

WALKING SUNSET BOULEVARD

By Victor Margolin

The Plan

I don't know exactly when I realized I was a walker. Perhaps it was after I had perambulated thirteen miles of Chicago's Clark Street from its origin at the city's northern border to the center of downtown, lured by the promise of myriad cafes, restaurants, and thrift shops. Or maybe it was after I had spent a day each on several other lengthy streets in the City of Big Shoulders. In any case, once I discovered the pleasures of urban walking, I began planning walks wherever I traveled.

My ultimate ambition was to walk the length of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. Several factors made this activity particularly attractive. Sunset was the longest street I knew of, twenty five miles; it passed through many different neighborhoods from multicultural Echo Park and Silverlake to upscale Beverly Hills and Bel Air; and it offered a chance to get to know Los Angeles on foot so I could establish a firm connection to the place, something impossible to do by driving in a car.

I had been talking with friends about the Sunset Boulevard walk for a long time. I contemplated it the way skiers on the modest hills of upper Wisconsin dream of sailing down the slopes at St. Moritz, or mountain climbers in North Dakota imagine themselves scaling Mt. Everest. The opportunity came in early December 1996 when I went out to Los Angeles on business. Before leaving, I phoned my friend Miriam and told her I was ready to do the walk. She had said earlier that she knew someone who might go with me, a co-worker's husband, Gary Munson, who ran and biked all over Los Angeles. Several days later Gary called and we agreed to arrange our logistics after I arrived in Los Angeles. I was staying in Westwood and Gary lived close by in the Palms District. Miriam agreed to pick us up on the day of the walk and drop us off at City Hall downtown. She said she would meet us in Malibu when we finished. We were to call her later in the late afternoon to confirm the time we expected to arrive at the ocean.

The Walk

Gary and I started off briskly from City Hall at 8:30 a.m. Gary had already driven the route and marked the streets mile by mile so we could keep track of how far we had to

go. Our goal: the Pacific Ocean. Gary didn't believe I would complete the trek. He is a seasoned L.A. traveler who's biked all the way to Palm Springs from Los Angeles. Maybe he thought I was some midwestern greenhorn whose eyes were bigger than his feet. But he was gracious and didn't confront me with his doubts at the start.

When Sunset Boulevard pulls out from City Hall it is still called Cesar Chavez Boulevard after the Mexican-American labor organizer. Within a few blocks the name changes to Sunset and remains so until the end. The first stretch of the walk, which took us through Echo Park and Silverlake, is an ethnic stew. I spotted a Brazilian nightspot and wrote down the address so I could come back and do the samba. Signs for restaurants, cleaners, and sundry service centers told us that the neighborhood was full of Thais, Vietnamese, and Latin Americans. We were urban Natty Bumpos, reading the surrounding signs in Echo Park to find out who lived there. Just as Natty could find traces of Indians in the woods by noticing the faintest of footprints or clumps of crushed leaves, so did we assess the population of each block by looking at the signage, the types of stores on the street, the eating places, and the public art. We passed a little hole in the wall eatery called Millie's Coffee Shop. People were eating and chatting at tables on the sidewalk. Inside was a typical diner set up - a counter, stools, folks hunched over their food and coffee. The food looked divine. We went outside and sat down. I ordered coffee and a muffin but the waiter talked me into a fruit plate as well. He disappeared inside and returned twenty minutes later with an elegant creation - thin slivers of fruit formed into extraordinary shapes. We learned that the owner was a trained chef. Instead of working downtown or in a place where the suits ate, she had staked her claim in Silverlake and catered to the local gentry who might have a ring in their nose or a hole in their shoe.

Waiting for our food, Gary and I began to connect. In the first stage of the walk, we talked about the event itself, how far we had gone already, how far we had to go, what kind of pace we were getting comfortable with. But now that we were really into it, the walk had already become a metaphor for life. We talked about how people challenge themselves. Gary used to work as a systems analyst in the space industry and then retrained as an attorney. Now he works on his own while also trying to write comedy and explore his potential as an actor. We considered what it meant to make time to walk Sunset Boulevard. We were flâneurs. We had nowhere to be, and were in no hurry to get there. We agreed nonchalantly that we would go as far as we liked, though both of us secretly hoped that we would make it all the way.

The food was finished and we were on our way again. We continued to pass murals, signs, and kitschy storefronts. I told Gary that one of the deals on a walk like

this is that each person gets to do just what he wants. Gary agreed. I was taking photographs left and right: a Tiki club, a Moorish apartment on a side street with Arabic minarets attached; Mexican pride murals; all signs of ethnic assertiveness or commercial kitsch. This leg of Sunset was full of such sights.

The next section was Hollywood. Here the street became a bit more genteel but not too much so. Instead of funky stores and ethnic minimalls, we now saw hospitals and larger shopping emporia. I began to spot signs in Russian and told Gary that this must be a place where immigrants from the different Soviet republics settled. Sure enough, I looked into a shop front and saw a group of men who might have been from Tashkent or Turkestan. Added to this was no shortage of signs in Thai script signaling services for the local population rather than comestibles for roving gourmets. Our first encounter with Hollywood was uneventful. The strip we were walking on was sandwiched between the colorful ethnicity of Silverlake and the dreary theatricality of Hollywood Boulevard.

Gary suggested that when we got to Vine we follow the “Hollywood Walk of Fame” and head up to Hollywood Boulevard. I agreed. At Vine we turned right and strode towards the Capitol Records Tower. I was surprised to see how shabby Hollywood had become. I photographed a large mural near the tower which showed a gigantic Nat King Cole flashing a row of pearly teeth. Behind him stood Miles Davis who sported the ringlets of his last years. Charlie Parker in a classic pose was also in the picture as were numerous other singers and musicians who made a lot of money for Capitol over the years. On a building next door were huge replicas of the Fab Four. They serve as icons for the devotees who make the trek to Hollywood from all corners of the globe just as carved figures of the saints once marked the splendor of the great cathedrals for pilgrims of the late Middle Ages.

We turned onto Hollywood Boulevard and passed innumerable souvenir shops. Always on the lookout for good tourist paraphernalia, I scanned the store shelves but found nothing of interest. The best image I took away from this part of the walk was a sign for the Hollywood Car Wash whose lettering mimicked the large white letters in the nearby hills that signal one’s arrival in Hollywood. We checked out the names of the stars on the sidewalk and shared our knowledge of obscure performers whose accomplishments were commemorated beneath our feet. Gary was more familiar with Hollywood than with Echo Park or Silverlake. He pointed out the various theaters and other monuments that testified to grander times. These were in sharp contrast to the seedy stores whose wares ranged from outrageous pompadour wigs to the studded straps that turn S/M aficionados on. Grauman’s Chinese Theater is now Mann’s and

has been fully Disneyfied. The down-at-the-heel atmosphere of the first streets we passed was only partially redeemed by Mann's or the spiffy ushers with little rounded caps like Johnny's of Philip Morris fame who led eager tourists in to a large theater to see *101 Dalmations*.

We turned left and headed back towards Sunset, glad to be leaving the tawdriness and glitz of Hollywood Boulevard behind. Then we headed into West Los Angeles, where all the jazzy billboards were. In this section of town a stream of Mercedes' and Jaguars, driven by hot young deal makers, flows steadily in and out of fancy restaurant driveways. This strip of Sunset Boulevard is a buffer between the old shell of Hollywood and the lavish homes of Beverly Hills. We passed fancy hotels and restaurants where people were sitting outside on the sidewalks, enjoying the afternoon.

Gary and I began to talk seriously about how much of the walk was left. I was enjoying the outrageous advertising signs and billboards. We passed chef Wolfgang Puck's headquarters, represented by gargantuan graphics and gaudy ornaments on the building façade. Soon the street changed. We were heading into Beverly Hills. All signs of commerce gradually disappeared and landscaping took over. We didn't see any houses. Just green grass and walkways. The houses were all on the side streets. We passed the Beverly Hills Hotel which is set back from the street and we walked for several miles speculating about the big homes that line Sunset's arteries.

Gary told me he initially thought we would only get as far as Westwood and then quit. Now we were talking seriously about finishing the walk. Westwood was coming up next and we had no desire to stop. Numerous gateways to Bel Air line the north side of Sunset. You see nothing from the street but you know you are walking through one of the wealthiest communities in the United States. How different this section of the boulevard was from where we started. In Echo Park and Silverlake, everything was right on the street - signs, murals, shops, cafes. The neighborhoods offered plenty of clues to what went on there. You could also participate as a walker, enjoying the murals, stopping for coffee, ducking into thrift shops. But Beverly Hills and Bel Air tell the you nothing. On this leg of the trip we first encountered streets without sidewalks. This neighborhood is not for walkers. The only invitation to discover it comes from the young Mexican boys who sit on the street corners selling maps that purport to show where the movie stars' homes are. We passed at least four of them. They radiated low energy as if no one had stopped by for a map all day.

We came to the end of Beverly Hills and entered Westwood. Sunset took us around the north end of the UCLA campus. This is the point where Gary had anticipated that we might quit. He looked at me as if to say "Was I right? Are you

ready to pack it in?" I told him that I felt a surge of energy and wanted to keep going. I am a finisher and would have been very disappointed if we had not continued. Gary expressed his satisfaction with this decision. He is a finisher too but didn't know how to take my measure. We bonded at a new level of appreciation for our mutual willingness to push on. Now we both believed we were likely to complete the walk.

It was great to have a sidewalk again after traipsing across so many lawns in Beverly Hills. On our left were the UCLA athletic fields and we moved on to an upscale part of Westwood. One house, still under construction, reprised Richard Neutra's modern Los Angeles villas of the 1920s. I liked the play of its volumes, its white finish, and its large windows. We would see few other houses as dramatic as this one on the rest of our walk.

After Westwood we began to encounter a more varied terrain. On a map of Los Angeles you can see how this section of Sunset leaves a squiggly line as it snakes around in the hills. As we pushed on towards Brentwood, we were no longer flâneurs. We were hikers. When we began, Sunset Boulevard spread out before us like an infinite path. Now it was late afternoon and we were focused on a final destination as we headed into the sunset. We knew we would be doing the last several hours of the walk in the dark and had begun periodic assessments of our energy a while back to insure that we would make it to the end in good time. We gave ourselves a deadline of 7:30 P.M. because a party was planned afterwards and we didn't want to keep people waiting.

In Brentwood, we found a Lebanese cafe where we stopped for a drink and a snack. The smallish town center was far less interesting than the kaleidoscopic sidewalks of Echo Park but Brentwood was nonetheless one of the few places between West Hollywood and Pacific Palisades where one could get anything to eat. Sunset Boulevard is hardly a gourmet's paradise. Rich in gastronomic opportunities on the first several legs, it offers almost nothing for the last fifteen miles. We were grateful for a Snapple and a plate of hummus. Gary called our friend Miriam and told her we expected to reach the ocean around 7:30 P.M., just about on schedule.

Rested and refreshed, we geared up for the last leg of the walk and increased the pace slightly. We had shifted from casual strolling to an earnest self-conscious stride. Twelve miles remained between us and the ocean. Originally Gary had calculated a pace of about three miles an hour, which we had averaged, including a stop for breakfast and distractions for browsing and photographing. Now we would try to add a mile to the hourly measure. Gary was checking our distance regularly against the street signs that he had spaced about a mile apart on his list. We were maintaining the

new pace with no effort. We passed through communities whose names were unfamiliar. Unlike Beverly Hills, the houses were right on the street though most were architecturally undistinguished. All had prominently displayed signs warning potential intruders that armed security guards would appear quickly if they happened to trip an alarm.

While the flâneur strolls in a timeless present, the hiker is usually focused on a time-bound future. Our increasing discussions of hourly pace and the distance left to walk were in direct proportion to the lack of things to see on this stretch of the boulevard. It got a bit more interesting when we climbed a relatively steep hill and walked through a wooded area that offered us a splendid view of the houses below. We tramped on dirt and dried brush for quiet a distance while we noticed several palatial residences set back from the street in the woods.

When we descended into Pacific Palisades, Gary gave the word that we had only a couple of miles to go. Encountering shops again after a long spell of residential neighborhoods, we were no longer inclined to browse. Besides, the shops were not very interesting, simply the typical boutiques and cute eateries of a wealthy suburban community. We were not free of hills yet and climbed several more before we reached the final leg of our journey. Unfortunately, the sidewalk disappeared again and we were obliged to pick our way across rows of lawns. We sighted water on our left and made out a distant waterfront. Our spirits began to rise. Finishing would be no problem, and on time too.

The last stretch of Sunset, which jogs and twists up a hill, left us at an elevated point from which we could see the Pacific Ocean spread out before us. Below lay Malibu, and Gladstones 4 Fish, the restaurant which Gary had designated as our final landmark. We surveyed the scene and headed down the hill as we sensed the impulse to congratulate ourselves but refused to do so until we had actually arrived at the beach. We passed an ashram on our left, the last interesting landmark before the end of the walk and we became flâneurs again as we strolled the last few yards of Sunset Boulevard. The light at Pacific Coast Highway was red and we stopped as if we were casually heading across the street to the beach. I wanted to tell people, “We have just walked the entire length of Sunset Boulevard. We started at City Hall eleven hours ago and have been on the move until now.” I think they would have been slightly incredulous, less because we had done the walk than because we had *wanted* to do it.

The light turned green and we headed across the street. We let our feelings of accomplishment ooze through our bodies. “But,” Gary said, “we haven’t touched the ocean yet.” Always one for ritual, I recognized the need to do this. So we walked down

the beach and put our hands in the water. Now the journey was over. Unlike Vasco de Balboa who had discovered the Pacific Ocean in a wild and natural state, we found it flanked by restaurants, gyms, and strip malls. It was dark and a bit chilly. After a long day, we were tired, but we were flush with a sense of our achievement. Just as sensitive lovers process into memory the contours of their partners' body, we had learned the boulevard well. Now it was inside us and would remain there forever.

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