

## THE JACKET FROM VIC HIGH

By Geoff Bell – Newcastle, England

I suppose it was the means by which we travelled to Canada that helped to form in my mind such a strong impression of the great enterprise we were embarking upon. My family and I had travelled from our hometown of Newcastle to Liverpool and, from there, we were to proceed to Montreal by sea (a seven-day voyage on the Empress of Canada). From Montreal we were to take the train – a further four days' travel to Vancouver.



It was while on this train that I experienced one of those moments that, I suspect, we all must experience sometime in our lives, one of those instances when the world comes so vividly into focus. It was on this train and on that “burnt into my memory” night; with the biggest and brightest full moon I had ever seen casting its shimmering silver light across a seemingly endless landscape of prairie wheat, that I first grasped, not only the full significance of our current move towards a new life, but also a portent of the way that travel and my ache for it would colour a large measure of my life. The train had halted late in the night (a night that appeared to crackle with possibility and expectancy) at some remote grain elevator station. Time seemed to stand motionless and all my sensations seemed to soar above the noise of the diesels on idle and some tap, tap, hoodoo maintenance being hammered out somewhere in the night. I knew, even then, that this moment would remain constant in my memory, that every detail would remain undimmed for my entire life. This instant in time was to become my own personal lodestar; a signpost pointing forward from where I had been to wherever it was I was going. As I lay in my cabin on board the train, I considered my imminent new life. I wondered what lay ahead – a new home, a new school, new friends? My life was entering a whole new chapter, my childhood was writing out its final last few lines, and adulthood beckoned as a blank page.

\*Now like a summer  
the train comes  
beating the platform  
with its blue wings”

(Helen Dunmore – The Marshalling Yard)

I'm not absolutely sure how and why I ended up with the varsity jacket. I'm not even sure that VHS ever operated a varsity jacket or letter award system and, come to that, whether or not the jacket was standard issue for the school. I have some vague recollection that I traded a few records for the jacket (North American college wear had been big on the fashion scene back in the UK). I acquired the VHS badge later on, possibly, as a souvenir of my time at the school. However, they remained largely consigned to either the junk cupboard or attic for the better part of 40+ years.



I suppose Canada had always been on the agenda. My father had served under bomber command with the RAF during the war and the main part of his training had been carried out in Picton, Ontario. He fell in love with not only Canada but also, I believe, a young Canadian girl. I have some of my father's old photographs from that period seeming to hint at a romance and, in a tin box amongst his war memorabilia, I found a silver RAF identity bracelet inscribed; "Xmas 1944 Vernise" (misspelling of Vernice). How or why this romance ended, I'm not sure – this episode of my father's life was rarely talked about. However, my father's romance with Canada certainly endured, and there was always some inference that someday he would like us to go there.

Around 1964 my mother was managing a painting and decorating shop in a suburb of Newcastle. One day a Canadian gentleman came into the shop to buy some painting supplies. Apparently he was in the UK visiting his mother and, while on this visit, he was re-decorating her house. On one of his subsequent trips to the shop my mother invited him to come to our home for a meal. He soon became a regular visitor throughout his stay, and my parents maintained contact with him on his return to Victoria. I also, unwittingly, took a small part in the circumstances that would ultimately lead to us immigrating to Canada by becoming a pen pal to his daughter. The wheels had been set in motion and, increasingly, it became more and more apparent that, sponsored and encouraged by our Canadian friends, we were set on a course to move to Canada, and that move was to lead me straight through the doors of Victoria High School.

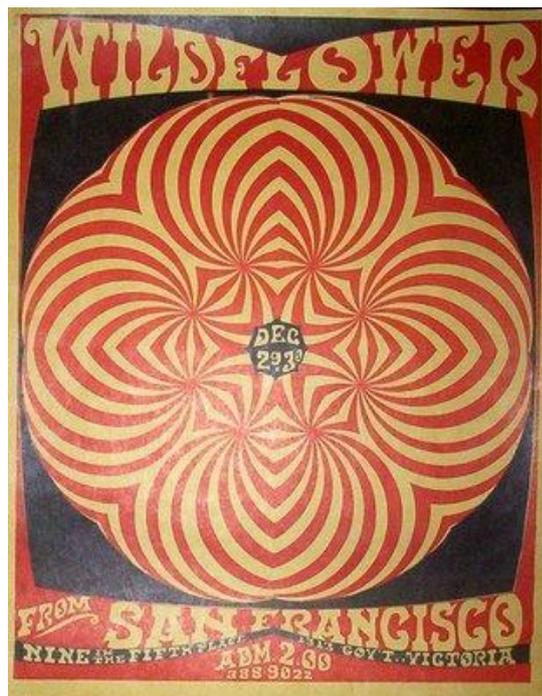


At this point, I must confess that this is no tale of great academic achievement or one of exemplary citizenship. I was an unconfident and, quite possibly, an indifferent student. In retrospect, I think my younger self had more than a few concentration issues and I just did not seem to fully grasp the importance of education. Add to this the further complication of being confronted by an unfamiliar education system, a new school, a new country, and all the acclimatization issues that these encompass, my time at VHS was unlikely to be an unqualified success.

The idyllic Canadian summer still held its grip as I sat in my home room on my first day at Vic High. I sat among my new classmates, everyone a stranger, trying to feign some attitude of disinterest. I attempted to disguise my nervousness by casually demonstrating intent on something outside a nearby window. Then suddenly he was there, beaming one of his engaging enigmatic smiles and, at that very moment, I had a friend. It was as simple as that. We became close very quickly and, in no time at all, it felt like we had known each other for years. Dave, my new friend, was someone who did not acknowledge the rule book much less conform to it – a born rebel. Yes, he was hard to fathom at times, but you know, I think I grew to love him because of that. We were both somewhat at odds with ourselves, both striving to make some sense of the world we were growing up in.

Through Dave I was soon introduced to a wider circle of friends and acquaintances. Most notable amongst these was Tom, with whom we formed into an almost inseparable band of wannabe outlaws. If I was to be this misplaced jigsaw piece set out on the wrong board, then at least, I now had company. Tom was a huge personality, warm and generous, most noticeable by his huge shock of curly red hair. Again, we hit it off instantly. I loved his crazy sense of humour and his total obsession with music. He owned literally hundreds of records stacked all around his bedroom. They were all there, every current rock artist of the era – Dylan, Doors, Beatles, Country Joe & the Fish etc. Dave and Tom operated from their respective basement rooms and these became our headquarters. Both rooms were festooned with the paraphernalia of the late '60s youth culture: concert posters, music papers, magazines and, in Tom's case, an old bomb casing painted with the "Ban the Bomb" symbol. Whereas Dave's room was decorated in every psychedelic colour imaginable Tom's was totally black – the walls, the ceiling, the floor, and even the bed cover.

We travelled around Victoria and the rest of the Island in a huge old station wagon belonging to Dave's father (Dave seemed to have almost unlimited access to this car). I soon developed semi-nocturnal habits that involved sneaking in and out of my bedroom window at various times throughout the night. We did the usual teenage stuff – the parties, the dances, and the local venues to see local bands. We would go to the White Eagle Hall to see *Moxie* or *As Sheriff*. We would go to Club Tango, Purple Onion, or the Nine In The Fifth Place. We did the burger joints and the outdoor cinema. We did a weekend in Vancouver to see John Mayall and Deep Purple. We did crazy stuff, some really crazy stuff and, in the background, I suppose my parents were starting to get more than a little concerned.



Surprisingly, although an inattentive student, I loved my time at Vic High. The school had a friendly and vibrant atmosphere. There seemed to be an all-pervasive atmosphere of self-betterment which I believe left some impression deep in my consciousness. I later took on education successfully as a mature student with surprising ease, spurred on, in no small measure, by the recollection of my previous indifference. I can only apologise to my despairing teachers at Vic High that I was not yet ready for their diligent instruction. However, they may take some consolation in that some seed from their tutelage took hold in my distracted and befuddled brain – I'm sorry to all that it would prove to be so tardy in reaching germination.

I loved the building. I loved the way the trees dappled the light into some of the rooms. I loved the buzz of class change, the chatter and the clash of the locker doors, the lunchtime debates and the crushes on the girls I never got the nerve to talk to. I loved the walks to and from school and watching Captain Kangaroo while Dave got ready (we were always running late), his mother busy cooking in the kitchen.

I loved that winter: "Oh no, we hardly ever get snow. In fact most winters you can pick daffodils on Christmas Day". Well it snowed that winter in 1969, on New Year's Eve. Just

after the bells had rushed 1968 out of the door, it started, and was knee deep in no time at all. I loved the stillness and the sense of fresh anticipation that the snowfall brought to the island.

Most of all I loved the people, you people; I loved your friendliness and your tolerance. Your endless positiveness and your willingness to accept, uninhibited by the weight of tradition. You seemed to me to have a highly developed sense of right and wrong – everybody I knew appeared to be totally indignant at the napalming of children in Vietnam, the Russian tanks in Czechoslovakia etc.

There are so many vague recollections of people, faces and names, and so many great memories from what turned out to be such a brief period in my life. I was truly taken by my new home, my new school and my new friends. However, destiny had other plans for me, the journey was not yet over for me, I still had a long way to go.

In my bedroom I had a small pile of what I called my Saturday Morning Records; among these was an album by John Mayall called *The Blues Alone*, and one track in particular haunted me that spring. That track was entitled “Broken Wings.” I had been on a couple of dates with a girl called Donna and one of these dates had been to a dance at Vic High (*As Sheriff?*). I liked her a lot; however, she had not made the call after she said she would and I was determined to play it cool.

I was trying to resolve a question put to me by my parents. Due to their concerns in regard to my poor performance at school and my questionable extracurricular activities, they thought it might possibly be for the best if I returned to the UK to take up a job that my uncle could arrange within the construction industry. I was torn, between the pressure from my parents and the certainty of this job offer, and my new life and friends in Victoria. I was given the final say and, at seventeen, I was about to make a decision that would ultimately have such a huge impact on both me and my immediate family.

I was listening to this song and thinking about the proposition put to me by my parents. I thought about my new friends, especially Dave and Tom. I thought about the huge commitment my parents had made in coming to Victoria. If Donna had made that call would I have been any more inclined to say no to this proposal? I don't honestly know. It was going to be such a close call. I came to the conclusion that she did not appear to be interested. I left my room and “Broken Wings,” sought out my my parents, and told them that I had decided to take up the job offer. That was it – from such small reasonings are major decisions made?

In no time at all the arrangements were made and I was flying home to take up a career in construction and almost 25 years on the road. The night on the train in prairie Canada had revealed to me the full extent of my restless nature and it would take a good many more miles before I could work it out of my system. It would also take some time before I was able to make contact with my old friends Dave and Tom again. It was almost 44 years before I made contact with my new friend Debbie (at the Vic High Archives), who would kindly provide the new VHS badge to grace the newly restored Vic High Jacket.

It has taken the fullness of time for me to fully realise what a huge part Victoria and Vic High played in my life. To all of you that took my side and touched my life, albeit it ever so briefly, thank you.

As a footnote and as some measure of recognition toward the fickle nature of fate: after my return to the UK, I received a letter from my mother in which she mentioned that a few days after I left for the UK some girl had turned up at our apartment, a girl called Donna.

To this day, I still occasionally play "Broken Wings" and wonder about the consequences of a lost phone number and that decision I made so many years ago.

