

# ONE WATCHCAT'S MEMOIR

*A memory ramble down  
analog days now long gone*

*By K.D. Self*

PHOTO BY DENISE SELF



*Crew of old Uptown Café (near the Bluebird), the day after an April 1980 fire forced Michael Cassady (middle, standing) to move. Inside both the old and new Uptown Café, artists shared life.*

*The Dancing Cigarettes, 1980. From left, Don Trubey, Emily Bonus, Jaclyn Oddi, Michael Gitlin, John Terrill, Tim Noe.*

*The Cigs were a locally and regionally active band from 1979 through 1983. Notably, they closed for William Burroughs at the Bluebird in March 1981.*



PHOTO BY CHARLES SILVER

IN THE NOW, as I write this, Van Morrison croons gone-by days. I traverse shadows, contemplate my true self, revive the past. What was I doing in Spring 1979 when the first issue of *The Ryder* published as a free art/film/music mag? During *The Ryder's* initial 1980s decade, what was happening in Bloomington's burgeoning scene; how was I involved (and with whom)?

Though I am native Bloomingtonian, in 1979, when Peter LoPilato first published, we had not met. I was living out of town, finishing a photography degree, residing in Cincinnati. But my then-partner John Terrill played in the pivotal Dancing Cigarettes; music called us home. Back in Bloomington, I gathered with artsy old friends—the cheeky Cigs, Jim Andrews, Garbo, Jim Hurd, Donna Fay Reeves—intelligent creatives. Sparked by a love for designed poetry (rarely a paying gig), I next intersected with a quirky bunch of collage makers, wordsmiths, and typographers who inspired me toward graphic design and phototypesetting (not yet personal computers but getting there). Such good folk deeply affected my life. Typesetting, I found James Campbell, Rick Heinsohn, Esther and Steve Millen, Paul Sturm, Jeannette Brown, and Paul Smedberg. Wordsmithing, I met Sue Havlish and Mark Robinson.

Through the former, I probably first encountered Peter LoPilato. By the early 1980s, *The Ryder* was being shaped at ¾ Design (above the old White Rabbit, on Indiana Avenue), where Terrill, Smedberg, Sturm, Brian Wilcox, and Steve Thrasher graphically experimented. In July 1982, my first *Ryder* cover was published (depicting Cyn Hammond, Chrissie Dickinson, and Donna Fay Reeves). By the mid-1980s, I became a regular *Ryder* arts columnist (and, a bit later, redesigned the magazine). None of this work paid—benefits were experiential. I wrote about politics and culture, interviewed my choice of artists, gave coverage to shows I found intriguing. More valuable than the writing practice, I was blessed to befriend other art enthusiasts.

Throughout the 1980s, I barely survived financially (paid rent by setting type) but created poetic art, produced a few ER nights, played with other artists, and helped raise my son. I consider all art poetry and have always created, although rarely “sold.” Not my standard, but to be considered a successful artist, one must usually sell. Money aside, for me, choosing art is choosing life. Back in the day, when we were

young, some local folks had ‘make-it-big’ dreams; others (like myself) were born to create, so, regardless of material reward, we just “made.” Despite ongoing economic issues, in the pre-digital 1980s/early 1990s, a thriving creative community emerged in Bloomington. Theatre, music, poetry, visual, and craft artists shared talents, supported shows, and were able to find audiences for outsider reflections. From 1979 forward, *The Ryder* was an essential analog means for promoting creative gatherings.

Marketing and creativity require different, not always confluent skills. Without digital means, art, theatre, and music marketing in the 1980s happened only via phototypeset print posters, cable TV and radio, word-of-mouth, and print media (the *H-T* and *The Ryder* primarily). *Viable personal computers, a usable internet, Facebook, smart phones, and community radio WFHB did not exist in the 1980s.* Despite being mostly analog bound, despite it being a Republican decade (Reagan, George H.W. Bush), often despite individual impoverishment, from 1979 through the early 1990s, Bloomington was home to a rich community of artists who reflected the irreverent, the beautiful, the dangerous—promoted in large part by *The Ryder*.

Today, artists and organizers usually post event information online. During the 1980s, besides *Ryder* reviews and listings, organizers occasionally also obtained print media coverage from the *Herald-Times*. Digital multimedia did not exist. However, by the late 1970s, Don Smith at BCAT/Monroe County Public Library encouraged patrons to use (1”, B&W) portable videotape machines and, by the mid-1980s, Michael White and MCPL crews were videotaping and cable broadcasting community art and political events. Cable radio WQAX also was somewhat accessible as medium for shout outs about upcoming shows or social concerns. Thankfully, in 1993, community radio station WFHB opened wavelengths by providing FM airspace for art and social conversations. Brian Kearney, Jeffrey Morris, Emily Jackson, many others pushed WFHB into existence. Jim Manion was a fellow doula, and he assumed the station's music director role. From the outset through today, WFHB gave listeners opportunities to hear music of all genres; today, the station also provides event listings and global news. In 2019, who can imagine Bloomington without WFHB? But, in the 1980s first *Ryder* decade, community radio was only a dream.

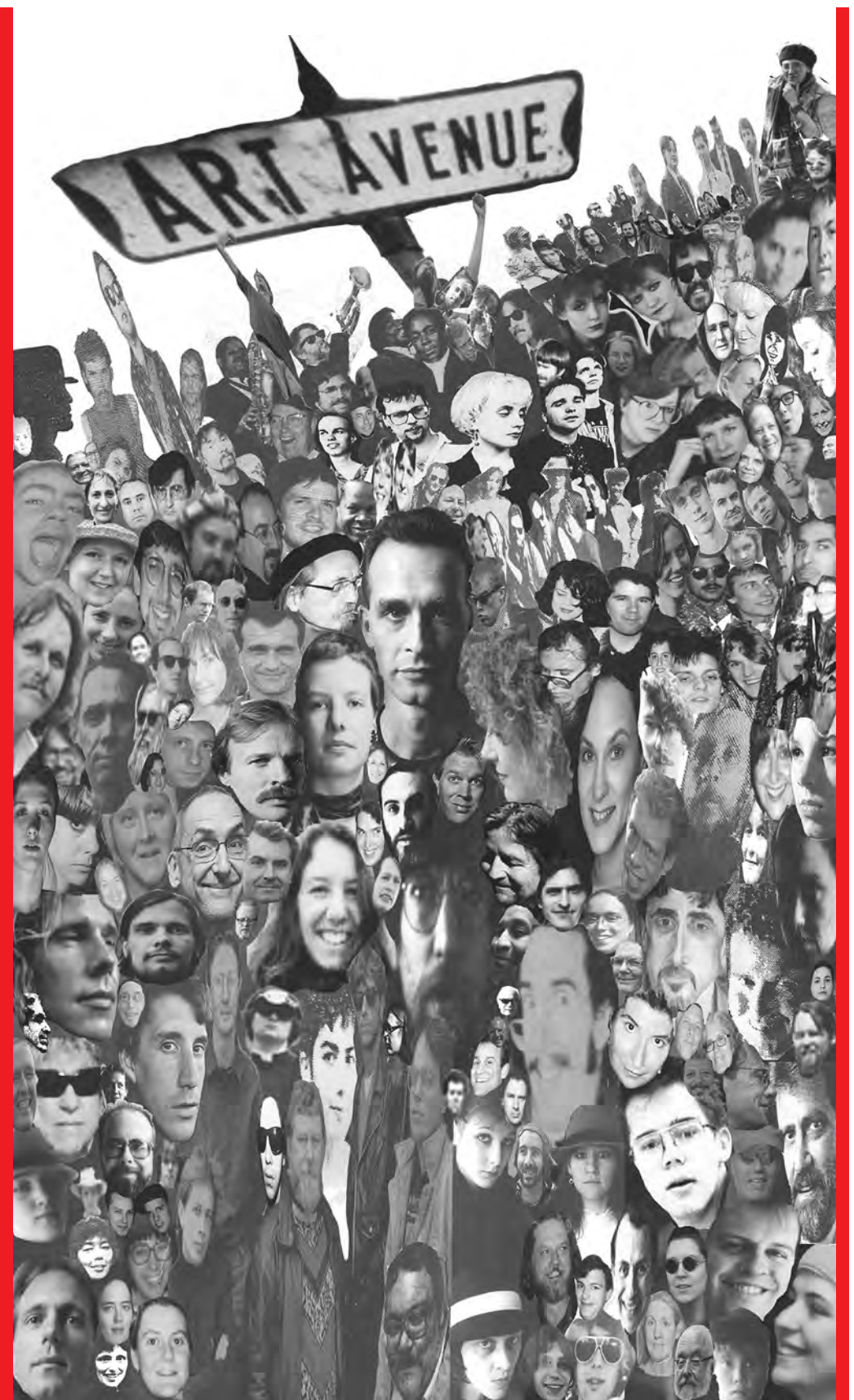
Amazingly, artists also then communicated face-on-face (texting did not exist). We actually talked in person about life, politics, events, creative work. Downtown spaces were vital—these were our information superhighways. At the old (then new) Uptown, artistic impulses flowed. Lots of musicians and art makers lived in cold-water flats in the Allen Building (above the ‘new’ Uptown), where *The Ryder* had an office. By 1987, the independent

**Top third:** (somewhat l. to r.) Trisha Bracken, Tom Roznowski, Tom Gallagher, Cynthia Brubaker, Jim Hurd [ds], Sally Heiney, Mark Bingham, Linda Manus, Andy Cobine, Kirk Ross, Frankie Camaro, Bob Sloan, Ransom Haile, the Dynamics, Ian Brewer (standing), Orie Stith, Rex Miller, Tom Donohue, Marcos Cavalcante, Arson Garden, Marc Haggarty, Walking Ruins, Tom Moeller, Sally's Dream, Liz French, Angie Skidmore, Dancing Cigarettes [ds], the Gizmos, Craig Brenner, David Miller's Ut Haus and Jazz Fables, Sharlee Davis & Will Devitt, Karen Billings & Pete Sutherland, Stuart & Cathi Norton, Malcolm Dalglish, Lawrence Lazare, Jan Henshaw, Carrie Newcomer, Geri Cowell, Amy Roche, Lara Lynn Weaver, Kevin MacDowell, Kathleen Mills, Scott Southwick; (from left again) Bob Lucas, Ron Kadish, Christy Davis, Paula Worley, DavAnne Parry, Lee Nading, Steve Volan, Rob Eder, Dale Enochs, Doug Kruithof, Ian Brewer, Joanne Shank, Tim Hittle, Hugh Heinsohn, Tom Hastings, Chet Chmielewski, Gary Glynn [ds], Ron Dye, James Campbell, Chuck Rogers, Sue Havish, Mark Robinson, Mojo Hand, Jeff Mease, Jane Henderson, Billy Nightshade, New Delta Cats, Holly Silver, Trailside Killers, Gretchen, Freda/Jake/Dale & Mysteries of Life, John Strohm, Eloid Ruiz, Phil Traicoff, Tim Hommey, Christy Paxson & Bart Everson, the Wild Raccoons.

**Middle third:** Danielle Urschell, Jaclyn Oddi [ds], Michael White, Tom Hastings, Gini Patrick, Jane Reeves [ds], John Terrill [ds], Dale Staton, Dale Lawrence, David Baas, Lisa Sorg, Brad Loudenbach, Garbo [ds], Betsy Stirratt, Jeannette Brown Smedberg, Roscoe Medlock, Steve Gardner, David Wierhake, Jim Andrews, Janet Summers, Steve Cook, Diane Kondrat, Terri Loyal, Kevin Loyal, John Barge, David Ebbinghouse, Suzanne Halvorsen [ds], Suzette Weakley, Sarah Flint, Patricia Cole.

**Bottom third:** Burhan Erturan, John Woodcock, Janiece Jaffe, Janas Hoyt, Bob Rugh, Sharrel Boike, Beth Hamlin, Janet Yedes, Sue Kennedy, Deneise Self, Janis Berzins & Brian Friedman, Darren Haggarty, Patti Powell, Dennis Meckler, Michael van Vooren, Gail Kincaid, Jim Poyser, Lee Williams, Brad Wilhelm, Todd Carter, David Miller, Heather Floyd, Dan Willems, Bill Zink, Jim Manion, Michael Cassidy, Paul Smedberg, Bill Craig, Strats, Steve Mascari, John Vitello, Joel Washington, Gordon Bonham, Mark Beebe, Susan Kornblum, Jeanne Smith; (back to bottom middle) Bill Weaver, Donna Fay Reeves [ds], Steve Criscolo, Jim Eberly, Cyn Hammond [ds], Peter LoPilato, Paul Sturm, Nell Weatherwax, Eric Rensberger, Brian Kearney, Joyce Bird, Bill D'Amico, Jim & Carrol Krause, Frank Reiter, Doug Graham, Marco Powell, Sulaiman Zai, Mike Whybark, Chrissie Dickinson [ds], Michael Redman [ds], Matt Uhlman, Joe LaMantia, Roxanne Rogers, Eileen Rice, Janis Stars, Jana Ana, Steve Millen & Esther Millen.

**Attributions:** Most pics are vintage; those marked [ds] are photos I shot; if unattributed, apologies, I do not have info; some pics are from public domain, some scanned from old Ryder/Voice/H-Ts; photo of Tom Roznowski by Mark Robinson; photos of Jim Poyser and Michael White by David Sutton; photos of Linda Manus, Andy Cobine, Bob Sloan, Brad Loudenbach & Jim Andrews by Bob Rugh; photo of Bob Rugh by Alda Trabucca; photo of Susan Kornblum by Maria Marmala; painting of Eric Rensberger by Lisa Nilsson; photo of Craig Brenner by Michael Redman; photo of Gail Kincaid, Rob Eder & Steve Gardner by Susan Kornblum. Thanks especially to Bob Rugh, David Ebbinghouse, Susan Kornblum, Toby Barnett, James Combs, Donna Fay Reeves, Jim Poyser, and John Terrill for helpful contributions.



**Above:** This subjective memory collage includes only a few of the art enthusiasts who formed community in Bloomington from the late-1970s through the mid-1990s; my cultural influencers were musicians, artists, promoters, and avid audience members. Jim Andrews' image size does indicate his aesthetic inspiration, but mostly image sizes are arbitrary, based on fit. If you are not pictured, both memory and subjective collage are fallible; perhaps I could not find your photo. Should there be interest, I could start a web page collection of different folks' memory collages.

Bellevue Gallery was located there (exhibits at the Bellevue showed the visual brilliance of Brad Loudenbach, Michael van Vooren, Jim Andrews, Bob Rugh, and Mark Beebe, among others). In downtown alleyways, or at the Bellevue, you could also consider David Ebbinghouse's thoughtful outsider installations. In the 1980s, I personally benefited from cheap downtown rent and had many deep heartfelts with fellow art enthusiasts within sacred, funky Allen Building hallways.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, musicians and artists could almost invest in individual creative work because we were young (or students) and because rent was low-cost in the near-downtown area. Yet then, as now, artists often had to leave town to survive. Nevertheless, the cultural myth that artists choose starvation needs debunking. Today, given that city officials seem inclined to brand Bloomington as an arts community, more could be done to generate grant provisions and creative space for nonacademic, nontraditional creative work. Bloomington should have affordable cohousing for young with senior artists, including creative community play/work/performance spaces. Such might provide sustenance for multi-generational, long-term arts development to help stop the outflow of artists who cannot stay.

*The 1980s was a collectively fertile time; there was a closeness among artists, a vitality.*

**JIM ANDREWS**

result of inventive efforts by multitudes. Artists creatively fed each other (facing poverty, also, sometimes, dinner). Despite the limitation of analog promotion, we successfully worked together to market shows. We grew a lively cross-genre arts community, led by some cool folk who today remain my personal art heroes.

Who rocked my analog-days art world? First, from early *Ryder* years forward, the person who particularly strikes me as contributing mightily to the Bloomington arts scene (past and present) is music impresario Lee Williams. Lee was always smart, wry, and zealous. He wasn't a maker though he keenly loved music, so he carved a promotional niche. This began around 1980, after Jim Manion first opened doors by putting trance dances into Second Story. At that seminal club, Lee Williams booked experimental music. (Second Story was located above Bullwinkles' gay bar; the room now houses Serendipity Martini Lounge.)

Lee and Jim's fledgling work proved culturally vital. But, Lee did not stay at Second Story. By about 1983, Williams moved up Walnut to Jake's. There, until around 1994, Lee Williams regularly astounded audiences by staging phenomenal regional, national, and international acts. Back down College Avenue, when Lee left Second Story, David Miller took a leap beyond his jazz roots, picked up Lee's lead, took big risks, and ran the club (still experimentally). At the end of the 1980s, Miller began his legendary Thursday Jazz Fables shows at Bear's Place. (When David left Second Story in 1990ish, I began to book the room.) Both David Miller and I brought great acts to Second Story, but no one could match Lee Williams' knack for hosting mind-blowing entertainment. His iconic Jake's shows are too numerous to name—each

Although every Bloomington art lover who remembers the 1980s and early 1990s will have their own stories, peeps, and stars, we probably agree: Art, theatre, music, dance, and poetics then thrived. I organized a few projects (mostly music and visual art), but this scene was the

elder enthusiast will have his or her own fave—but, among other exhilarating performances, I swooned to see Tracy Chapman and K.D. Lang at Jake's nightclub.

Was Lee content? No, he had a wider vision. By 1994, Williams diverted his prowess toward founding the Lotus World Music & Arts Festival. Lotus seems Lee's primary legacy, since the festival is now an institutional cornerstone of Bloomington's self-identity as a multicultural art community. I am incredibly grateful for Lee Williams' presence in my life and our town. Besides staging hundreds of kick-ass Second Story, Jake's, and Lotus shows, Lee paved the way for and consulted with other promoters—David Miller, me, Brad Wilhelm, and the invincible Lisa Sorg. A strong, intelligent woman, Lisa managed bands (including Arson Garden) in the 1980s and 1990s and was influential as manager of Rhino's (an all-ages venue sponsored by Harmony School). In the 1990s, she wrote for and edited the *Bloomington Independent*. Jim Manion, Lisa Sorg, Brad Wilhelm (who booked Rhino's for decades), and David Miller are among my local music promoter heroes. But Lee Williams outshines us all. For nearly forty years, Lee has been an inspiration, a bringer of cultural joy, a great blessing for Bloomington audiences.

In this, *The Ryder's* 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, I am also truly grateful young Peter LoPilato took a wacky 1979 chance and began publishing his magazine and hosting *Ryder* films (over 2,000!). In the mag's 1980s first decade, Peter published outsider work like Mike Cagle's line drawing covers; experimental collages by Paul Smedberg, John Terrill, and Brian Wilcox; original sketches by Roxanne Rogers; political commentary by leftist intellectuals like Steve Millen; and my own art and music profiles. *The Ryder* also published provocative reviews (including Michael Redman's movie and Jim Manion's music critiques).

Personally, whether as columnist, booking agent, or audience member, in its formative years (from the 1980s through the 1990s), I used *The Ryder* to both promote and select entertainment. Early on, I danced to the Dancing Cigarettes, then fell into Sally's 1980s Dream—was broken by the Walking Ruins, got the New Delta Cats or Gordon Bonham blues, raged with the Texans, and was funkified by the Dynamics, Johnny Socko, Mojo Hand and the Wild Raccoons. I listened thoughtfully to Malcolm Dalglish or Sulaiman Zai, was entranced by the Octave Doctors, and rocked out with: Arson Garden; Frankie Camaro; John Strohm. I was stopped in my tracks by the Trailside Killers while pondering Plastic Cheeses, the Vulgar Boatmen, and many Mysteries of Life.

Early in the 1990s, I stopped writing for *The Ryder*. Instead, I focused on running Second Story and began writing "Watchcat" cultural columns for the *Bloomington Voice*. However, *The Ryder* continued to publish Second Story listings. In that analog era, I needed all the help I could get. Without WFHB or the internet, I marketed to diverse audiences. In a single month at early 1990s Second Story, I booked Irish drovers, alternative rock, blues, or funk bands; Al Cobine's jazz big band; Marcos Cavalcante's Latin ensemble; or, occasionally, the beautiful Carrie Newcomer. Bloomington had a fantastic singer/songwriter scene (including folks like Bob Lucas, Sharlee Davis & Will Devitt, Jan Henshaw, and the still stunning Cathi Norton). However, the constant bass beat from Bullwinkles' disco downstairs made soft sound events upstairs less viable. That pulse did not affect rockers or experimental groups—music by smart folk like Bill Zink, Heather Floyd, and Dan Willems; or, rowdy nights with the cool kids from Carmel—including Todd Carter, John Dehner, and Phil Eskew.

Of course, during the 1980s into the 1990s, original music events at Second Story, Rhino's, Jake's, Bear's Place, and the Bluebird were not the only shows in town. Theatre performance

and writing groups evolved. Currently located downtown, the Bloomington Playwrights Project (BPP), a 'theatre devoted to new plays,' was founded in 1979; some participants from early BPP days include Jim Poyser, Nell Weatherwax, Garbo, David Christman, Kevin Holladay, and Ron Dye. In 1988, 'saved' by Nell Weatherwax, Diane Kondrat birthed Oasis Productions with a focus on "small cast shows with great roles for women"—a commitment she accomplished with characteristic genius.

Looking back, I am astonished at the number of art spaces and institutions—BPP, Oasis, Second Story, Jake's, Rhino's, Jazz Fables at Bear's Place, By Hand Gallery, Windfall Dancers, John Waldron Arts Center, Bellevue Gallery, WFHB, the Tibetan Cultural Center, and, eventually, the Lotus World Music & Arts Festival—all these were birthed or developed from the late 1970s through the 1980s. Even the cover-band oriented Bluebird hosted great national acts, *Live from Bloomington* shows, and Tom Roznowski's Back Porch events. (Not yet a venue, the Buskirk-Chumley was donated in 1995.)

Creative events staged by such 1980s institutions were at least sideways promoted by *Ryder* columns. Plus, Peter supported occasional oddball endeavors. From the early 1980s into the 1990s, a random mix of associates—Terrill, Weaver, me, Manion, Sturm, Smedberg, Roznowski, Dale Staton, Eric Rensberger, John Barge, others—constructed and participated in various multimedia happenings such as 33 Steps, Back Porch, ER, and Snowy Nights. We put combinations of music, video, dance, theatre, and poetry on stage in single (blowout) evenings. ER nights were multimedia extravaganzas first organized by Bill Weaver and the cooperative Visionaires in 1981; then, from 1985 through 1995, Jim Manion and I coproduced them, mostly at Second Story. Participants included many already-mentioned outsider artists, alongside experimentalists like Pulitzer poet Yusef Komunyakaa; IU Ethnomusicologist Daniel Stern (who Monkey Puzzled); and Oscar-nominated Tim Hittle, who showed his early stop-motion films.

By the mid-1990s, I stopped running Second Story. For a few years, I continued to write for the *Bloomington Independent* but, mostly, I began a retreat from community arts engagement. Last year, Danielle Urschell (then of the Void) asked when are we going to 'do' another ER night. I laughed: My time for such has passed. Nevertheless, today, solicitation for, booking of, and marketing similar events would be—digitally—comparatively easy. Yet, without a large space like Second Story, finding venue seems problematic (smaller venues now exist in the same Fourth and College area, but these do not seem conducive). Besides, in today's digitally streamed world, do older and younger Bloomington artists want to multimedia gather in person?

Since *The Ryder's* 1980s first decade, the world *has* revolutionized. By the mid-1990s, Bloomington musicians, artists, writers, and publishers were using PCs and turning digital. Around then, one local lover of the arts—founder of Bluemarble Steve Volan—generously set some of us up with free email accounts. I remember thinking how astounding it felt to send "Watchcat" columns to the *Bloomington Voice* via email. Today, I (mostly) love participating in the digital verse, but I also cherish analog gone-by days. I recall with loving kindness old friendships, philosophical discourses, exciting music, great dance nights (Janet Summers with Jim Poyser, spinning!), and exquisitely beautiful (often provocative) art shared.

In our current troubled political era, I live my joy by spending precious moments with family and friends, try for grace, and continue to create visual and verbal poetics. In early 2017, I returned to occasional arts writing for *The Ryder* (motivated by need to reflect kind light beyond Trump's shadows). In the present moment, 'it feels good to be alive,' as Van Morrison allows. Now, I raise my glass, and I raise it high. Thank you, oh you many art heroes of old—those named, those not. How lovely were our long ago, analog days. Forty years on, I feel truly grateful.

Find K.D. Self at (or send memory collages to): [deneiseseif@gmail.com](mailto:deneiseseif@gmail.com); see band history info at: <http://www.musicalfamilytree.com/>; please accept this elder's apologies for any memory lapse.