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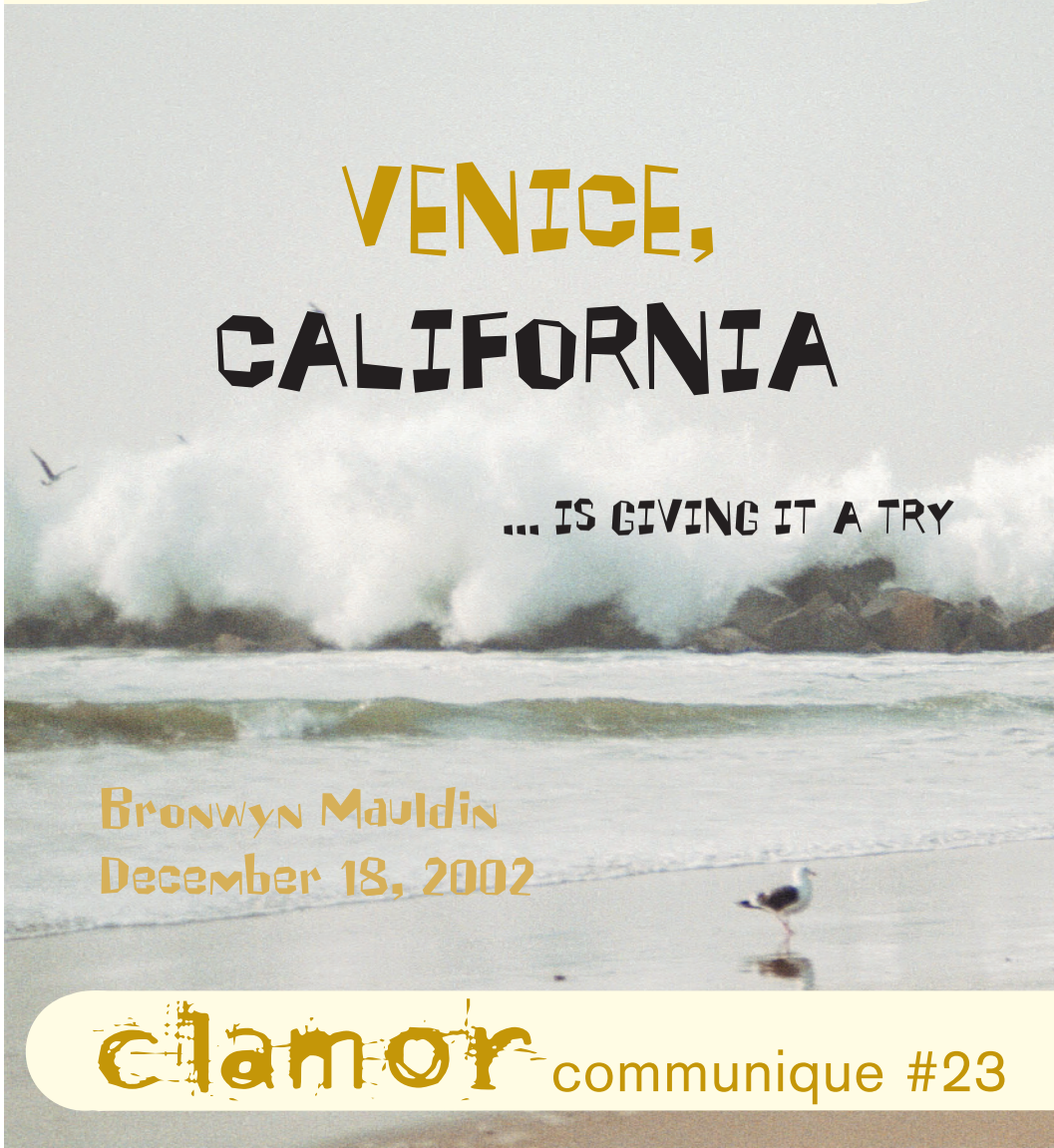
Can Your NEIGHBORHOOD Stop the War?



VENICE, CALIFORNIA

... IS GIVING IT A TRY

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"Earth to Venice!
Let's not have a war!"

Suzy Williams shouts to the sea of shoppers, rollerbladers, buskers and hawkers on the Venice Beach boardwalk on a warm Sunday afternoon. As she walks along with the Venice Peace March, Williams clangs the bell on her rusty bicycle to the beat of Edwin Starr's "War," blaring from CD walkman rigged up to a small speaker slung over fellow marcher Jim Smith's shoulder.

Skipping along barefoot beside Williams is Diane Butler, a local artist who lives with her husband in a couple of campers on the streets of Venice. She makes peace signs with her paint-spattered hands, waving to the crowds from the center of the march.

Along the boardwalk, a group of musicians with electric guitars and African drums recalibrate their rhythm to the beat of the marchers' music as they pass, calling out, "We're going to give the peace marchers some help!" An aging stoner called Yin selling fabric-covered conical Vietnamese straw hats from a boardwalk booth smiles and nods. A group of middle aged women selling hand-decorated toilet seats decoupaged in brightly colored floral prints cheers as the big blue Venice Peace Movement banner goes by. Cameras pop with the sound of tourists capturing the authentic local wildlife.

Welcome to Venice, the coastal California town created in 1905 in the image of its Italian namesake as a waterfront resort and amusement park crisscrossed with twenty miles of canals, now a bohemian epicenter of Southern California personal expression. After several decades as a crumbling home for beat generation coffeehouses and later for Dog Town's Z-Boys, it's now the region's second largest tourist attraction after Disney's commodified playground.

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The Venice Peace marchers believe that what they are doing is so important that they want to encourage other groups around the country to organize similar events in their own local communities. "We would like to inspire other people to start their own marches until there are marches all across America against the war," Williams says. "In every community, there's people like us."

Smith says to people thinking about taking action in their communities against the war, to just get out there and do it. "What I usually tell people is, if they go out there with a sign, people will think they're a nut. But if they have one or two people with them, then it becomes a movement."

Dietlin says Butler said it and Butler says it was Dietlin. Smith is sure it wasn't him. In any case, the three of them decided to march. They walked the usual route, for once clear of didgeridoo players, henna tattoo artists, and pick-pockets. At Windward Ave. each took a turn to speak to an empty beach. They walked back in the rain, certain they had done the right thing.

"We preserved our street," Smith says, with evident pride.

Is it possible to measure the impact of local, community-based events like the Venice Peace March and Rally? Today, political actions both big and small can be as much about spin as they are about what actually happens. Law enforcement, elected officials and corporations have become quite skilled at dismissing major events as small and insignificant. Even the direct action at Seattle has been interpreted and reinterpreted until it might be forgotten that it did quite literally stop the World Trade Organization in its tracks and change the terms of the corporate globalization debate.

Venice painter, sculptor and peace march regular Jeffrey Hirsch says that the high he experienced the first time he spoke at the open mic rally is gone now. "In my delusions, I thought that me speaking up publicly would change things. Free speech is a hollow promise if we don't have access to electronic media." The Venice Peace March has been on local L.A. television news once or twice, and has been picked up by media as far away as Norway and Japan.

The press, too, has become adept at downplaying important political events, particularly those that happen in the streets. Consider the New York Times' coverage of anti-war marches and rallies across the U.S. on October 6, 2002. If the nation's "newspaper of record" that sets the agenda for papers around the country won't cover the largest anti-war event since the Vietnam War, community-based marches may become even more important. It is possible that if enough of these smaller weekly events are organized around the country, more people would see their pro-peace, anti-war messages in person than would hear about a giant bi-coastal march in the mainstream press.

Smith takes both a functional and a social movement view of the impact of the march. He multiplies a conservative estimate of 10,000 people visiting the boardwalk each Sunday by the number of weeks to calculate that in its first year alone, the Venice Peace March was seen by as many as half a million people. Still, he says "I think we've had some influence beyond just the community of Venice. Every peace activity has a bigger influence than people realize. People see it, and it makes them think about something the next time they hear Bush on t.v."

And this is the peace movement, Venice style. Every Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m. or so (we're on Venice time, after all), fifteen to twenty-five people meet at Rose Ave. then make their way up the boardwalk, singing, shouting and waving their anti-war messages. At the Venice Peace March and Rally, professors march side by side with homeless people, poets with publicists and doctors. Vietnam veterans with war resisters who spent most of the 1970s in Canada.

On the Sunday of the 53rd weekly march, boardwalk performer Louis Cangemi sang Phil Och's "Draft Dodger Rag" in honor of the Venice Peace March as it passed by. On his karaoke machine he had "The Hits of Robert Goulet" cued up for later. Cangemi is a masseur from neighboring Mar Vista who sings for tips on the boardwalk every weekend. He's active with environmental groups, from the local Ballona Wetlands Land Trust to the national Natural Resources Defense Council. He likes the Venice Peace March, but he says rather pointedly, "It's nothing to write home about."

Or is it?

All across the country, community groups are getting together to organize local, weekly anti-war, pro-peace events. There are more than twenty of these smaller neighborhood-based demos in Southern California alone, from Glendale to Long Beach to Riverside, with new ones appearing each month. They range from quiet, candlelit vigils to raucous rallies. Some even hold their events in malls where free speech is limited by law, wearing their anti-war statements on t-shirts rather than poster board.

There's no question that these groups are putting into action the dictum, "Think globally, act locally." But are they having an impact? Is this a good way to stop a war? The Venice peace marchers say yes it is, absolutely.

In her rippling multicolored clothes and long, flowing salt-and-pepper tresses, Butler might be dismissed as an aging hippie who did too many drugs in the 60s and doesn't really know what she's doing in the middle of the Venice Peace March. That would be a mistake. She's there to stop a war she understands too well.

"I didn't want to sit by while our country was being inhumane. If you go bomb people, you're being inhumane," she says. "I can't believe we've been bombing Iraq every week for ten years. What does that do to our planet? What does that do to their environment and our environment? We're at a turning point. Do we want to exist in the world? Do we want humans to be able to live on the planet? Or do we want to move over and let insects take over?" Butler marches each week with her daughter Lani Ware, an artist who also lives in

Venice. Sometimes Butler's 77 year-old mother joins them.

For Butler, participating in the march is an important part of holding her government accountable for their actions. "I know peace marchers will say we're the ones being patriotic, but to me, I don't think it's that important to be patriotic. I think it's important to be a good human being and to care about whether people live or die or are harmed by anything that we have control of, and we're supposed to have control of this government."

For Williams, a Venice cook by day and a singer by night, "Marching for peace seemed pretty necessary for me. This is our little Venice thing, and I'm really proud of it."

Jim Smith is one of the key organizers of the Venice Peace March and Rally. He's a Vietnam veteran who makes his living as Communications Director for the California Faculty Association, the union representing professors, librarians and counselors in the sprawling 23-campus California State University system. Smith argues that small events like this one are very important, in part because they help build communities.

"In the big marches, it's great to be out there, but a lot of the people you'll never see again," he says. "We have several people from our block who go to the [Venice Peace] march, and people you run into at the store, so it builds a real kind of a family feeling that the big marches don't do."

Big marches are good because they remind people that they are not alone. It's a cathartic, energizing experience to stand in a crowd of a few hundred or several thousand and chant or sing or drum along, or just look around at all the people who know, as you do, that something is terribly wrong, and that you are the ones who can fix it. But those events are few and far between, and when they're over, people scatter.

The Venice Peace March and other local events like it are worth writing home about not because of their size – the largest march had 50 people, the smallest had three. It's the grassroots community building and empowerment of "regular people" that makes them important.

Community-based marches can also solve problems created by geography. In a sprawling city like L.A., or in the suburbs and rural parts of the country, sheer distances keep a lot of people from mass events. Americans are already stretched thin from our ever increasing on-the-job productivity demands and from balancing work and family. The easier and more convenient the march is to get to, the more likely people are to show up.

the obligatory sunglasses, mildly offensive t-shirts and Your Name on a Piece of Rice. On the other side of the walkway artists, performers and craftspeople ply their trades along the edge of the sand. Many of them return week after week, creating a boardwalk community of its own within the larger Venice neighborhood.

When Butler walks down the boardwalk, countless people call out to her by name – artisans, performers, and a fair share of folks who are clearly homeless or almost so. She stops to speak to every single one of them. "When you come out here and you see just American flags up all over the place and no protest against our government for being inhumane, then that's kind of scary, 'cause this is a place where people can be different," Butler says. "Bohemian place, right? That's what I'm counting on. When it ceases to be, then I guess I'll cease to be here."

When the Venice Peace March passes by, some people applaud and nod pointedly. Others press into the crowd while family or friends snap photos as if they were in front of the Taj Mahal or just landed a hundred-pound swordfish off the Florida Keys. Some roll their eyes at the marchers, and a small number have been openly hostile. Once, a person at a boardwalk café threw a piece of cake at Butler's mother. Still, several marchers tell of being approached quietly by someone from the crowd to express support.

"Just when I think I'm going to give up," Dietlin says, "someone stops and says, 'Thanks for doing this.'"

At the very least, local community-based events like this are important because they give people an opportunity to keep active against the war. "It's kind of a defense against this powerlessness that you can feel against these world events that are horrible. You feel like there's nothing you can do about them, and it can be very depressing. The best way to counter that is by taking some kind of action," Smith says.

There is a core of Venice peace marchers who show up on the boardwalk nearly every week, joined by not-so-regulars and a few new people. Even bystanders join in sometimes. The smallest Venice Peace March and Rally ever occurred on one particularly dismal, rainy Sunday afternoon when only about six or seven march regulars showed up. It was the sort of day that keeps fair weather Angelenos curled up indoors with the heat cranked up to 80 degrees. Huddling under the corner of a building, they stared out into the rain and debated whether or not to march. One of the women finally said she thought it was important to hold the march with only a few people, at least as a symbolic gesture.

"In the beginning we didn't know what the reaction of people would be, if it would be very hostile. This was a month after September 11th. But actually the reaction from the first march onward was very positive," says Smith.

That first Venice Peace March and Rally grew out of a community meeting organized by the Venice branch of the Peace and Freedom Party, a socialist, democratic, feminist, environmentalist political party founded in 1967. PFP is one of California's most successful third parties, garnering enough votes through thirty years of successive elections to stay on the California ballot from 1968 until 1998.

With post-9/11 war drums reverberating across the country in late September 2001, PFP organizers held their meeting to discuss how the Venice community should respond to the impending U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The thirty or so people who attended decided to hold a march on the beach to express their opposition to war. Between that meeting and the first Venice Peace March, the U.S. began bombing.

As the first march made its way up the boardwalk, several cafés filled to standing-room-only on that sunny Sunday afternoon erupted into loud cheers as the marchers passed, singing along to John Lennon's "Imagine" at a time when the Clear Channel radio behemoth was pressuring its stations not to play it.

His head swathed in a red, white and blue bandana as he walked in that first march, Richard Washington asked, "If we're powerful enough to bomb, why aren't we powerful enough to out-think them?"

Butler carried a bright yellow, green and blue oil painting that day that read, "Jesus said, 'Love your enemies.'"

The marchers decided to come back the next week and do it all over again. The same thing happened the next week, and the week after that.

"By the third one I guess it was pretty much decided by consensus that we were going to keep doing this until the policy was reversed," Smith says. "There was no master design to do this. It just evolved out of people's feelings and commitment."

Venice is the kind of place where "community" means more than a targeted advertising demographic. Thanks to the persistent work of local activists, you won't see many chain stores here. On one side of the asphalt beach boardwalk are a series of buildings, some of them original Italianate structures from the early 1900s, now housing restaurants and cafés, tattoo parlors, shops selling

For many regulars, the open mic rally is the high point of the Venice Peace March. It's another aspect of that march that's worth writing home about. Every week, when they reach Windward Ave. the marchers form a half circle in front of their big blue banner while Smith plugs a microphone into the speaker and Williams takes down the names of those who want a turn to talk. She shouts out to the throngs on the boardwalk, inviting them to speak as well. While they're getting ready, an L.A.P.D. officer sometimes stops by and speaks to one of the organizers.

"A couple of times cops have come up and said, 'Do you have a permit for this?' We said no, we don't need one. They say, well, if you have over 300 people you have to have a permit. Our response is, if we have 300 people we don't need a permit," says Smith

Anyone can have five minutes at the mic to stand under the banner, face the boardwalk crowds and say whatever is on his or her mind. The speakers aren't vetted, nor are they censored. It's democracy and free speech at their grass-rootsiest. People who would never have a chance to speak at big political events get their turn to speak out to the crowds at Venice Beach.

Smith says the Venice Peace March is also important because they don't "preach to the choir" the way some political events both big and small do. As many as 150,000 people may visit Venice Beach on any single weekend. Only about twenty of them are there for an anti-war march. "Our rallies are for people who came out to Venice for entirely different reasons than going to a peace rally," he says.

There's an element of leadership development at these rallies that makes them important for movement building. People who have never spoken in front of a group come back week after week until they find the courage to take the micro-phone. "Some of [the speakers] are people just happening by who have very emotional feelings to express," Smith says. "Others are people who have been doing this week after week and have gotten to be pretty good soapbox orators. Including people who were just scared to death the first time or few times they did it, and now it's hard to shut them up after five minutes."

One of those people is Therese Dietlin. Dietlin lives in Atwater Village, some 20-odd miles from Venice Beach. Every weekend she tables on the boardwalk, distributing information about the stolen 2000 election. She wears a black baseball cap embroidered with "IMPEACH SCALIA" in bright yellow. If you want to know about all the election-related events that were scheduled to take place on 9/11 but were cancelled due to the WTC and Pentagon attacks, just stop by her booth.

At first, Dietlin marched along with everyone else and just listened at the rally. Eventually, she got frustrated with everyone at the mic talking about "President Bush this, and President Bush that. I felt like I had to get up and speak and tell people he's not the president."

Of course, free speech has its challenges, and the Venice Peace March hasn't been immune. A serious rift in the group emerged several months ago when a person stepped out from the boardwalk crowd and started in on a homophobic diatribe at the mic. No one knows who the speaker was or exactly what she said, but they are clear on what happened next.

Butler became angry. This isn't what the Venice Peace March is about, she explains, and it's not what she personally stands for. She was afraid that bystanders might misunderstand the point of the rally, or might be hurt by what was being said. She grabbed the microphone away from the speaker.

Others marchers disagreed with Butler. Free speech is free speech, they argued, and the Venice Peace Movement mic should be open to any point of view.

In the end, the peace marchers voted to let the speaker continue. Butler handed back the mic, and the speaker finished quickly. Before she was through, though, Butler and her daughter had walked away. They didn't return for several weeks.

Many of the marchers were troubled by Butler's departure. Her family was a

fixture in the march, and some say that she carries the "true spirit" of both the march and the community.

Williams was devastated. "Diane is an authentic Venetian," she says, by way of explanation.

Butler and her daughter returned to the march after nearly two months away. They've made their peace by only participating in the march. At Windward Ave. while the others are lining up for the rally, Butler and Ware turn back and head to their booth on the boardwalk.

"We learned from that [event] that somebody should have been prepared to come up after her and argue the opposite, against homophobia," Smith says. "There was discussion at that time of should we stop having the open mic, but most people felt the benefits outweighed that part of it. The open mic has, I think, energized people more than it's been damaging.

"You get to the point," he adds, "where you have to decide whether you believe in democracy or not, and what are the risks."

50 people, four dogs and at least one cat showed up for the first Venice Peace March and Rally on October 14, 2001, just days after the U.S. began bombing Afghanistan. That original march had three points of unity that continue to guide these activists: opposition to military action, to racial profiling and hate crimes, and to the erosion of civil liberties.

When the mainstream media covers anti-war events these days, they'll sometimes state that most Americans supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, but fewer support attacking Iraq. This has the effect of slowly erasing from people's consciousness the many demonstrations, rallies, vigils and other post-9/11 actions that were organized across the country to try to prevent and later to oppose the bombing of Afghanistan. Many of these were small, community-based events where neighbors, stunned by both 9/11 and the U.S. government's swift and angry drive for vengeance, came together to sort out their own response, and to take their message of peace to their community. It's important to write about even small events, to keep the historical record of protest and action accurate and alive.

Moreover, today's anti-war movement owes its strength in part to events like the first Venice Peace March, organized at a time when flag waving and American nationalism were at their most chauvinistic, and when organizers were unsure of what to expect, even in Venice, known for its bohemian live-and-let-live attitude.