## The Story of the 1970 Concert that Launched Greenpeace

October 16th, 1970, 8 p.m. Night has fallen and it's dark outside the Pacific Coliseum, Vancouver's largest concert arena, but inside all is bright and tinged with the adrenaline buzz of ten thousand ticket-holders. A pungent potpourri of patchouli, sandalwood and Acapulco Gold is wafting through the stadium. My mother, flanked by my fifteen-year-old brother and me, is sitting in the first row of chairs lined up in front of the stage. Every seat has been taken, and those unwilling to sit in the stands are plunking themselves down in the aisles and on the floor in front of us, with scant resistance from volunteer ushers.

Shortly after eight the house lights dim and a raucous cheer erupts as Terry David Mulligan, deejay of local rock station CKVN, saunters onstage. The whole arena is humming, vibrating with anticipation. I slip off my chair and slide into the crush of bodies on the floor. A shiver of expectation shakes my whole body. Can this really, finally, be happening?

When my father said he was going to organize "a rock concert" I thought he'd gone out of his mind. Dad had never organized a concert before, and the thought of my middle-aged *father* dealing with *rock stars* was just sad. Besides, it was absurd to think that anyone would play for free for an obscure little group which a local journalist had sniggeringly characterized as a handful of "eco-freaks and beardies."

"I'd like to introduce…Mr. Irving Stowe."

Dad is a big man, nearly six foot, but I don't think I've ever seen him stand so tall. He's wearing a long-sleeved, button-down Brooks Brothers shirt left over from his trial lawyer days, which I've tie-dyed. The thick white Egyptian cotton took the blue dye exceptionally well, and the cloth is streaked here and there with pale lines like trailing balloon strings. Shapes reminiscent of clouds hover here and there in clusters. It looks like he is wearing the sky.

"By coming here tonight you are making possible a trip for life and for peace." His resonant voice rings out into the cavernous space. "You are supporting the first Greenpeace project: sending a ship to Amchitka Island to try to stop the testing of hydrogen bombs there or *anywhere*!"

Applause explodes all around me, and I smile up at Dad, knowing he can't see me in that blaze of light, and then tears blur my vision and I can't see anything anymore.

It's the proudest moment of my fourteen-year-old life.

It all started at the end of the summer of '69.

The Sixties were drawing to a close. All over the globe people had taken to the streets, marching against a nuclear arms race that jeopardized the planet, demanding civil rights and repudiating the Vietnam War. Women turned gender roles on their heads and gays burst out of legally enforced closets. Revolution was the order of the day.

In Vancouver, Canada, my idealistic parents, inspired by legendary activists Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, dreamt of a world where revolutions were crafted from velvet instead of steel. As members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), a pacifist sect with a long tradition of intense social activism, they progressed from dreaming to action. Among their other causes was an underground railroad which helped Vietnam war resisters find shelter in hippie hangouts on Vancouver's Fourth Avenue, a.k.a Haight Ashbury North.

Teens like me gravitated to Fourth Avenue too, peering shyly into head shops, fingering turquoise in the House of Orange bead shop and flipping through stacks of LPs at Rohan's Records. My family downed its first vegetarian curry and drank chai

at the Golden Lotus. "Peace", everyone said, flashing "V" signs and radiant smiles. The anthem of the Sixties, the Beatles' song "All You Need is Love," lulled us all into a sleepy euphoria of innocence and hope.

But before the decade ended, the bliss of Woodstock would be shattered by murder at Altamont while the Rolling Stones played on. Casualties in Vietnam would escalate into the hundreds of thousands. And on Amchitka Island, 4,000 kilometers from our hometown, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission would drill deep into one of the most seismically volatile regions on the planet, preparing for a series of nuclear weapons tests.

My father was incensed when he heard about the atomic experiments on Amchitka Island. Seismologists were warning that *any* sub-surface blast -- nuclear or otherwise -- in the tectonically unstable Aleutian Island Chain could initiate earthquakes and tidal waves all over the Pacific Rim. And Amchitka was a dedicated wildlife preserve, world renowned as the site where sea otters –- hunted to near extinction by the beginning of the twentieth century –- had first begun to recover. When Dad heard that sea otters were washing up dead on the shores of Amchitka with their eardrums split by trial blasts, he exploded in his own carefully controlled way. He grabbed a pen and scrawled a petition to "Stop the Bomb!" Then he stormed downtown to the US Consulate and stood outside in the rain, collecting signatures.

Meanwhile, journalist Bob Hunter was writing in his environmental column in the Vancouver Sun that the U.S. was playing "a game of Russian roulette with a nuclear pistol pressed against the head of the world." On October 1st 1969, Hunter and my father stood together on a makeshift stage at the Peace Arch border crossing just south of Vancouver, addressing six thousand angry students, housewives, clergy, anarchists and other disparate groups. By the end of "Operation Borderclose" the crowd had forced traffic to a standstill, closing the Canada/US border and repudiating the noble sentiment -- "Brethren Dwelling Together in Unity" –- engraved on the Peace Arch monument.

Similar, smaller protests erupted at customs checkpoints all across Canada. In vain. Less than twenty-four hours after we hoisted "Don't Make a Wave" signs at the Peace Arch, a 1.2 megaton blast ripped through pristine Amchitka Island. The Atomic Energy Commission promptly declared the experiment a success and scheduled a five megaton test for the fall of 1971, two years hence. Code-named "Cannikin," it would carry more than four hundred times the power of the bomb that leveled Hiroshima.

My father gathered a small but potent group of activists together to form the "Don't Make a Wave Committee" (DMAW). The first to join were fellow Quakers and ex-Americans Jim and Marie Bohlen. Jim was a visionary engineer who'd worked on nuclear weapon delivery systems before becoming radicalized and shifting his focus to environmental engineering. His wife Marie was a respected nature illustrator. Both were ardent conservationists, who -- like my parents -- believed in the Quaker practice of "bearing witness" to wrongdoing. But how could DMAW bear witness to nuclear tests on an island located roughly halfway between Alaska and Russia?

Marie casually came up with the solution one morning over breakfast:

"Why not sail a boat up there?"

No sooner had she spoken than the phone rang. On a slow news day it wasn't unusual for journalists to call local activists, looking for a story. Jim, hearing a reporter on the other end of the line, boldly improvised a plan to sail a boat to Amchitka. The next day the Sun printed the story as if the voyage was a done deal.

Dad called an emergency meeting of DMAW. Everyone approved of the plan, despite the fact that DMAW had no money, no boat, and hardly any of its members

had ever sailed before. As the meeting drew to a close, Dad flashed the "V" sign at community activist Bill Darnell as he headed out the door.

"Hey, Bill! Peace!"

Bill was known more for listening than speaking, but tonight he tossed off a spontaneous reply in the deep bass voice I found so incongruous in a twenty-three year old:

"Let's make it a *green* peace."

The phrase resonated, and not only in the basement of the Unitarian Church. Quiet, thoughtful Bill had captured the zeitgeist in two words. A burgeoning environmental awareness -- stoked by Rachel Carson's ecological wake-up call, "Silent Spring" -- was seeping into the consciousness of peace activists everywhere, prompting them to consider a larger definition of war. Urbanites who'd never farmed before were going "back to the land." Citizens worldwide were starting to listen to the language of the earth, the sea, and the sky, to pay homage to our singular blue planet.

My father had been writing an environmental column in Vancouver's underground newspaper, the Georgia Straight. It was one of his oft-repeated caveats that the "military industrial complex" was destroying the environment as well as people. He called Bill the next day, very excited.

"I can't stop thinking about what you said! Peace…and the environment…this puts it all together."

Everyone in DMAW heard the magic in the phrase.

"That's what we should call the boat, when we get one," Jim declared at the next meeting. "The *Green Peace*." Marie offered to design a button as a fundraiser. Dad hammered together vending boxes and the next weekend we all went out to stand on street corners and hawk Greenpeace buttons. But at a quarter a pop, by the spring of 1970 we'd raised less than $500 in button sales, and it would take thousands more to charter a boat.

My father had drawn up DMAW's constitution, citing two lofty goals: to stop nuclear testing worldwide; and to preserve the environment. But if DMAW couldn't even raise $18,000 to charter a boat, these visionary ideals would amount to nothing more than a grandiose joke. Reluctantly, the Committee started to take fundraising more seriously.

DMAW often met at our house. Sometimes when I came home from ballet I'd perch at the edge of the living room, hugging our black cat and listening to wordsmiths like Dad, Bob Hunter and Ben Metcalfe (a journalist whose radio broadcasts focused on environmental issues) discussing strategy. Amid the frustration that sometimes erupted in diatribes, there were also flashes of luminous speech, which lit up the room like lightning crackling through storm clouds. Fundraising ideas, however, were scarce. One afternoon Dad came into the kitchen looking more drawn and haggard than I'd ever seen him before. With jittery hands he scooped beans into the coffee grinder.

"I know how we'll raise the money, Peachy!" he said, using the pet name he'd given me as a child. "We'll have a rock concert!"

There was a false bravado I'd never heard in his voice before. I turned away so he wouldn't see my expression. *As if*! I thought. His colleagues in DMAW had a similar response. My mother and Bill Darnell were the only ones who supported the idea. "Fine!" Dad bristled. "I'll organize it myself."

In retrospect, putting on a rock concert was perhaps not the most insane idea Dad had ever had. Although I hated to admit it, he *was* clued-in to the music of the day. His sizable collection of classical and jazz records had expanded within a few years to include a lot of folk and rock. Al Sorenson, the music critic for the Georgia Straight, lent him promo albums, virgin vinyl that hadn't even hit the airwaves yet.

Word got around, and when there were no meetings our living room would fill with a combination of DMAW members, Georgia Straight staff and other friends, all listening to the latest Grateful Dead, Laura Nyro, or other offerings.

On those evenings, a reverent silence would reign as Dad slid each LP from an unmarked sleeve and placed it on the turntable. The only light would be a pole lamp beside the stereo system and Dad would sit there with eyes closed and a blissful expression on his face. My parents didn't smoke (anything) but sometimes a listener would wander onto our sundeck for a toke under the stars. Those evenings were seminal, magic, and the house was filled with an air of hope and awe and wonder.

Dad started writing to musicians. One afternoon in late spring, I came home from school and he tossed me an envelope.

"Joan Baez!" My fingers were the ones trembling now. "You got an answer from *Joan Baez*?"

"She can't come," he replied calmly. "She has a previous commitment. But she sent this."

He handed me a cheque for a thousand dollars.

Soon, the Canadian band Chilliwack -- formerly "The Collectors," whose hit single "Lydia Purple" would become an enduring rock classic -- signed on. Political folksinger Phil Ochs, who had a large and loyal following, also agreed to play. Then Joni Mitchell came through, even donating the cost of renting her grand piano. "Ladies of the Canyon" had been released in April, and Melody Maker would vote her the Top Female Performer of 1970. She was as big a draw as we could possibly hope for.

Suddenly the concert was an actual, happening thing. Our house morphed into DMAW central as everyone pitched in to get posters made, sell tickets and attend to a ton of details. Dad booked the Coliseum for October 16$^{th}$. At a modest $3 apiece, tickets moved briskly but there were still some available when the phone rang at dinnertime in the beginning of October.

"Hello?"

My mother, brother and I looked up expectantly from our veggie burgers as Dad put his hand over the mouthpiece. "It's Joni. She wants to know if it's okay to bring James Taylor." Taylor's album "Sweet Baby James" was shooting up the charts and would reach platinum on October 16th. The concert sold out.

But as mid-October loomed, Canada was spiraling into one of the darkest periods of its political history. A cell of the Québec séparatiste FLQ escalated terrorist activities from mailbox bombings to the kidnapping of dignitaries. At four o'clock on the morning of October 16th, Prime Minister Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act. Tanks rolled through the streets of Montréal, civil liberties were curtailed nationwide and all day long we feared the authorities would try to cancel the concert.

Opposition to Amchitka, however, was widespread. Both right and left wing factions had roundly condemned the tests, and even as far back as October of 1969, when the traditionally conservative RCMP stood idly by while students blocked the border at the Peace Arch, it seemed that on this issue our nation stood largely united. Now, as the expected order to call off the concert failed to materialize, the powers-that-be seemed to be turning a blind eye once more.

Canadian author and editor Alan Twigg later opined, rather more cynically, that the reason the bastions of law and order didn't cancel the concert was because doing so might have instigated a riot. Whatever the reason for the non-action of the authorities, music triumphed over politics on this night. Phil Ochs stood under the hot Coliseum lights in black jeans and a black leather jacket muttering, "not

everyday you get to play in a police state" before launching into "Rhythms of Revolution."

After a vibrant set, a standing ovation and an encore, he ceded the stage to Chilliwack. Bill Henderson and his band worked their magic with electric guitar, flute, sax, violin, keyboard, drums, bass and vocals, and by the time they ended with a transcendent, extended version of "Rain-O," the floor was alive with blissed-out dancing hippie chicks. I was one of them, and as Bill sang: "If there's no *audience*, there just ain't no *show*" I turned around to see the whole Coliseum singing and swaying in unison.

Then my father drew the door prize. "Whoever occupies… seat Number 4, in Row 10, Section F…will be the free guest of the committee on the ship to Amchitka!" Thunderous cheers erupted as a roving spotlight swept the hall and came to rest on North Vancouver high school teacher Ron Jones high up in the stands.

It was a dubious door prize. Although no-one in DMAW would say so aloud, the voyage of the *Greenpeace* looked like a suicide mission. Sailing in the Aleutians was notoriously dangerous, especially in fall, when unpredictable winds known as "williwaws" ripped through the Bering Sea with enough force to rip a steel boat in half. And when the bomb exploded, if the drill cavities were to vent then everyone on board risked being showered with radioactivity. As if that wasn't enough, should the blast trigger a tsunami, the *Greenpeace* would be right in its path. I wondered how the winner of the door prize felt about martyrdom.

Despite the dangers, it seemed like all of Canada wanted to get on that boat. A halibut trawler going up against the U.S. military was a potent David and Goliath image, and people who'd never protested anything in their lives were sending DMAW letters begging to crew. My father even nudged me to apply. "That boat's going to make history," he predicted. I resisted his entreaties, but the braver part of me sneered silently that I was a coward.

After the prize drawing, Terry David Mulligan brought James Taylor on. In his quietly mesmerizing voice –- a combination of Bostonian accent and Southern drawl -- Taylor lulled us seemingly effortlessly into a blissful euphoria with songs like "Fire and Rain" and "You Can Close Your Eyes". We were all reluctant to let him go, and it was only by reminding us that Joni was waiting in the wings that he was able to slip away.

The hour was close to midnight when Joni walked on with her long blonde hair cascading over her guitar, and the whole stadium seemed to rise several inches off the ground. Equally at home on guitar, piano and dulcimer, she selected a range of songs from older albums as well as a few from the as-yet-unreleased "Blue." Near the end of her set she called James back to sing a duet of "Mr. Tambourine Man," and then both artists called their managers (Elliot Roberts and Peter Asher), and Terry David, and my father onstage to join them in "The Circle Game."

At one a.m. the house lights finally came back up and we all trooped out of the Coliseum. Together, we'd raised roughly $18,000, just enough to charter the fishing boat of Captain John Cormack, the only man brave enough, crazy enough, and –- rumor had it -- financially desperate enough to sail to Amchitka.

The *Phyllis Cormack*, re-christened *Greenpeace* for the voyage, was readied for the trip and a twelve-man crew was assembled. There were no women, because Captain Cormack wouldn't allow an unmarried female on his boat, and the only *married* woman short listed --- Marie Bohlen –- voluntarily gave up her position.

Marie had a child from a previous marriage. Jim had two, including his teenage son Lance who was living with them. I wondered how much it factored into Marie's decision that, should any of the disasters we feared befall the crew, Lance would lose not only his father but his stepmother too. As we'd discover only later,

the Bohlens had another reason to worry. Jim couldn't bring himself to tell the crew but, the night before the boat was due to leave, he received a disturbing phone call. The caller was a fisherman who'd sailed with John Cormack. The Captain was quite competent, he assured Jim, but the *Phyllis Cormack* had sunk twice before, and he had grave doubts she'd even make it a thousand miles up the BC coast to Prince Rupert.

It was a bittersweet moment for all of us when the *Greenpeace* sailed from the False Creek dock on September 15th 1971. A local rock band played as the crew made emotional farewells with wives, girlfriends and children. We waved goodbye to Jim, Bob, Bill and the others, trying not to trip over the cords of television cameras as ABC, NBC, CBC and other networks vied for position. I sensed Dad's despair at not being on the boat, though he put on a brave face. In World War II, while flying for the US Civil Air Patrol, he'd contracted a permanent inner ear disorder which gave him such a propensity to motion sickness that even the calmest ocean could make him violently ill. I was conflicted with feelings of relief that none of my family was on board; the desire to stand with those men; and a sinking feeling that none of them were coming back alive.

As the *Greenpeace* headed for Amchitka, protests escalated throughout the Pacific Rim. My brother Bob led a walkout of 10,000 high school students -- the largest demonstration of its kind ever held in Canada -- before flying to Ottawa with fellow organizer Peter Lando to present a petition, signed by thousands of teens, to the federal government. In the US a coalition of eight organizations (peace activists, native rights groups and conservationists) launched a Supreme Court action against the blasts. Meanwhile, in Japan, protesters were marching with signs that said: "Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Amchitka!" Amidst all this, dispatches from journalists aboard the *Greenpeace* prompted an international media furor and ignited such national pride that even Prime Minister Trudeau sent a telegram to the crew, wishing them "Godspeed."

Dorothy Metcalfe, also a journalist, passed her husband Ben's transmissions on to us before feeding them to Canadian and American networks. It was wrenching to sit in our living room, where so many of the crew had met in recent months, hearing reports of the halibut trawler battling twenty foot waves, especially when radio communication failed and days went by with no contact at all.

President Nixon kept delaying the test, and on September 30th, fifteen days after the *Greenpeace* had set sail from Vancouver, the crew was arrested by the U.S. coastguard. As they fumed in frustration, my father and Jim schemed to charter a second ship. It had taken two years to organize the voyage of the *Greenpeace*, but support for DMAW was so high now that donations poured in, and within days Dad was able to charter a decommissioned Canadian minesweeper, the *Edgewater Fortune*. On October 28th 1971, with a crew hastily assembled by skipper Hank Johansen, the 47-metre naval frigate sailed out of Vancouver and surged through stormy seas towards Amchitka.

On the morning of November 6th, 1971, the US Supreme Court ruled -- in a tight 4:3 decision –- in favor of the test, and shortly after noon that day, President Nixon ordered Cannikin detonated. The bomb exploded before the *Edgewater Fortune* could reach the island. The whole Pacific Rim was stunned by Nixon's hubris. We tasted the bitter, age old truth: the sword had vanquished the dove.

My father and Jim Bohlen, exhausted, stepped down from the leadership of DMAW and championed Ben Metcalfe to take over the helm. Our family home continued to operate as the Greenpeace office until 1974, when, my father died of cancer at the age of fifty-nine. Two years before his death, however, he was to savor the sweetest moment of his life. In February, 1972, three months after the *Greenpeace* and the *Edgewater Fortune* returned to Vancouver, the U.S. Atomic

Energy Commission announced that it was canceling the test series “for political and other reasons”. Eight test cavities had been drilled on Amchitka Island. Only three of them were ever used.

Barbara Stowe
Vancouver, 2009