

Knoxville: Summer of 1995



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I've had a theory about places, and specifically about Knoxville, for years. The more thoroughly you know a spot in the world, whether it's Knoxville or Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, the more foreigners you meet.

It's a paradox that doesn't make any linear sense at all. But if you stay in one place and get to know it pretty well, the world will come to you. And if you ask politely, the world will tell you what it thinks of your place.

Earlier this month, I was interviewed at length by a couple of guys from the BBC in London. Basically, they were asking me what I thought about Knoxville. When they were done, I asked them what they thought about Knoxville.

Actually – and actually is a word they use a lot – producer Alan Hall and his technical assistant Marvin Ware were here to tape an impressionistic documentary about James Agee. See, a London symphony is planning a performance of Samuel Barber's oratorio 'Knoxville: summer 1915', which is based on Agee's famous memories of his childhood here. The BBC was here for almost a week to soak up the atmosphere of Knoxville in the summer of 1995.

Alan called me a few weeks in advance, and we arranged to meet on a weekday afternoon on Market Square. It seemed an appropriate spot – central, easy to find, and described twice in Agee's Pulitzer-winning novel *A Death in the Family*. (The prose poem 'Knoxville: summer 1915' appears as the novel's prologue. But by the time the editors slapped it on the late Agee's finished novel, it was already famous as the text for the Barber composition, which had come out a decade earlier in 1947.)

I recognized them because they were both standing up straighter than anybody else on Market Square that afternoon. They're both young guys – thirtyish, tall, short-haired blokes. They were toting some big audio equipment, but were surprised at how quickly I

recognized them. 'Must have been our English shorts,' Alan said. He pronounced *been* like *bean*.

We looked around some – at the likely site of the Market Square speakeasy described in the novel, the stark concrete corner where the Majestic Theater was, the Sterchi's building. They seemed interested in the whole Knoxville story. Alan was puzzled about why some earlier local sources seemed vague about the Civil War, and had told him it was in the early 1800s.

"Did America have another Civil War before 1861?" he asked, apparently sincere.

Faced with the prospect that these Londoners might well know more about the American Civil War than some Knoxvilleians do, I thought fast. "It's just too painful for Knoxvilleians to remember. We block it out."

They'd left something at the hotel, so I proposed that we walk. They were staying at the Hyatt, which struck them as a very weird place. I told them you'd never understand it until you looked at it from an Aztec perspective.

We walked some more from there, again my idea. I was expecting to impress them with my Tennessee-bred frontier constitution, and exhaust the thin-skinned, queen-loving Englishmen by walking Knoxville's downtown streets on a day when the high, at 97, was rivaled only by the humidity.

From the Hyatt we set off for Fort Sanders on foot, on the hottest day of the year. Alan and Marvin were carrying several pounds of audio equipment. I wasn't.

As we hiked up 15th Street, Alan asked me questions about the neighbourhood's history. I was panting. He wasn't. These chaps from the green and pleasant land weren't even breaking a sweat.

What may turn out to be the hottest week of the year didn't impress them. They said they'd actually found it quite pleasant. "It doesn't actually get this *hot* in London," admitted Marvin. "And it's odd because it's a wet heat here. But in England it's a more *draining* heat." Neither of them complained about anything that day except the air-conditioning at the Smoky Mountain Brewery and several other places downtown. Why? They asked. I don't know, I said.

They especially liked the beer there, incidentally, and seemed genuinely surprised to find American beer that was palatable. They seemed a little embarrassed about the English theme of the place, though, and insisted there was absolutely nothing whatsoever English about the English Pale Ale.

They don't care for American sports, either, like "the one where you stand around on the big pads" and "the one where you stand around and miss hitting the ball". To them, neither football nor baseball seems to require any physical stamina. Comparing their

soccer-and-rugby-bred stamina to mine, I wasn't in a position to argue.

Leaving the bone-aching chill of the Smoky Mountain Brewery for the lush, balmy summer evening, Alan commented, "this is a land of extremes".

Our automobile culture mystified them. After a trip out Kingston Pike to West Town, Marvin commented, "To hop from one shop to the next, you get in your *car*. You start your car up again just to go to the shop next door. I find that strange."

"I have a lingering concern for those people unable to be car-dependent," Alan added. "Those too old to drive, the handicapped – I wonder what *their* America is like."

In search of recordable insect noises, we ventured after midnight into the darker corners of the Sequoyah Hills. When headlights appeared on Cherokee Boulevard, they were astonished that their host quickly concealed his beer bottle into his front pocket out of respect for Knoxville's open-container ordinance. Alan seemed amused that anyone might find something wrong with walking down a quiet street with a bottle of beer in hand.

"There's a sinister shadow in this city," Alan remarked, perhaps facetiously, slipping his bottle of Gerst into his pocket. They seemed astonished at the beauty of the river at midnight, and recorded crickets, katydids, even a tree frog.

Overall they were very impressed with Knoxville. "Everybody's been friendly and welcoming," Alan remarked. They encountered only two unfriendly incidents during their stay, and both were at West Town Mall. One was an older man who lurched away wordlessly when they tried to interview him. The other was a dress-shop clerk who got upset when they tried to speak to people in front of her store and chased them away. They looked like a couple of GQ models on vacation, but apparently somebody at West Town Mall thinks BBC reporters are bad for business.

"I don't know how the city supports so much cultural activity," remarked Alan. "Not only official culture, the art museum, the symphony, the ballet – but there's an extraordinarily rich and varied alternative culture here."

However, they were a little taken aback that so few Knoxvilleians were conversant on the subject of Samuel Barber's tone poem about their town. (It had been years since I heard it myself, and I could only remember being a little *disturbed* by it.) But then, these guys work for BBC Radio 3, the classical music channel in England; it's their business.

They were especially impressed with the variety of food at the Tomato Head and the Crescent Moon (Marvin liked the oatmeal scones at the Moon, but said they were very different from English ones) and the beer at the Smoky Mountain Brewery. They returned to each of those places several times during their week. On his last day here, Marvin was proudly wearing his TOMATO HEAD T-shirt, sure his kids would be tickled with it when he brought it home.

Asked to describe Knoxville as we sat at Harold's Deli on their last day, Alan gave it a go: "It's like taking a British city and stretching it out and out – and swabbing clean the center."

He seemed especially surprised to encounter the same question, over and over, from most of the people he interviewed: "What are you doing in *Knoxville*?" He seemed puzzled about that, and actually a little concerned, as if he were a conscientious municipal psychologist. "It wasn't just modesty," he observed. "It's beyond that. It seems to be a sincere feeling that no one from the outside could think Knoxville has anything to offer."

They'd gotten everything they came to get: several good interviews, RB Morris, Victor Ashe, and Knoxville sound effects – folk singers, traffic, night birds, crickets, katydids, tree frogs, even some early cicadas. But despite several tries, they hadn't gotten a freight train's horn. They'd heard plenty during their week here, but were always late in setting up the equipment. Just the night before they'd waited in the Old City for 45 minutes, assured it would be along any minute now. They gave up and saw a jazz band at Lucille's – which, of course, was interrupted by a passing freight train. After we paid and Harold Shersky told them about his own dad's experience in the British Army before World War 1, I proposed that we try standing on the viaduct over the old Southern yards and see what happened.

Marvin heard it first, in the distance to the east. We stood silently, hoping to get only one clear honk. Then there it was, its headlight superfluous on that bright afternoon, barreling right at us and blasting away as if they knew it was for broadcast on the BBC.

Marvin, in headphones holding a large microphone over the viaduct, smiled like a kid on Christmas morning.



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