

Jake and Ernest

A Personal Memory of Michael Riceⁱ

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You know how it goes at APS March Meetings. One of your theorist friends will corner you, pull out a preprint, and exclaim, "Let me show you my latest Hamiltonian. It explains your data." With Michael it was, "my latest Lagrangian." Right away you knew you were dealing with an eccentric and had better take care how you responded.

The 1970s and early 80s were the heyday of conducting polymers and low-dimensional organic metals. It was a rather exotic and at the same time eclectic little corner of condensed matter physics containing just about every solid state collective instability you could possibly find, and thus attracted an inordinately large number of theoreticians, some very good, some not so. These materials were, and are, rather difficult to make. The synthetic and experimental efforts were thus centered at perhaps only six or so institutions involving perhaps two dozen individuals, but a least twice that number of theoreticians from all over the world would show up at our meetings held biannually at wondrously diverse locations such as Budapest, Helsingor, Dubrovnik, New York and Les Arcs. Even once in Boulder, Colorado. Of those attending, Michael Rice was amongst the finest, both as physicist and human being.

I first met Michael when he was at Brown Boveri near Baden and thought he was a sort of queer and distant chap. He wanted to return to the United States, so we had him come to interview at the IBM San Jose Research Laboratory. This was in the 1970s, well before the construction of the present Almaden Center, at a time when we were a mere afterthought of the headquarters establishment in Yorktown. The only two card-carrying condensed matter physicists we had on the staff back then were Rick Greene and myself, and our management was comprised principally of wet chemists. To be brief, Michael's interview did not go down very well with our bosses. To be blunt and more to the point, he terrified them. In later years, I often told Michael how lucky he was to have been hired by Xerox.

As time and meetings passed, Michael and I really bonded. I'm not sure why. On his part it might have been that I was one of those few experimentalists who actually remembered what a Lagrangian was. On my part it was because he was definitely not British. Michael was English, and that's quite different, you know (he used the word "twit" a lot), and I marveled that individuals like him had once conquered the world. Most likely, however, it was our common love of romantic literature and especially Hemingway that cemented the relationship. We were joined in this mutual interest by David Campbell and Hans Morawitz, shared by Aaron Bloch and another Campbell, Campbell Scott, as well. All in all, we formed a tight little group found sitting together

and behaving badly at restaurants and bars in the surrounding environs of any given March Meeting. At times Charlie Falco, Ivan Schuller, Rick Greene and Ray Baughman would try to crash our party, and we were usually successful in fending them off and keeping them at bay...but occasionally we'd relent and let them in the door. Inside the inner circle, Michael would frequently assign each a particular Hemingway character and we'd all have to converse on whatever topic was on the table from that character's point of view. The discourse could become quite loud and hilarious if that topic were, say, charge-spin separation in TTF-TCNQ, instilling total bewilderment amongst those surrounding us, even if they were fellow physicists.

For some reason, Michael never allowed me to be Robert Jordan or Frederic Henry, roles he would expropriate for himself. I was always Ernest, the creator. I suspect it was simply that I had a superficial appearance to Papa with my grayish-white hair and beard, all premature, of course. Michael made me work hard. I probably put as much effort preparing Hemingway-esque dialog and rejoinders for each upcoming March Meeting as I did for my talks. When we began to meet more and more at locations abroad, we took on fancying ourselves as that little group of wandering American expatriates in "The Sun Also Rises." Michael was Jake Barnes, naturally, and I remember Aaron always wanted be the bullfighter Pedro Romero...but just to annoy Aaron, we insisted Robert Cohn was a much better fit. David Campbell was Pedro...definitely.

In 1980, by the time of the Helsingor organic conductors conference, my personal life had undergone an abrupt "phase transition," and, in recognition of my new independence, our group from that time on often included a Lady Brett Ashley, invariably recruited by Michael. In fact, at Helsingor, there were three Lady Bretts (over the following years, there were a number of other Lady Bretts, none of whose identity I will disclose in order to protect their innocence...regardless whether that innocence in fact existed!).

Our relationships with the Lady Bretts were by and large platonic but always romantic. I remember one such encounter vividly. I was alone in Paris and Michael was in London. One day I called him from Batiment 510 in Orsay and he flew over that evening. It was winter and at midnight we came together in the deserted courtyard of Notre Dame with one of our foremost Lady Bretts. The following day, having spent much of the night in the bistros and bars of Ile Saint-Louis, we took the RER to Versailles where the three of us played hide and seek in its gardens, rolled around on its lawns (despite his bad back), paraded through the grounds arm-in-arm in total communion with each other. I have been to Versaille many times since, most recently a few months ago with my 12 year old son, Diego, and I told him about that evening and day so long ago. He didn't understand anything. But he will sooner than he knows.

All those close to Michael knew he could be at times "quite a patience," breaking out in public with bawdy doggerels on the sexual antics of indefinite integrals, and performing his uncanny imitations of John Bardeen. The rest of us would collapse in hysteria, passersby regarding us as complete lunatics. Michael had an aversion to being stared at, an unsettling trait of some Europeans, especially the German-speaking variety. One afternoon following the Les Arcs conference (where Michael had broken a rib skiing and

was in considerable pain), our little group of expatriates with our Lady Bretts in tow, all crammed into a car and motored down to Geneva. There were so many of us the Lady Bretts were required to sit on various laps. I had to drive. On arriving, we strolled for an hour or so along the lakeside esplanade making a loud general nuisance of ourselves, and came across a rather severe-looking middle aged woman, wearing a fedora, as I recall. The unsuspecting Swiss frau began staring intently at Michael. Our leader immediately broke into one of his Pythonesque “silly walks,” circling the hapless woman glaring into her eyes and babbling incoherently. Of course the rest of us started imitating Rice. The poor soul panicked and ran off on her sturdy Swiss half-high heel shoes. I expected to be taken into custody at any moment by the local gendarmerie or politzei, but we dispersed and escaped successfully.

Later that evening, we gathered for dinner in a local German-style restaurant after taking a Lady Brett to catch a train. Michael wasn't very hungry, still in pain from his ski accident. He only wanted tea, but it had to be hot. I remember him sitting on the outside edge of our booth, one of his elbows resting on the table, his upper body rocking back and forth, muttering to himself that “All I want is tea. Hot tea. It has to be hot. Very hot.” The waitress came over to take our orders. Michael was still muttering, almost inaudibly, in English. She couldn't hear what he was saying, thus bent closer and inquired innocently, “Bitte?” Even though Michael spoke fluent German and passable French, he said very loudly in English, “I want tea. Hot tea. It has to be very hot!” As the waitress retreated, he shouted after her, “Hot tea. Do you understand? It has to be very hot!” Presently, our dinners and Michael's tea arrived. It wasn't hot enough.

He could be like that.

As the 80s went by, our March Meeting convocations took on more of a “male confessional” flavor. No more Lady Bretts in attendance. The subject was always about a woman in our lives...present, past and often hopeful expectations for the future. Several weeks before, those of us wanting to “give testament” would notify the others of our desire and a very private dinner would be arranged. One of the most poignant occurred during the Phoenix meeting. Aaron Bloch, or perhaps David Campbell, asked the hotel concierge to recommend a quiet place somewhere far from the meeting site in order to minimize the collision crosssection with other attendees. We wound up way out in Scottsdale at a formal Italian restaurant with 1920s and 30s art deco furnishings, certainly quiet and elegant. The urinals were constructed from a mosaic of Florentine tiles held together with gold-foiled grouting. The place was a Mafia hangout.

I won't go into details, but Michael's stories that evening would have broken your heart, and some of them I knew were even true. As the hours wore on, each of us contributed our “first encounters” on transitioning to manhood, and loves gained and lost thereafter. It was hard to top Michael. At the end, we were figuratively in tears. Only one remained silent. Aaron sat through all of this with his mouth open.

What brought us together under Michael's aegis originally was our fascination with the physics of low-dimensional systems. The subject provided the “infrastructure” or

“logistics” and frankly the “funding” for us to engage in a far broader range of human interaction with each other. It was a great group of guys and gals. Hyperbole you say? So shoot me already.

The discovery of high temperature superconductivity drew several of us off, me in particular, in other directions, and the frequency of our “all aboard” gatherings began to diminish. For me personally, the last occasion celebrating those “travels with Jake” was the dinner party held at my home during the 1995 March Meeting in San Jose. Once more there were Lady Bretts at hand. One of them was a beautiful Mexican chemist who had also been present in Helsingor, but not among the three originally corralled there by Michael. I had to go catch her years later without his help. Doctora Maria Eugenia Lopez-Morales was her name, and now she’s Maria Grant.

He’s gone but we have not left memories of him behind. “The Sun Also Rises” closes on a bittersweet exchange between Jake and Brett, a lament about what could have been, but ultimately would not likely *have* been, one that captures the angst of many of our days with the Lady Bretts.

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together." ...
"Yes," I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

Well, Michael, for the two of us, we *did* have a damned good time together and it was *so* and I’m going to miss them and I will really miss you.

ⁱ This homily on my friendship with Michael Rice was inspired by a chance meeting a few days ago with Charlie Duke. Due to the brief time available for its preparation, I have drawn it entirely from memory and cannot vouch for its absolute accuracy. Some of the individuals named may remember events differently. However I do have fairly extensive records and notes of those years stashed away in my basement awaiting posthumous publication...or incineration!