

LUKE JAEGER

La Mono Nagra: An Analog Tale

AROUND 1989, my wife's ex-boyfriend came to visit us in San Francisco. Paul was passing through on his way from Australia to somewhere else and brought along a Nagra tape deck which he hoped to sell while in the U.S. He had no success finding a buyer, so the deck settled in for a long residency in our hall closet. We promised to sell it at our earliest convenience and forward him the money.

The Nagra was a Swiss-made, reel-to-reel deck about the size of the Manhattan Yellow Pages—portable, by the standards of the time. Nagras were ruggedly built with excellent sound fidelity. In those pre-digital days, the Nagra was widely used for radio fieldwork. A Nagra equipped with a sync crystal could exactly match speed with a movie camera, making it the standard choice for on-location sound recording in the film industry.

As a struggling independent animator, I was at first excited to have this piece of professional gear in my house, but soon discovered that this Nagra lacked a sync crystal, rendering it unsuitable for film work. This was due to its provenance: Paul did radio production for the Australian Broadcasting Company, which outfit had (knowingly or not) sent the deck along on its useless trip to America. Closer inspection revealed that this Nagra wasn't even a stereo model. The next time Paul called, as he did every few months, I had to break the news that the deck wouldn't be easy to sell.

Clearly this tape deck was to be a long-term guest in our home. It needed a name; I took to calling it "La Mono Nagra."

I was a few years out of art school and newly married. Having soured on the prospect of making a living in commercial animation—a line of work in which jobs were scarce and for which I seemed temperamentally unsuited in any case—I had parlayed my photographic skills into a livelihood working in the printing industry. By now I was working in a pre-press shop, assembling or "stripping" the lithographic film negatives used to make color printing plates. It was the first decent full-time job I'd ever had, and a big step up from the crummy quick-copy shops and retail printing plants where I'd worked before. At my previous jobs, I was accustomed to being the only artist for whom the job was merely a day gig, and I'd gotten in the habit of keeping my art life a secret from my co-workers. But here the other strippers

were a motley and interesting lot. There was a communal film-duplicating area where we'd chat as we waited for our film to come through the processing machine. Here I learned that Scott was working toward a pilot's license, Phoebe had been a volunteer teacher for Head Start in Arkansas in 1967, Rich had furnished his house with chairs and tables he made from corrugated cardboard and hot glue, and Stuart was a classical piano recitalist who'd just cut a record for Sony and was stripping film until his royalty check showed up.

Stuart Johnson was a sweaty, ruddy-faced English bloke with a working-class accent. With his blond Peter Frampton ringlets, plaid flannel shirts, and too-tight designer jeans, it was easier to picture him bashing a guitar in a pub band than tickling the ivories of the Bösendorfer concert grand he kept in his extremely non-climate-controlled Potrero Hill loft—where, to hear Stuart tell it, the piano's health was imperiled by San Francisco's wild fluctuations of humidity and air pressure.

Anyway, knowing that professional musicians tend to be obsessive buyers and sellers of gear, I sensed a possible opportunity to unload La Mono Nagra. Did Stuart know anyone who might want to buy an almost-obsolete, high-end audio deck?

"I don't," Stuart told me, "but my recording engineer might." He gave me the phone number. "If you talk to him, tell him Stan sent you."

"Who's Stan?"

"That's my stage name. Stanislaus Jovanovitch."

Who knew classical recitalists used fake names? In fact, Stuart's faux-Russian handle was founded on a sound business principle. When he played a show, the posters would read, "Stuart Johnson presents Stanislaus Jovanovitch." By performing under an assumed name, Stuart could act as his own promoter and keep the presenter's 10 percent cut.

But the other, and perhaps primary, reason for Stuart's exotic-sounding alias was simply that he was a natural-born bullshitter. Stuart invented the persona as a goofy way to save a few bucks; then, like Pinocchio, the toy identity became a real person. Shortly after he gave birth to his alter ego ("Jovanovitch" being, basically, Russian for "Johnson"), Stuart was sitting for what might have been a routine BBC radio interview when he took a sudden whim to conjure up a ridiculous pseudo-biography. The story just came tumbling out, each whopper requiring the fabrication of a more whopping whopper: Stanislaus was born in Siberia; his parents were killed by wolves; he was relocated to Manchester, England, and raised by blue-collar adoptive parents (hence his highly unlikely working-stiff accent, and his inability to speak Russian).

I couldn't decide which was harder to believe: the cartoonishly bogus backstory itself, the apparent gullibility of the BBC interviewer who bought

it, or the fact that a classical player would indulge in such Hollywood hokum. Pop stars might tinker with their identities in public, christen themselves Prince or Bono or Madonna, but weren't such antics frowned upon in the world of "serious" music? Not according to Stuart: he assured me, in fact, that identity hacking is a long-standing tradition in the classical music scene. Leopold Stokowski, the unimpeachably highbrow conductor who lent his starchy gravitas to Disney's original *Fantasia*, was also a phony. "I went to school with his kids in Manchester," Stuart said. "He was English like me, and his real name was Leonard Stokes." (If Wikipedia is to be believed, Stuart's story was approximately half true. Stokowski was his real name; his father was Polish and his mother Irish. But he was born and raised in England, and his fruity Eastern European accent was as fake as a seven-dollar bill.)

Of course, there's nothing unusual about wishing for different parents than the ones you have, or about gratifying that wish with a fantasy about your parents being mere adoptive hosts. It's a familiar trope to anyone who knows the story of Moses or Superman. Nor is it my intention to subject poor old Stuart, a guy I lost track of twenty years ago and whom in any case I barely knew, to amateur psychobiography. Rather, the significance of the "Jovanovitch" episode—a narrative in which La Mono Nagra served as the Maguffin—was that it initiated (so slowly that even though the humor of it hit me immediately, I'm only now formulating all the implications) the undoing of almost every fixed idea I held on to for dear life at the advanced age of twenty-five, and let me just add that for someone so unencumbered by genuine worldly responsibility I carried around an awful lot of fixed ideas.

It won't surprise you that most of these concerned Art, or that they formed the basis for my stubborn and doomed efforts to keep my art life and my paid employment as rigidly segregated as meat and dairy in a kosher kitchen. In fact, "ideas" might be too strong a word for what were essentially a bunch of shopworn slogans about Not Selling Out (whatever that might have meant in practice; aside from commercial animation gigs where I'd been simply a hired pair of hands, no serious opportunity for selling my work had ever presented itself for my refusal, so the issue stayed in the comfortable realm of the abstract). It was a worldview still largely intact after being formed in my adolescence, during Reagan's paranoid heyday, when mainstream utterances from Washington and Hollywood were matched for idiocy only by the romantic idealization of all things proletarian and thuggish on the part of "alternative" opinion-makers like The Clash and Black Flag, and an impressionable mind could easily believe that power-suited corporate devils roamed the landscape, hungry for the souls of young artists. That I'd never met one of these monsters was no reason for doubt; they were as real to me as the dybbuks and demons who spooked my shtetl-dwelling ancestors.

There was indeed, as the Reagan campaign ad claimed, a bear in the woods.

It was a convincing imaginary world, uncontaminated by much contact with lived reality, and reassuring in the way conspiracy theories always are. And if not for the apartheid state I'd created to separate my art and my employment, I might have been forced to confront its fundamental flaw: what I feared above all was *Selling Out*, which could be defined as letting your ambitions distort your work, but in my case the only ambition I had was to not sell out, and it distorted my work. That process was what started to unravel when *La Mono Nagra* appeared on the scene.

Not all of the art I was making around that time was bad; some of it I think still comes off rather well. I made some animated films, which won some awards on the festival circuit, and I cranked out a lot of zines, drawings, paintings, and comics, both alone and in various collaborations. What I'm least proud of, at least in the traditional sense of stand-alone art objects, is the body of black-and-white photographs I had started as an undergraduate and kept at for about five years, finally petering out around the time *La Mono* moved in.

As an undergraduate, I wanted to be like FSA-period Walker Evans, or Weegee, or Garry Winogrand: a hard-boiled guy unafraid to plant himself in the path of oncoming reality and blast its gritty image onto film so that the whole world would be forced to reckon with its own ugliness and horror. At least that's what I imagined the motivations of these photographers to be (and did I mention I was a big fan of comic books? This scenario might as well be a *Fantastic Four* splash page drawn by Jack Kirby—like Weegee, another diminutive, street-tough Jew from the slums of New York—with the photographer posed for combat like *The Thing*). What the human subjects of Weegee et al. were really thinking, feeling, and doing at the moment of exposure concerned me not at all—and, looking at my photographs of people, it shows. When I wanted to have fun, I'd create formalistic compositions from urban spaces, subways, and freightyards, preferably at night and empty of people. But then my social conscience would act up, and I'd slink away to look for scenes of people being dehumanized by their environments.

I wanted these images to drip with irony, as if all the contempt I felt for the Reagan-Bush vision of America and the way it played out in the physical spaces of American cities would be recorded on film along with the highlights and shadows. I hung around places I imagined oppression was occurring and waited for the lucky moment when an unsuspecting passerby would visually manifest all that was hateful about the social structure with exactly the right gesture, facial expression, or anomalous pose.

Needless to say, the results were disappointing. As much film as I shot, as many tanks of spent developer as I dumped down the kitchen sink, something

wasn't happening. (Was it just coincidence that La Mono—for which Stuart/Stan's engineer had no use, big surprise—sat in the hall closet right next to the milk crate where I kept the film processing gear? Did the Nagra's invisible radiation of uselessness contaminate the chemicals and make the photos suck?) My social conscience, whose participation in the art-making process was becoming increasingly unwelcome, tried to goad me onward by invoking Winogrand and the legendary thousands of rolls of exposed but undeveloped Tri-X he'd left behind when he died—Hefty bags bulging with negatives! Just keep shooting and something will happen! Another part of me, however, started to ask uncomfortable questions. If I was so intent on demonstrating the dehumanizing effects of society on the individual, why was I reluctant to talk to any of the real live individuals I photographed, as my former art-school roommate did (a guy with less formal education than me, but a much better photographer by any measure)? Was I afraid that engaging with them personally would diminish their value as unwitting props in the narratives I hoped to construct—narratives which by some unexplained process would embody both journalistic objectivity and an unambiguously left-wing perspective? And how did this make me any better than the Republican manipulators who seemed to exercise such mastery of the mass media? Whatever was dehumanizing the people in my photographs, it wasn't the buildings.

Right around this time, the owner of the pre-press shop saw the writing on the wall and bought a brand-new Mac II. This unattractive plastic box, with its 33 MHz processor and as much memory as its slots could hold (32 megs!), cost slightly less than a new car. As the only person on staff who wasn't terrified of the thing, it soon fell to me to learn Photoshop 2.0 and bring on the benefits of the digital revolution.

I wish I could tell you that I left all my art problems behind when I entered the digital realm, but the truth is I don't remember many of the details. It was a long and slow process. By this time we had a baby on the way; I was worried, perennially short of money, and (at least as I remember it now) always cold in our unheated, uninsulated San Francisco apartment, with its rattling windows and its bathroom walls full of holes which penetrated clear through to the outdoors, so that anyone who had occasion to be on hands and knees peering behind the toilet might see an unexpected patch of daylight.

Nonetheless, La Mono prepared the ground, Photoshop planted the seed, and what grew forth soon decimated the native flora. I think Gary Winogrand was the first to go, or rather, the mythologized version of Winogrand whose heroics had been drummed into me and anyone else who crossed the threshold of an art school during the 1980s (not until years

later did I stop to wonder in what way, if any, the recently deceased, actual human Winogrand might resemble the Paul Bunyan-like figure whom my art school instructors had eulogized with such reverence). Photoshop cracked the burnished surface of that myth and exposed the contradiction within: if film is so expendable that we should expect to shoot ten thousand images for every keeper, why should the final print be considered so precious? Maybe art photographers adopted this posture to compensate for the medium's inherent lack of preciousness compared to painting, or perhaps to quarantine themselves from such commercial practitioners as fashion photographers and photojournalists (except for Weegee, who was able to jump across the gap by means of his superhuman street cred).

There was a sense of innate authenticity—something like what Walter Benjamin called *Aura*, though at the time my compulsive avoidance of critical theory shielded me from such knowledge—that attached to Winogrand's black-and-white street photography, and it had a lot to do with the associations embedded in Winogrand's film stock of choice, Kodak Tri-X. As the film of choice for the Serious Photographer, Tri-X bespoke simple, manly virtue. It was the Bob Dylan of film stock: not the best presentation, but it reeked of Honesty. The mystique of Tri-X was all about its big and chunky grain which was often visible to the naked eye in enlargement prints, especially if you processed your negatives using one of the grain-enhancing methods which we hoarded or swapped for advantage. While there was a great deal of math and science to understand in the photographic enterprise, I was more interested in the magical process through which the grain became both the vehicle for and the evidence of Authenticity. Didn't the FBI have experts whose pronouncements about photographic authenticity were based on microscopic examinations of film grain? (Not that I would have gone on record professing any respect for the police.)

While I was making up metaphysical theories about what grain meant, Adobe's engineers were hard at work taking advantage of faster computers, bigger storage systems, and higher image resolutions. By the early '90s, there was nothing one could do in a darkroom that couldn't be done in Photoshop, even at the sub-visible level of grain. Which in turn revealed all the mystical claptrap about grain to be exactly what it had been all along: pure showbiz. First Jovanovitch, and now this! My Garry Winogrand stance, which I had convinced myself was the One True Way to Use a Camera, turned out to be just a mannerism, with no greater or lesser claim to authenticity than the Pictorialism my History of Photography instructor had taught me to look down on.

On second thought, it was actually far less authentic than Pictorialism, which, twee though it was, at least did what it set out to do. But if a photo-

graph is not a cul-de-sac where reality can be surrounded and trapped, then my Stance didn't even rise to the status of a mannerism. Not only did it lack the courage of its convictions, it lacked convictions. I was attempting documentary photography with belabored, fussy compositions—in other words, an aesthetic that used all the tools of narrative but refused to tell a story—then blaming the unwitting subjects for the mess that resulted from this conceptual failure. And how could such a scheme not fail? Why expect reality to do the job of fiction?

Reality wasn't the one stuck in the cul-de-sac; that was me. Reality caught the first train out of there, and when it did it took a century's worth of analog image-making machinery with it. La Mono Nagra wasn't an unusual case, just an early one: Patient Zero in what soon became a worldwide cascade of obsolescence. Where animation was concerned, the change was so profound that by the end of the decade, everything its practitioners had known was transformed beyond recognition or just gone: not only the cameras, film, and lenses but whatever material you put in front of the camera, and whatever you used for drawing or painting on that material. And the lights. And the sound gear. And all the other expensive, special-purpose machines, materials, supplies, services, businesses, and skilled trades that independent animators used to bury themselves in debt paying for. And the language you used to describe it. All dead and gone to virtualized heaven, translated through the ingenuity and labor of endless brigades of engineers into software tools that ran on the descendants of that old Mac II.

It was scary at first, then sad for a while. Then came a sense of lightness: the wonderful realization that there are better ways to spend one's life than producing cubic yards of artwork which must be kept maniacally clean and organized, schlepped to the camera facility, then forever after stored in attic or basement. By 2000, digital video compositing had evolved to the point where it begged the term "computer animation". You could still draw your animation on paper, but now you scanned or shot it digitally and layered your artwork in software, yielding a result that is indistinguishable from photomechanically created animation except for the fact that it looks better. The medium has made itself disappear, and in so doing has also stuffed a sock in the problem of Walter Benjamin's *Aura* by deleting the original object altogether. Good riddance to all of it: I can't muster the slightest nostalgia for the time I flew across country to shoot a film, hauling a garment bag stuffed with boxes of my animation artwork that weighed more than me. Or the 250-pound editing machine I rented, which very nearly killed me and the friends I enlisted to hump it up three flights of stairs. These weren't isolated incidents; old-school animation really did involve a lot of heavy lifting.

You can find a Nagra on eBay these days for about \$300 (look under “antique electronics”), but it was harder to sell such things twenty years ago, especially if you weren’t willing to shell out for a classified print ad. Long after La Mono Nagra wore out his welcome, not to mention any expectation of profitable sale, I saw a leaflet on the Film Arts Foundation’s notice board soliciting donations of media equipment for rural peasants in Chiapas. This was clearly the closest thing to a good home anyone would offer our little orphan. The apartment where I dropped La Mono off was stacked with obsolete sound and video gear, hulking cameras deaccessioned by the public access cable facility and top-loading video decks so massive you could get a hernia just looking at one, and perhaps I felt just the briefest pang of sympathy for our down-at-the-heels European aristocrat’s latest slip down the socioeconomic ladder.

Mostly I was relieved at finally liberating myself from this albatross (not only a proxy for my wife’s ex-boyfriend, compared to whose worldwide travels my own life appeared small and adventureless, but also a drain on valuable closet space), yet it was also poignant to consider all the places La Mono Nagra had been, and how anywhere he showed up, he was always a little too late. One could trace La Mono’s path around the globe and see represented in miniature all the political devolutions of the postwar era: from Switzerland, to the farthest outpost of British Empire, to the mean-spirited shores of George H. W. Bush’s America, and now, on the brink of his final journey, to some remote Mexican mountaintop where the campesinos would (I hoped) welcome him to their dusty village with the respect due a foreign dignitary, polish his leather carrying case to a high gloss, painstakingly untangle the reels of tape spaghettied at the bottom of the box, and refurbish his transport mechanism with handmade parts fashioned from fence wire and old cans.