

'Magic Days'

In the winter of 2014 my friend Prabod Shrestha and I took a sentimental trip to Freak Street. We wanted to see what was still left of the places we used to hang out in the late 80s and early 90s. The outcome was a little disappointing. Many places changed owners and lost their original features. We looked up Hotel Eden. This was once the famous Eden Hashish Centre, selling 'the best Nepalese hash & ganja'. The hotel still had its tiny elevator that took you right to the top. But it was no longer a welcoming place. On one of the floors a sparsely dressed girl stared out of a dirty window; she still sat there when we returned an hour later.

Our spirits lifted when we entered Snowman Café. The walls were still adorned with funky artwork and next to the counter we found a large collection of 60s tapes, lovingly preserved by owner Ram Prasad Manandhar and his son Birju. The place was filled with young Nepalese, enjoying a hookah and one of the cakes that used to be an item on the 'hippie trail'. 'Wait till you get to Kathmandu,' seasoned travelers reportedly said, 'that's where you find the best cakes and tapes.' We talked to a few of the young visitors, and were surprised to find that none of them knew how Freak Street got its name. The fact that this place once was the long awaited destination of an adventurous journey for countless 'overlanders' somehow had never been communicated to the 21st century Freak Street generation.

Although recently there's been some kind of a surge in publications on the Hippie Trail, encouraged by the fact that the flower children are now in their '60s and '70s and feel the need to share their experiences, much of it is yet to enter the public domain. Although 'Freak Street' is an integral part of Nepal's modern history, the hippie period is yet to be formally documented. Be it intentionally or unintentionally, many of the facts and stories from those days remain anecdotal, and hard to verify.

To begin with, the actual origins of Freak Street remain unclear. Few are aware of the fact that before Jhochhen was nicknamed 'Freak Street' and artist Jimmy Thapa created a new road sign, there was Maruhitya Tol, with its nicknames Pig Alley and Pie Alley. In this classic 'gulli', leading from Hanumandokha to Bijeshwori temple on the banks of the Vishnumati, overlanders used to find their 'Soho of the East'. They stayed at the Camp or Matchbox Hotel and visited Bishnu's Chai and Pie Palace for something sweet to go with the smoke.

But hippies started to feel unsafe here after a foreigner got killed, apparently by a local youth, over a girl. Who decided when that Jhochhen would be the best next hang out?

If it is correct that Manandhar from Snowman Café and Mohan Mulepati from the Himalayan Cold Drink Store were the first ones to open places for foreigners in Jhochhen in 1965, then this means 2015 marked the 50th anniversary of 'Freak Street'. It is an anniversary that few seemed to know about, and no one appeared to be interested in celebrating. When the earthquakes of 2015 destroyed most of the classic 'hang outs' that were still intact, no one seemed overly concerned.

Another aspect that tends to be ignored is the fact that for many western hippies there was a local counterpart. One can only imagine the stories quintessential Nepalese hippies such as Trilochan Shrestha, Jimmy Thapa and Ram Gopal KC as well as the members of the true to life hippie crew who featured in the movie Hare Ram Hare Krishna, could tell. Having been in the forefront of a unique youth movement, transcending physical and mental boundaries, and acting as the founders of the country's tourism industry, these flower children's memories definitely are worthy of preservation.

Yet another largely unknown aspect of the hippie days of Kathmandu is the fact that many western bohemians stayed behind and that some are here till this date. I knew of a few of them but was not sure how to get introduced. That changed when I was interviewing Jimmy Thapa, the gifted artist who used to run an outlet for dope on Freak Street called Jimmy's Wagon. "Meet Billy", Jimmy said, "he will tell you all."

William Forbes, better known as Swayambhu Billy, and his wife Susan Burns have lived at the base of Swayambhu on and off since the early 70s. Their present house in Kimdol carries the memories of a life well lived. A larger than life Chow Chow guards the compound. The walls show artwork by the renowned 'real' hippies and beatniks they befriended in Kathmandu: Ira Cohen, Petra Vogt and Hetty McGee.

William has created a self-styled altar on the top floor, where he practices yoga and watches the sun rise and set on the stupa. William used to be a yoga teacher but turned into a scholar and Sanskrit translator after he met with a serious trekking accident in 1985.

Susan's room has a similar view, and she uses it to develop curricula for educational workshops and to do her own bit of writing. Susan is better known as Ms. Burns, the music and English teacher at Lincoln School. After her retirement she keeps in touch with hundreds of former students, who appreciate her for introducing them to 'the real Nepal' through social service programmes.

William and Susan were both born in 1943 to a family of Communists, with no interest in spirituality. While growing up in New York, William met spiritual seekers who had returned from India. They had 'something about them'. Wanting to find out 'if enlightened consciousnesses existed without the use of drugs', he booked his flight to Europe. It was 1970.

William first travelled eastwards in a small van, which he crashed in Morocco. After that it was public transport, all the way to Kathmandu. "From people I met who had been to India, I already had some ideas about places to go to. They turned out to be all power places. I fell in a groove."

Two years later William managed to convince his cousin Susan to join him on a next trip to the East. The two took a Yugoslavian freighter to Europe and continued travelling eastwards. Susan: "We were riding rickety buses, touching some holy stone. I felt definitely at home. It seemed this was it for me. And that was a strange thing."

When visiting the ashram of Ramana Maharshi in Tamil Nadu, William and Susan felt a strong attraction to the holy mountain Arunchala. They decided to settle there. Since the Indian government allowed only a six month visa, the couple used to stay in Afghanistan or Nepal the other half of the year. After Afghanistan closed for foreigners and a national Emergency was declared in India, Nepal became the main 'hang out'.

But let us first set the scene of the 'magic days' of Kathmandu. Photographs of the late 60s and early 70s show a largely empty city with few cars and few people. Majestic bulls were given right of way. Life seemed to flow according to astrologers' calendars, from one festival to the next. Swayambhunath was untouched, Boudhanath still a small build up in the middle of agricultural fields. And in the middle of this largely pristine valley, with the Himalaya's beckoning to the north and Goa to the south, travelers from all over world convened, smoked, danced and 'shared notes'.

How magical the scene could be at times is illustrated by a memory of Susan:

"One day I took a taxi back to Swayambhu and saw Jimmy Thapa on his white horse, riding towards the temple. He was dressed in a black outfit, with silver details. It had long, wide sleeves. He looked absolutely stunning. I asked the taxi driver to stop and let him pass, so I could enjoy the view of this magical man on his horse."

It was the first time a generation of youth could simply 'drop out', and be who they wanted to be, without the pressures of parents and society. After departing from London or Amsterdam, they explored the 'power places' of Greece, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Ultimately the flower children landed in Kathmandu, where they were met by its curious but tolerant residents. The police did not carry guns, and no one seemed to blink an eye when the visitors experimented with clothes, substances and artistic expressions.

Susan remembers the kind gesture of a Kimdol shopkeeper towards a hippie who could often be found walking around naked: "He placed a blanket around the boy's shoulders and invited him to some food. The things the locals put up with, for years, it's quite amazing."

"It was a chaotic but also highly creative scene," remembers William. "Everyone was on their own trip. People experimented with drapes, scarves, boots and hats; no one looked the same." Susan: "There was lots of dancing but not in a structured manner. Everyone moved the way they felt like moving, with Eight Finger Eddy in the middle of it all."

The 'hippie scene' consisted of Freak Street and the Hanumandhoka area in the heart of the city, with Swayambhunath and Boudhanath as two outposts representing two distinct groups of hippie expats. Boudhanath had more Tibetan Buddhism and antiques and carpet businesses. It had Shiva's Slaves, riding classic bikes such as BSA, Triumph and the Royal Enfield. And there was money, booze and drugs. Swayambhunath was 'trippy', easier on the budget, suitable for those who preferred tea over beer and chillums over other drugs.

But whether one stayed in Boudhanath or Swayambunath, one would inevitably end up in Freak Street. By the mid-70s, this small area in the heart of Kathmandu acted as a renowned hot spot. Here one could get the latest tapes and books. The restaurants, with funky names like Don't Pass Me By, The Hungry I and Lost Horizon, had good stereo sets and the latest Beatles and Santana songs danced out of the open windows.

Few places matched Trilochan Shrestha's Ying Yang restaurant, opposite the Hanumandokha Palace. Here, in the words of Desmond Doig, 'on cleverly devised, carpeted levels and in an atmosphere of vermillion, and gilded gloom, seekers of bliss drift through before dinner beers, meals and after-dinner joints'.¹ Here one could dance any time of the day, and watch the moon circle the skies above, because the place never really seemed to close. "Trilochan had all of us trapped in there", Susan concludes.

At some point William and Susan befriended Hetty McGee, a 'real' San Francisco hippie who knew everyone worth knowing on the Kathmandu scene. She was married to Angus MacLise, the former drummer of Velvet Underground, one of the era's most influential bands. Through Hetty, William and Susan got introduced to some renowned beatniks and bohemians. They befriended American poet-photographer Ira Cohen and his German partner actress Petra Vogt, who called Kathmandu their home from '72 till '77. The artists, in the words of Cohen, 'fell under the spell of this Shangri-La in the Himalayas where it was not difficult to believe that, as long as we remained, we would stay young forever writing poems touched by the magic of high tantric strivings under the blue cloud-filled skies, there at the top of the world.'

The eclectic tribe of bohemians transformed Freak Street into a thriving artistic hub. Cohen published poetry on hand crafted paper, Angus MacLise created books from tree bark, Keith Redman taught the Secret Yogas of Naropa to a growing following and everyone visited the Spirit Catcher Bookshop to listen to poetry or some jamming. There were plays at the Yak and Yeti and the Vajra Hotel and some outings to the mountains. There were also cremations, after someone OD-ed. In the words of Susan, 'it was a world in which death was always a possibility'. But mostly there was 'hanging out', with a cup of tea or some smoke, and someone strumming a guitar in the background.

I believe the images of William and Susan give a unique insight into the lifestyle of the bohemians who called Kathmandu their home during the 70s. Some were taken with the Russian camera William bought in Athens. It was a half-frame and gave 72 images instead of 36, two on each print. He used that for a while until he got hold of another Japanese camera.

The quality of the images is not uniform but in the course of my research I learned that quality photos of this era are rare. Camera's got stolen and some got swapped for hand knotted carpets and the like. But even those who had cameras took few personal images. William and Susan explain why:

¹ Desmond Doig in 'My Kind of Kathmandu, An Artist's Impression of the Emerald Valley'

“The whole scene was a kind of underground. No one liked to have their pictures taken. There was this privacy thing. You thought of the people you left behind. They might not like seeing you stoned or doing crazy things.”

This is why the images of the ‘Swayambhu gang’ created by Ira Cohen were such a hit. William: “We no longer felt inhibited when Ira dressed us up. He would use masks and wild outfits, and then it became art.”

The beginning of the end of the ‘magic days’ started in 1973, when Nepal gave in to pressure from the US and outlawed cannabis. The coronation of King Birendra in 1975 saw a cleanup in which stray dogs were poisoned and foreigners that did not look the part deported to India. US drug move and political intrigues led to the arrest of leading local hippie entrepreneurs accused of smuggling. The global move from psychedelics to street drugs influenced Nepal too. With the opening of the flight from Bangkok, hard drugs entered the country, transforming the ‘peace and love’ scene.

For those westerners who stayed behind however, the magic never entirely died. Ira Cohen, when presenting his Kathmandu Portfolio, said the following: “[F]or the one who stays long enough to know the God within, for the one who learns to bow, if only once, for that one the dream will never die.”

One only has to look at the collection of William and Susan to know this to be true.