

## ***SQUAWK! Coffeehouse***

By Jessa Piaia

Hi, my name is Jessa Piaia. I have been living in the greater Boston-Cambridge area since 1980, and I'm very excited to be part of the Jukebox project. What I'd like to focus on is my time with the Coffeehouse. My introduction to the **Naked City Coffeehouse** was when I was sitting on the Route #1 Mass Avenue bus during its layover, across from the old Holyoke Center. Now it's called the Smith Campus Center.

Somebody came up from behind me, and reached their arm around, to place a poster in my hand announcing this weekly venue at **108 Brighton Ave., Allston** on Wednesday nights from 8:00 p.m to midnight. And I thought, "Wow, this looks interesting!" So right after the holidays, I went for the first time, and indeed, it was a very unique scene. I had to scale a long flight of stairs, which opened into a L-shaped room with candles on the floor, and people sitting around in cozy chairs, chitchatting before the open mike began.

People kept coming in, carrying guitars or other instruments. And what I realized, from the moment I entered that space was, I felt like I had 'come home.' It was a very warm, cozy atmosphere, where everybody was smiling, and I started attending every week. I should also mention, there was a particular person, Lee Kidd, a poet-musician, or a troubadour in the classical tradition, who caught my attention – and in time, Lee and I got married.

Lee Kidd and Chris Dunn had co-founded the Naked City Coffeehouse in 1988, after a Language-and-Travel course that Lee offered in the Dominican Republic. Plus there was another individual named Egg Al, who was in and out, continually agitating if things didn't go his way. So it was just this confluence of people. And again, I will emphasize, the Naked City was always the "openest" open mic venue in town with poets, musicians, comics, mimes, painters, and just anyone who wanted to participate. We were a "Do-it-yourself" operation.

Everyone was welcome to share a poem, song, story, or personal experience of two songs or ten minutes at the mike. And so, on this January evening, 1990, when I first went, it turned out to be the beginning of a surge in attendance. We were around the same age, from different backgrounds, with different interests. Some had polished their performance technique, while others were standing up for the first time. But it didn't matter how polished or how 'new' a person was, it was breathtaking to watch people, like Dar Williams perform for the very first time at the open mic.

Dar had just graduated college, and Don White brought her to the venue. There were others, such as Sean Colvin, Jim Infantino, Vance Gilbert, Ellis Paul, these were just some of the singer-songwriters, who now, shall we say, have become seasoned elders in the folk scene. But at that time, they were the 'new kids on the block,' so to speak, in 1990, and it was riveting to

hear them. What's also interesting is when the Berlin Wall came down (in November 1989), I was inspired to learn the German language.

So I came across one of the handbills I'd seen circulating around Harvard Square, advertising the **Intercontinental Foreign Language Program in Harvard Square**, and I called the office. I was intrigued when the founder of the Language School, Lee Riethmiller answered the phone, and I told him I was interested in learning German. And he said, "Oh, that's a very good decision, Jessa." We discussed the program details, and he sent a packet of materials. And in early January 1990, I enrolled in a German class at the Intercontinental Foreign Language Program in Harvard Square, which Mr. Riethmiller had founded in 1976.

So during 1990 on, I was seeing Lee Kidd at the Coffeehouse on Wednesday nights, and Lee Riethmiller at the Language School every Friday night. Getting back to the Coffeehouse scene, there was that momentum in attendance, which began about the time I started coming, over the next several years, with a multitude of folks coming through the open mike on Wednesday nights. We'd also gather around the community. Like we'd get a permit from Cambridge City Hall to host an open mike at the Holyoke Center Plaza, or at neighborhood parks, and at the Mass College of Art auditorium.

Everybody was welcome to join in. And the venue was based on the personal honor system, which meant, you kept to ten minutes, or two songs. And if you didn't, then people's attention would start to wander. So what was I doing during those early days of the Coffeehouse? Well, one of my hats was as a clown. I'd started from a clowning class I took at the Cambridge Center for Adult Ed in the spring of 1982, with Ellie Friedland, a clown instructor from New York City, and we formed a local clown troupe with six to eight clowns.

One of the clown troupe's public actions was to take the subway to the airport, and en route there, while the train was at a stop, I slowly stood up on the seat, and slipped my arms through the overhead grab bars, then swung out into the aisle. Other passengers weren't certain whether they should laugh or not. Then once we got to the airport, several clowns positioned themselves in silly poses on those conveyor belts for luggage, which nearly got us kicked out of the airport. But all I can say is, it was a liberating experience.

Although Ellie, the clown instructor, stressed the 'silent clown' technique, I found that to be too intimidating, especially for young children. So I was the clown who would always utter a few words, or noises. And after several months, I realized it was time for me to branch out and do my own form of what I felt clowning was meant to be. Which enabled me to connect with people on a deeper level, and I performed as **Beep! The Clown** for the next 15 years at children's birthday parties, festivals, parades, some school shows, as well as bringing cheer to patients at Cambridge City Hospital.

Another coffeehouse-related activity was the 'zine' we published, called "**SQUAWK! Magazine**," which started as a weekly venture, with someone pasting up poems, short stories, photos, and graphics in a basic chapbook format. But in time, we refined our aesthetic approach, and while

the frequency lessened, the quality improved. And with that, Lee and I, and Mick Cusimano became known as “The SQUAWK Squad.” Mick was a cartoonist, who later became a filmmaker. The three of us began attending small press festivals. We went to the **Lowell Celebrates Kerouac Festival**, where Jack Kerouac’s hometown celebrates his literary achievements with poetry readings, every October. We brought our zine to Lowell, and we also ventured to the **Small Press Fair** in Manhattan during the mid-’90s, and enjoyed networking with other poets and writers.

Then in May 1998, Naked City Coffeehouse transformed, or shall we say, we transformed, and renamed ourselves **SQUAWK! Coffeehouse**, to more closely align with the zine that we published. We also envisioned ourselves as the spiritual ancestors of the “Beats (or ‘Beatniks’), the Fugs, the Black Arts Movement, and the Squawks,” spanning the timeline from the 1950s into the new millennium 2000, and beyond, we saw ourselves as spiritually aligned with these creative groups. They were our spiritual ancestors. It was during this time that we relocated the venue from the **Old Cambridge Baptist Church** (1151 Mass. Ave.) to the **Harvard-Epworth Methodist Church** (1555 Mass. Ave.), and we have been there ever since.

*SQUAWK!* Coffeehouse was an intersectionality of the arts and community. People from all walks of life, all backgrounds, would meet at the Coffeehouse, share our individual art forms, insights and experiences once a week, and through this, deep friendships and alliances were formed. There were weddings, births, and, sadly, in time, funerals (Lee passed in 2016) over the next three decades, from 1988 until when the pandemic began in March 2020.