables to bellhopping, you know, to elevator boy. All that sort of thing. And he really never got out of that category as far as earning a living. He never wanted to. He never would take on "the responsibility", as most people put it, of making a living for himself in the usual way.

And he educated himself as a musician at the public library, which meant that he at the very best could get hold of the most LIMITED kinds of books, limited and limiting kinds of books. And his idea of it must have been ah late nineteenth century American reflections of British academic music training. Of course, he felt that it was stupid, and it is. But, he did train himself on these things. And he was originally writing things like a piano concerto and string quartet and so forth. He'd even written a string quartet supposedly in just intonation.

He was not interested in the usual musical things. But he terribly badly wanted to be a composer, and I think he understood in a certain way what a terrific fight it was going to be. And I think he was prepared for that, even from a very early age. He didn't really believe that it was going to work, or that it was going to be particularly successful.

The first time he really came to terms with his musical aims according to him..... and you can find all this in various writings about him and by him....was in New Orleans. He had travelled across the country, very possibly just riding the rails and hitch-hiking. And he was in New Orleans living very meagrely. And he had all his manuscripts with him. And he got disgusted with them. And he burned them all up in a potbelly stove.

That was his lucky day.

LITERALLY. Then he started to make a move in the direction that he felt he had to go, which was to first of all I think abandon the tuning system of western music and abandon its concert usages and abandon its instruments to some extent. Because obviously how do you make a sweeping revolution in the pitch realm without changing instruments?

So, he started by adapting the viola. And the way he did it was to lengthen the neck of the viola, and it's then tuned an octave below the violin, so that it has an even hoarser tone than it usually has. He played it gamba style between the knees. And it therefore with a longer neck has bigger distances for the fingers, enabling him to get very tiny microtones.

The way he wanted to tune everything was according to just intonation, eliminating beats, trying to get the purest consonants possible. And I think from a very early age he had quite an understanding not only of the acoustics of this but also the history of it. I could see that very clearly in his books.

Well, MY impression of those years is in a way that he was struggling to find, partly in Los Angeles..... And I suppose then he went to San Francisco; I never pinned him down to exactly what all of his wanderings were..... But he did travel around in the West.

Among the impressions that remained most deeply in him were those of Oriental musicians, the Chinese people. They had their own version of the Peking Opera. And he heard Indian music, American Indian music. And he heard the usual concert music. About the only credit he paid to European music was WAGNER, about his ideas of "Gesamtkunstwerk", and MOUSSORGSKY about his BORIS GODUNOFF and for his PROSODY. And that's about it.

It wasn't until the forties that he started to build an ensemble. The first thing he had was only the viola, which meant himself playing it and singing.. Then he started to form a wider ensemble. The first instrument he took in was a harmonium.

After the viola.

And he retuned all the reeds making them accord with the kind of scale he had already discovered.

By this time he had his forty-three tone scale?

Mrs. JOHNSTON: Here, have some tuna fish on rye. Eat! Eat!

That can't be all for me!

Well, yes. That is the way he tuned the chromelodeon, as he called it. But he often got angry when people tried to pin his music down to a forty-three tones per octave because he was thoroughly aware that just intonation involves an infinite choice of pitches, that it's arbitrary to restrict it. A temperate system, of any sort, no matter what number of notes you use, is a finite set. You can have an infinite number of sets, but every one of them is finite.

Now a just intonation system, no matter what limits you put on it.....And you certainly can place limits on it..... is infinite. Each set is

infinite. You can use a subset, any subset you like, and that's what you have to do if you're going to make music..... because obviously you can't deal with an infinite set. But you do have as a total an infinite set each time you have a just intonation system.

So he limited himself to the number eleven.

All right, now, the particular just intonation system that he used used prime numbers of 2, 3, 5, 7, and 11, whereas TRIADIC music uses only 3 and 5. And that's two steps beyond. Now, there are a multiplicity of other possible systems. And of course within his work one of the natures of any just intonation system is that it's contained within other just intonation systems. The whole thing works just like Chinese boxes, each one contained within another So that the 3-5-7 set is contained within the 3-5-7-11 set

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And it was easy enough for him to use that. He did at times limit himself to segments of that sort, and also to the triadic set.

Especially when he involved voice.

Well not so much. With voice he usually tried to follow the melodic inflections of spoken English. And the only piece he ever admired for SCHOENBERG was PIERROT LUNAIRE, and that's why. He had very, almost too complementary, things to say about that, and then nothing but scorn for the rest. And the reason of course was nothing could have been farther from his aims as a composer than an idea like the twelve-tone row.

Because that's the ideology of being stuck.

It's almost the epidemic of it.....And this is my remark, not his.....But it's one that he'd like..... that these people including SCHOENBERG and also HINDEMITH and numerous people whose theories don't resemble SCHOENBERG's at all were busy exhausting the final permutations in a closed system. And exhausting is almost the only word that's appropriate." This kind of thing, he fully believed, could lead anywhere. And the only way you could get beyond it was to go very, very far back in the sense of going way behind temperament. But more than that. In going back to Greek sources, in going back to pre-medieval, pre-European sources. And in a modern sense this of course means going outside the context of western culture. And he did that.

In turning away from the "fatal day in Halberstadt" as he calls it in his GENESIS OF A MUSIC. It's the day where the seven white and five black were invented. He really had idiosyncrasies against the keyboard. In one of his articles, "SHOWHORSES IN THE CONCERT RING", he wrote, "A period of comparative anarchy with each composer employing his own instruments, his own scale, and his own forms is very necessary for the way out of this malaise."

And that's exactly the advice I took in my own work. And it's in that sense that my work stems from his..... I think ONLY in that sense. And in another sense not at all, because one of the most basic things about his point of view was that he didn't consider abstract music had any future whatsoever. And that the only future for music was to return to the other arts

and to re-involve itself totally with speech, movement, dance,with all these other things.

The whole gestural moments of making music.

The really fascinating thing to me is that PARTCH could have taken such an extraordinary diversity of materials, of influences, of ideas, and made anything out of them except the WILDEST kind of eclecticism. But, in fact eclectic is the last thing I would call his work.

He is called eclectic by the people who want to defend their own music.

Well, they're wrong. I don't think that hits it at all. It certainly doesn't hit what's significant about it. I don't even think it hits what the impact of it is to people who understand it. And that isn't some elite ingroup either. What is startling about PARTCH's work, or what was startling about PARTCH's work, is that it had a terrific appeal to the most ordinary people, in the same sense that KABUKI apparently had in Japan.

I can understand that, because the staging of his music, the whole function of movement and music together, this relatedness, I think that makes the evocative character.

He was very strong about never wanting this sort of adulation or respect or as he would have said, "phony success", that seems to be the model for an artist in twentieth century America. Now, we're talking about a generation at least ago. But it's still true in many ways. In other words, that was that kind of rejection of the tradition. At the same time there were all these other things. And I think in a way that was almost the most important, to undo all of that,. Yet towards the end of his life he began to be really accepted, first by jazz musicians, and finally by rock musicians.

What? How's that?

Well, for example he wrote pieces for CHET BAKER, for I think JERRY MULLIGAN. There were jazz musicians in his ensemble at the time he did the GATE FIVE recordings. He worked primarily with those people. This was in the middle of the beat generation in New York. They felt that he was in a way almost more a part of what they were doing than the majority of white jazz musicians.

He was deeply involved in a type not of improvisation, but of what you could call "group egos" in music. It's not group composition, but he had more of an ensemble. He HAD to. The only way he could survive was to have a group of people that were practically a cult in that they practically had to swear allegiance to him over a long period of time in order to get one of these things done. And this at that time in music was practically the only place outside jazz that that kind of a group cohesion was really taking place.

Ya, because it was the only existing form where the playing together defined the structure. That was very important for him. And he actually sees in his pieces thii "corporealism", as he always called it.

You could compare him to NAM JUN PAIK, but in a very strange way. While NAM JUN PAIK is talking about sex and the absence of it in

music, and it's making a very sarcastic point, there's nothing sarcastic about HARRY PARTCH's attitude. There was something defiant in it. He felt that the whole idea of formal dress in the concert and the whole idea of distance between the stage and the audience, the formality of the whole thing, the artificiality of the whole thing was not only not successful, which he felt it wasn't. But also it was destructive to the very essence of music. And he fought it as hard as possible. He was after the sought out charisma that one normally associates with figures in the pop theater.

And this is why his REVELATION IN THE COURTHOUSE PARK, which is based on EURIPIDES' BACCHAE. That is to say half of it is. It's a double story, half modern and half ancient Greek. The BACCHAE is the story of King Pantheus and the God Dionysos and the Bacchantes. The way he approached that story was to find a contemporary equivalent of Dionysos. And he found it in the figure of a rock idol. Now what he did I think was to invent something that in effect didn't take place until later. He invented ELVIS PRESLEY before ELVIS I think, although ELVIS MIGHT have played a part in that.

All right. He was involved in an analysis of what was going on in the fifties and what he saw happening, which was a whole lot more perceptive than any of the sociologists who were commenting on it at that point. And he used EURIPIDES as the commentator. And what he said in effect was that something phonic, something underworld, something subterranean was surfacing. And that was going to undermine the authority of the very structure of the society. And that was more powerful than it was being given credit for being, that it seemed to be simply banal and trite and bad taste.... but that it had an enormous and subterranean energy, silly as it seemed.

He always had a tremendous involvement with Greek art. And part of the reason was he felt that the Greek tradition had placed a proper predominance on the body and the bodily. And that all this predominance on abstraction, which more northern European traditions had contributed,

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had poisoned the whole society in the long run, and should then be adjured and resended and be gotten rid of.

An "A-Number One" on the list of his enemies was Christianity, the whole thing. And partly I think this stems from his childhood aversions in reflection to his parents' apostasy. I think no doubt that's true.

I think that among other things he didn't fail to look very closely at the world he was living in as he lived in it. So that during the years of the thirties and the early forties you have all these "AMERICANA WORKS", as some people like to call them. That makes them sound much more trivial than they are. They are chronicles, as I said earlier, of that depression. And I think they are remarkably sharp insights into what it felt like to go through it.

When we came to the fifties, and he was here in the Midwest, and he was observing what was

happening, he almost predicted the sixties. There isn't any question that what he was talking about symbolically in REVELATION OF THE COURTHOUSE PARK actually happened all over the country, especially on campuses, but not only on campuses. The whole business blew up, and it came partly out of that salted spirit of independence that was typified by the young people's declaration of independence in the pop world. And this whole perception he made the subject of one of his major works.

The BEWITCHED could also be sighted with this, because in that one he's talking about the entrapments that everybody is bewitched by. And he wanted to say that certain people are locked into certain behaviors. WHAT IF they could be magically released from this? What would they do?

He was concerned with liberation.

All right. The witch liberates people in effect, because she is representative of something that goes behind even patriarchal traditions. And one in other words doesn't even have the authority figure symbolized in the same way. One doesn't have the idea of male supremacy, for example. And the ramifications of this weren't lost on him. It's quite a subtle work. At the same time it gets its subtlety across by being blatantly obvious, and to the point that it's distasteful to a great many people. And I really think that's what gets a lot of Americans who have bought hook, line and sinker the image of European tradition, without any criticism of it or with very little criticism of it. And therefore too most or many Europeans who identify with that tradition will walk out oh what he's doing.

Because it's too far out.

IT'S BAD TASTE! They don't even THINK it's far out. "No, it's not far out. THAT'S JUST BAD TASTE." But that's just stupid.

He breaks through a lot of traditional rigidities, because he touches very basic tilings.

Well, he breaks through. And all of a sudden he has a WIDE audience. Not that he did anything that could possibly be called commercial, in fact so far from it nothing could be clearer.

Because he kept himself out of this standardized music making.

Of course toward the end of his life people like FRANK ZAPPA especially, and lots of other rock musicians were just tremendously turned on by HARRY PARTCH. And they sought him out during that period when he was living in Southern California, in Venice, California, later in Ensinadas, and finally in San Diego. And they put on a production of DELUSION OF THE FURY in L.A. And they had a lot of publicity and so forth. Among his staunchest supporters was the rock crowd. And, in a way he was very fascinated. But he felt quite aloof. And he felt quite on the way out of it. Well, a man that age, nearly seventy, would be sure to feel that way in a way. But more I think. He just never wanted to be part of any MOVEMENT in that sense. He couldn't have done it. And it wasn't that he couldn't join anything. It was he saw the whole joining of a movement and feeling of something like that as another

kind of bewitchment, another kind of entrapment.

The entrapment of getting commercialized.

No, not at all. In fact, exploitation is perhaps the key note of it. And that I think he understood even from the beginning. The comments that he made.... I saw him a year before he died in San Diego, and he talked maybe for the better part of the day....He talked among other things about some of the young people he knew and what their attitudes were, and what he felt about it. He certainly wasn't a person who at that age was physically able to go out and mingle with people. But he was intensely aware, almost as though he were out among people. Of a lot of the things that were going on, I think he had a better grasp of where things were for most people than the majority of artists do.

I think that the extreme independence of his thought on an intellectual level is something that he almost felt defiant and beligerant of, because his whole stance as an artist was surely accused of anti-intellectualism. And I think in a way his book gives the light of that forever, because it's quite admirable simply as musicology. And it really is excellent research. You can use it as a source book, almost. And it is quite accurate in what it says about other people's research. Aside from that, the points of view that he talks about are extremely well thought out. There is no lack of overview in the integration that he tries to make. So a lot of people have called him eclectic.

Ya, he was very aware, first of being independent of European history, but then being at the same time aware about the history itself to avoid thii narrow-mindedness, just to see the European development of the well-tempered scale. He saw that it had to go steps beyond that.

I think that if you could parallel his special hates, one of which I said was Christianity, another would be Europe. I suppose he had it in for Europeans as heavily as any American artist ever has, if not, maybe more so. And yes, this is chauvinistic in a way. But it didn't have anything to do with patriotism, and even less to do with nationalism. It had to do rather that if there was a feeling of any sort of incubus sucking the life out of art in the twentieth century, it was the European art image.

PARTCH says, "Perhaps no element of modern life is so stifling, so destroys a human being, as this idol of digital and larumgal proficiency. I know; I experienced it, and had to die and find still another womb to emerge from."

Okay, right. And he loved to criticise singing, and he called all of it belcanto, as though there wasn't anything else. Because what he was trying to lump together was a whole set of attitudes that are rather ludicrously typified by the idea that some singing teachers have, that there's only one way you can possibly use your larynx, and every other way will destroy the organ.

He's seen the whole development as a history of alienation. And so he probably could stimulate, or SHOULD stimulate people now to reduce alienation, the narrow-mindedness of keyboard

dependence for example.

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Yeah, well above everything that. There ONCE was an idea of a consort of instruments, a consort of voices, as the norm of conceiving what a sound object would be. Then later it got to be a gamut of pitches on a keyboard. He took it out of that, and I think he anticipated not as a forerunner, but as striking the key note instead of the keynote that is said to have been struck, the attitude that one associates with electronic music. Electronic music tends to do that. It tends to free one from that.

But at the same time it takes away the whole corporeality.

That's right. Yes, it takes away the corporeality.

And that's the crucial point.

And there's a parallel in what JOHN CAGE said in the middle fifties, way before electronic music had become the cliché which it became, that the whole idea of this was defective, that it was "anti-theater", and that it was necessary to find some way to present this kind of thing, if you're going to present it at all, that did not deny the fact that you were sitting there in a theater experience.

And this I think lead directly into that period when JOHN was working with theater pieces, and the only kind of electronic pieces that were made were like FONTANA MIX, which are in a way a put down of the very idea of MAKING an electronic piece. And the fact that the most famous presentation of FONTANA MIX is with CATHY BERBERIAN is that amazing mixture with ARIA. That is as corporeal as you can get. Played off against this incredible tape is almost a reductio ad absurdum of the idea that music was going to be some sort of bristling sine wave perfect thing, that a lot of the people influenced by STOCKHAUSEN's early fifty type thinking were talking about. Or ideas that were being promogated by the French in terms of the MUSIQUE CONCRETE thing, which was so doctrinaire in its own way. This kind of thing was bypassed entirely. And I see in the independence of those two people, who are so unlike in most ways, CAGE and PARTCH, a very great similarity. They both recognized that if you didn't have that aspect in your music, you might as well give up. You might as well stop doing it.

Well, I think what HARRY PARTCH is doing, that I don't see in JOHN CAGE, is getting to a certain kind of directness. JOHN said once that he felt maybe there were two kinds of composers. And he might say that one kind was "folk", and he was being very sarcastic about "folk" and also very sarcastic about the other word, "noble". And he said that if he had to choose, he supposed, bitter as the pill was, he had to say that he was a noble composer. He felt PARTCH was a folk composer.

That's the first time I've heard that.

Well, he said that they fought each other, that CAGE himself felt very sympathetic toward HARRY PARTCH. However, he felt poles apart. But PARTCH felt very belligerent and very hostile. And he never allowed CAGE to make friends with him. He always played like the fencer. He was always

battling. And therefore they had very little contact except a relatively hostile one. PARTCH in that sense pitied himself as the outsider, and played the role of the martyr to some extent. CAGE, I won't say never fell into that trap, but ultimately he didn't. And he was willing to accept the dangers of success which eventually came to him, whereas PARTCH in a way guaranteed that it wouldn't.

And that makes him into a real desert plant.

Yes. He was really into a sort of directness that I associate with the American Indians. And I suppose I'm influenced by all of the talk and all of the problems that come about because of the present effort of the Indians to do finally something about their state. But the fact that he was so interested in their culture and in their music at such an early age, and this really never left his music. That's the real reason why I focused on CLOUD CHAMBER music, where he uses Indian music as a basic component, as a piece to study. Not so much that it's the most interesting piece of his, but because his fascination with that says something about his attitude to music in general.

I think it says something very profound about it. He was really willing to be as direct and as simple and as "corny" if you like, as people are when they aren't trying to be concert artists. But they're making something for their house, or they're doing something for their friends, or something of that sort. He understood that attitude and that point of view. And there was almost nothing in his attitude of the concert artist.

And then his work is very rich. It contains a number of threads that lead in various directions, not just one. It's as though he provides more than one route through the maze, which is doing ARIADNE one better. One of those is the complete revolution that he makes possible in the reorganization, reorientation of thinking as people who listen to music, to the basic parameters of the musical art, the art of TONE, in other words, the most traditional of all things within the simple tradition of western music. Now, if those things are to be revived, what is necessary? And how do you spring those free of the conventional associations? How do you get them out of the cul-de-sac into which they appear to have gone?

The question is though, do you have to build the instruments and do you have to invent new Scales for it?

I think that my conclusion, and where I take my point of departure from is I think what you have to do basically is stop lying. You have to stop claiming you're doing something which in fact you're not doing. In a sense SCHOENBERG did that. He stopped lying. He took the twelve tones to be exactly what they were, and not what they were purported to be. What PARTCH did was to say, "Well, if we take these things, consonants and dissonants for example. Instead, if you say, Here are the differences. Let's get all the dissonances out of the consonants. And let's extend the field of dissonance to the point where its boundaries are almost infinite". Now, if you do that, you can't stop with the limited horizons of music where it stands.

And furthermore it implies that you've got one continuum for all the types of order that you're trying to use, and not a series of different

interlocking continuums. It seemed to me that there also in taking some of his ideas, not his music but his ideas, directly into the enemy's camp, into the concert world itself and into the European tradition itself and changing the nature of it in such way that one has a Trojan horse, out of which soldiers can spring, would be the right way to handle the situation. But it is a question of one tiny aspect of a manifold of things that he did. But, what he was doing involves all those other aspects - the total theater, the sculpture, the whole vision. And also, too, the dirty feet, the bare feet.

Ya, and that's the amazing thing, that he on the one side could develop a system of forty-three tone scale and all the structural implementation, and at the same time kept his feet really on the ground, not getting caught up in a cloud of pure theory. So we could learn to apply his approach to reduce our alienated music culture, without getting at the same time alienated socially.

Well, I'm a different kind of fighter from him, but I understand what it is to fight. And I think that in a way he was self-defeating. He had this bitter attitude and to some extent he had a certain self-pity, which in fact is very familiar in anyone who had very much to do with him. It had very much to do with his constant conviction that he

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was on the verge of dying and things of that kind. All right, so everybody has their neurotic tendencies of one kind or another. These were his. But one has at the same time to realize that what he was doing in this incredibly independent way was all the more brave, because he was doing it against that kind of personal limitation. And he did do that. But at the same time it hampered him.

For example, he continually made people enemies. He continually alienated people from himself, because he was very hostile to them. And very often the main reason they were alienated from him was because of personal hostilities. Now that's certainly nothing new. You find it in BEETHOVEN. And you find it in a lot of people. With him it was to such an extent, that he would almost bite any hand that tried to feed him. And it was very hard to get along with him. In that way it was a tragic life. But in a way he asked for it. Now, I don't say that in any sense he deserved what he got. Not at all. Not even a regret, rather with a sense of realism about the fact that he tried to do what he did and paid for it. And paid for it very heavily, largely in his way.

He was just consequent.

Yes, you know, this whole alienation business. He understood it for the best of reasons. He was alienated if anybody ever was. Because the basic message that he had was: You ought to make your own things with your own hands, and with people that you know, and in the most direct way. That was the nature of art, and if you got too far away from it, you were wrong. He really was involved in a very direct way.

The fact that this involvement did not capitulate him into the kind of success that it did ELVIS PRESLEY or something of this sort is only thinkable as an objection if you are

missing the basic point. The basic point is the essence of art is never a question of that kind of mass success. And that isn't to stay on an elitist point of view either. It's simply to say that the problem of art is wherever you are at any given moment what needs to be done. And can you do it? And it has to do with the view of things, which is as great as you can make it. So there is no such thing in that sense as being out of touch, or being isolated unless of course really just are not trying.

I feel that he was aware of some of the important problems. And he was very much ahead of his time, especially in setting a sort of keynote to a world attitude towards music. This is something that people are beginning to recognize.

So his whole attitude of doing everything with your own hands could be very useful in keeping you away from the seduction of commercialism.

Or the seduction of the proper IN GROUP type of thing, whether it's traditional or fashion. To

be a part of the latest avant-gardism, or to be able to establish the next trend. Or on the other hand to be the successful or unsuccessful defender of some very important tradition that you think is in danger of being lost or something. And instead of that all to be independent of any of these attitudes. And that is what I think he not only tried to do, he DID it.

I think he was fantastic in both the advantages and disadvantages of being a sort of "DESERT PLANT", living under hardest conditions but having fantastic blossoms and spines.

Oh, good Lord, he had spines.

But isn't he in the essence what an American artist is somehow?

Well, I don't know.

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Good luck on your new work,

Nov. 2, 1962.

Dear Pen and Betty:

You didn't owe me a letter. I owed you one. I found my bag; it was in the back of the car so encrusted with Arizona dust that I missed it.

Thanks to my old Gate 5 landlord, who was so good to me ten years ago, I have a studio--the office of a chick hatchery now out of business (they found it less expensive to raise chickens in Mississippi and send them frozen to California). 1100 square feet of floor space in one big room, and three other rooms, for workshop, bedroom, and guestroom. Also two restrooms--men and women, I guess. However, there is no shower or bath. And until Jim helped me get them installed, no cookstove, sink, hot water, or refrigerator. Slowly, we are getting the thing organized.

Petaluma, in case you've forgotten, is about 40 miles north of S.F. It is off the beaten track, even though close, and I don't like that. But rents around S.F., Sausalito particularly, are hysterical. Petaluma is now only 11 miles from the northern limits of S.F. area subdividing, but I feel safe. I pay only \$45 a month, plus utilities.

I have sent for my things (after I pay the \$900 they say I owe them you'll be able to drive a truck through the hole in my bank account), but I am not worried. I am doing nothing, in a state of nothingness. O yes, I wash socks, iron a shirt, pick roses, shell walnuts (there's a tree at one window), bake pears (a pear tree of neighbors). And when I meet old associates or acquaintances (rarely) they say:

How good you're back!
We need you!
Welcome home!
I feel good for you!

As I say, emptiness.

Sometimes I don't like it, but I realize most of the time that it is exactly what I need. And--strangely--I feel little or no desire to drown myself in alcohol. That last year in Champaign my liquor bill must have been staggering. I felt like a man, last fall, beginning with casting frustrations and the emergence of intellectual jazz, on the end of a gangplank. What was there to do, except jump off?

It all seems far away. Indeed, I miss many people, including John Garvey, whom I haven't written to. What I think about anything, or what anybody else thinks about anything, including me, seems strangely irrelevant. Irrelevant to what? Nothing or everything.

I just got a letter from U. of Wis., suggesting that I come up to give a lecture. Ha! They're six years too late. (And I laugh uproariously.)

I hope you are all well. Love,

Harry

P.O. Box 491 - Petaluma