

Gold Guns and God

Miners, Outlaws and Mystics
and the Power of the Edge

Written by Bill Gann & Juan Paredes

Gold, Guns and God

An Epic of separation

Juan Magg and William Elmore Gann

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Contents

The Teachings of Don Alex	1
The Many Lives of John Bullock	15
About the Author	23
Appendix A: Desert Playlist	25
Appendix B: Select Desert Mystics	28

The Teachings of Don Alex



The Teachings of Don Alex.

Some choose a big-screen life, then they act it out with gusto on a Shakespeare stage. Alex Apostolides, a real-life Edward Abbey counterpart, and an actual certified mystic was such a man. He chose adventure, colorful friends, and to walk with Carlos Castaneda along a path with heart. That made quite a story. These are the parts he let me tell before he died.

First, Castaneda comes to mind because he and Alex were colleagues at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) back in the Sixties. The noted mystic and prolific author discussed the shamanic world with Apostolides, long before he published his many shamanic books.

Castaneda and Apostolides also had a graduate student friends call

Sunny Skies. Sunny was an old hand around Bickel Camp in the Eighties. Interesting to note that I knew Ms. Skies for years, and she never told about the relationship she shared with these men at UCLA. Being mysterious seems to be a pattern with mystics.

For example, a lady named Patti who I called the Camel Lady in this work, may also have had a Castaneda connection. Patti actually arrived at Bickel Camp on Camel back. The story was that her rich husband had helped finance a camel caravan reenactment as a university project. Patti was such a horrible drunk, she couldn't stay on a camel.

This was after Apostolides left the area, but this is how The Camel Lady hooked up with an outlaw biker I call Outlaw John. That story is a tale of it's own, but the interesting connections is The Camel Lady may also have been Blue Scout a Castaneda witch.

It becomes apparent Castaneda, Sunny Skies, possibly even Blue Scout learned a thing or two from Apostolides. Much of the Greek's teachings did in fact later turned up in the guru's mystic writings.

As an archeologist, Alex knew Mexico well and worked the ancient Aztec and Maya digs for many years. He was in the anthropology department at UCLA when Castaneda was still working on his thesis that was later published as "The Teachings of Don Juan." Was Alex, the story-telling Greek, Castaneda's model for his famous Yaqui Indian sorcerer? Sunny Skies simply said she didn't know, but added, "no one ever saw Don Juan."

"I would tell Carlos that the secret of exploring a shaman's life." Alex recalled on the rare occasion he would discuss his relationship with Castaneda, "was to keep one foot firmly planted in reality. Carlito didn't listen, and often lost his way."

Alex certainly never claimed any particular influence on Castaneda. Then, there was much about the wandering writer I didn't know. I was, after all, a foolish young man in the years Alex lived in the California desert north of Los Angeles. Perhaps he didn't feel

I was worthy of the topic.

I didn't know until after Alex died, for example, that his sister Kleo was a writer of some merit, and that she was married to the famous science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. Not only did Alex never mention his sister or his noted brother-in-law, he never told me of his own success in science fiction, publishing books with Mark Crafton in the Fifties. These things I discovered after his death at 81 in 2005.

It seems Alex had simply experienced much success, knew a myriad of famous people, and had so many interesting life experiences, he didn't have time to tell the whole story. That, and there was much of his narrative he didn't want told. In fact, when I first wrote an early version of this bio, he reviewed it and said something like, "Yea, yea, yea, that's good enough," by way of critique. Then he asked that some really good parts be removed.

Years ago Alex was also upset with me for publishing the 1972 story about Walt Bickel. To me getting the first story about Walt Bickel in print in California State University's Fullerton Daily Titan was a great triumph. Alex felt I had blown the cover of a place that we should keep as a secret. He was both right and wrong.

In the early Seventies, I hiked the desert with Apostolides, and it was indeed like going on a quest for knowledge. Still, my experiences were nothing like the desert wandering told of in Castaneda's Yaqui Way of Knowledge. My experiences were bright shining and better.

I had just returned from the Vietnam War, and was wide-awake, and fearful. Alex taught friends to approach the natural world with respect, and absolute assurance of the goodness a seeker might find there. So where do I to start?

There are so many stories about Alex; it's hard to separate fact from legend. For the record, there are those who really believe he was a mystic. He was listed in the staff box of the Los Angeles Free Press as 'Staff Shaman.' He ran the Art Scene page there and also reported

for Open City in the Sixties, and was a star among Los Angeles' hip Bohemian crowd.

Dr. Derek Lamar of the Quantum Metaphysics Institute told me of meeting Alex at a L.A. nightclub in 1968. Dr. Lamar tells a highly entertaining story of Alex chain-smoking "cancer-fee" Mexican cigarettes in the Whisky a Go Go. No surgeon general warning on Mexican cigarettes, therefore no cancer. Well this was Alex's line, and he did die of smoking those unfiltered joints.

Betty Reimers, an Apache opera singer and Bickel Camp regular once said of Alex, "That damn Greek is a brujo (wizard), but don't expect him to ever admit it. You know how witches lie."

There was a good deal of military experience in Alex's background, but he talked little of this too. I know he joined the British Navy at the beginning of World War II. There were battles, explosions, sinking ships, and survival on tropical islands.

But the damn Greek only told me the funny story of how a British officer had to wear a proper beard or be told by his superiors to "Shave off!" This phrase, Alex would snap in a snooty limey accent when my red beard grew scraggly. "William old sport, your beard is a fright, shave off!"

There are tales of Alex traipsing around South America; for example, doing a survey designed to map radio 'dead spots.' For who and why he did this was always given a cryptic answer of, "government." He slogged through jungles for three months looking for mysterious zones of silence.

He spent most of this time where no radio transmission or reception was possible. This adventure generated great stories of places where compasses go crazy, and plant and animal life has taken strange evolutionary turns. There were even UFO sightings.

About the time I figured I had the real Alex sorted from fable, something would happen to cause me to question such conclusions. For example, I once visited an El Paso, Texas apartment he was

living in during the late Seventies. We slept in the guest room/office my first wife Diane, my young son Billy, and I. There was a desk I needed to work at. I couldn't help but snoop when I saw an interesting letter on his desk.

At the top was the letterhead of an exotic government agency. Alex and his girlfriend Anita were busy packing to go off to Saudi Arabia. He said he was going to Middle East to work for Raytheon, and to set up educational television. My inquisitive scan of the letter implied more interesting associations. I was a reporter at the time.

I said nothing, but noticed him pack a well-worn 38 snub-nosed police special pistol. He saw my inquisitive look. "Just a tool," he said. He let me play with the pistol a bit. It was a well used tool.

"Now, make yourself useful and come up with some incense that will mask the smell of bacon." I suggested pot, and gave him a can full. Anita loved the pot but Alex loved the can. My high school friend Eddie Stiglic had cut a can, filled it with the proper weight and had a glass jar embedded inside. It was as if I had gold, and the shifty Greek got my stash and my can.

I asked him about all this before he died and he said, "Less said, the better for everyone concerned," adding in one of his many voices, "Ve haf ze Patriot Act, and ve know vere you live...."

He then asked seriously that I not talk about which government agency had sent him the letter. At his ashes scattering, there were inquiring minds who wanted verification of their own suspicions. I had little to add, as they do know where I live. In truth I don't know but feed the myth for fun. Then I wish to be mystical and keep some things mysterious.

Apostolides was born in San Francisco, 29 November 1923. "Jesus that's a long damn time ago," said Alex, when I asked his age a few years ago. His father was a doctor and mother had great sway in his life. In 1998, the last time I visited the stone water tank where he lived with his wife Patti, I was showing more age than he.

Maybe in finding a good woman and water-tank house, one also finds a youthful fountain. “Damn, what happened to you?” he said of my aging, as wife Elisabeth, and children Daniel and Analissa and I entered the stone water tank called The Roundhouse. “A few short years and you become Burl Ives.” You know how those damn Wizards lie; I’d hardly aged a bit.

Alex and Patti made their living the last 20 years writing and telling stories of the Old West on a Texas radio program called The Edge of Texas. I tried to talk him into putting what are now over a thousand of these wonderful tales into digital for the Internet. The truth is, it was damn near impossible to get the ornery cuss to even use E-mail. He saw E-mail as too public, calling it a version of the old telephone party -line where “ten thousand idiots are listening in on what ought to be a private conversation. I say to hell with it.”

Use E-mail, and you can talk to his wife Patti. But if you wanted to talk to Alex, you had to send a letter by snail mail and wait for a response. When Alex got a letter, he immediately sat down and typed out an answer, and his letters were well worth the wait. I once got a letter back with him cussing his damn computer. At the time he had only been using a PC four years, but was missing his old Olympia typewriter that had no damn on-off switch, “just hit the g-dam keys and the words came out on the paper the way you wanted them to! F— the 21st Century!” So taking all his highly entertaining stories over to the Internet will have to rest in the hands of others, but it must be done.

I guess I can best explain Alex, then, by looking back to the last century. Well actually, Bickel Camp people, in our hearts were living back farther still, in the 19th century. Nonetheless, It’s around 1974, the time I’m thinking about. We are roaring off into the world in a 1959 Volkswagen bus. We’ve just pulled out of Last Chance Canyon and have hit the paved Highway 14 about 35 miles north of the town of Mojave. We turn north into rolling desert hills in spring bloom. To the west, frosted mountains cut into a cartoon blue sky.

On board the old bus are several good souls who have come to visit Walt Bickel. We are on a day outing looking for adventure and Apostolides is leading the charge. In those days Alex is living in one of Walt's trailers with his girlfriend Anita. Back then, it seems he's always just in from some great adventure or about to set off on another. He's either off working an archeology site deep in Mexico's Mayan or Aztec country, or he's on his way to a photo shoot for National Geographic or Arizona Highways. He went off once to ghost write a book for some rich Mexican on his private island. He came back another time from hiking with author Gary Jennings in the Superstition Mountains. He would tell of spending two months talking Aztecs with Jennings while he researched his epic novel, "Aztec."

So that day, it's good to have Alex in company. The bus will only reach a speed of about 40 miles per hour. While this is a good speed to see the lay of the land, we attract the attention of a Highway Patrolman who pulls us over to check things out. My first wife Diane holds our sleepy four-year old son Billy in her lap, no seatbelts required back then. The cop looks in the back and sees Alex, Anita, and friends Mike Palin and Eric Standring. Alex tells the officer he's an archeologist, and that he's doing some work on local Native American sites. He mentions the names of a few local people; the officer seems satisfied that adults are in charge. I think this is where George Lucas got the Star Wars line, "These aren't the droids you are looking for." We're good to go.

Working local surveys around Owens Lake and Bishop, in fact, was how Alex came to meet Walt Bickel. He had graduated from New Mexico's Hiler School of Art, and did graduate work in archeology at UCLA, where he taught field techniques. He was working the El Paso Mountains, and eventually stumbled upon Last Chance Canyon in 1958. That started a lifetime of visiting Bickel Camp.

First stop on our trip that day is Fossil Falls where we park on the banks of a dry lake. Back then, hiking for me is an extension of my

Navy training. I'm all about covering lots of ground quickly and quietly. I start off with my head down, ready to plow through a few miles of desert, when I notice Alex doing what looks like tai chi movements.

He moves in slow motion, eyes scouring every inch of the ground around and ahead. He sets each foot down carefully and steps around rocks and bushes like a reverent cat. I start to ask him what he's doing, but then he says, "Ah, here they are," as if he's discovered something.

I see nothing and want to know what he's found. He points out faint rectangular building-sized shapes in the sand. "These were probably railroad workers' cabins. See their cook fire was over here." There was a dark spot in the sand with a few rocks almost in a circle. Alex sees a 100-year-old workers' encampment where anyone else would see only sand. Nothing was still standing, and not a can or bottle was above the surface.

He keeps pointing out subtle signs and suggestions of what might have been. "This must have been a stock pen," he said as if there was a historical plaque for all to read. "This cabin must have been for the Chinese workers, see how it's off from the others, and near the animals. I'll bet you could find some opium bottles if you dug around here."

So I discovered a whole new way of seeing the desert. Where there had only been rocks and bushes, a new reality comes into focus. We hike on and I assume the slow motion gait. My internal clock ticks to a powerful ancient rhythm; this does wonders for my photography. Snakes, lizards, tortoises and birds study me from the shadows, and don't show their usual alarm. I move as soft desert wind, and see things I've never seen before.

Lichen grows in whimsical patterns, and paints the rocks in day-glow colors. Sand Matt flowers peek up like innocent little eyes. "Look, a hunting encampment," Alex says pointing what might have been an 8,000-year-old Paiute site. He shows us house rings,

campfires, and areas where obsidian tools were flaked. We see boulders with worn concave impressions where seeds were ground, and find worked hand-sized rocks used as tools.

The grandfathers tell us of their existence. "Don't take anything," Alex warns. "Watch where your step." When Alika Herring had taken his son Jack and me to this very spot, we were young boys and only saw things to shoot with our bb guns. Petroglyphs I had walked past since I was a kid and never seen, now introduce themselves. Now strange Indian rock drawing speak and have spiritual meaning.

As we approach the actual site of the ancient dry waterfall, I find a new understanding for one of my favorite spots on Earth. A place I had visited since I was 13 becomes a new friend. After spending time at the falls, we drive to what was then the ghost town of Keeler. We knock on the door of an old woman's house who was at the time the town's only resident. She opens the door, shuffles out, cocks her head and says as she comically rocks her new Vans, "Well, now you are lookin' at a little old lady in tennis shoes."

Alex introduces us to Lillian Hilderman. She was then 98 years old and had been the town's postmaster. Alex recounts a time a few years earlier when, at 95 summers, Lillian ran him ragged on a hike to the mine at Cerro Gordo. Our visit with her is sheer delight. We hike from her house down the dusty street to the Chinese cemetery north of town. We search for pottery shards, among the bones of Chinese slaves.

On the way back to Last Chance, the bus dies. The 36 horse power engine flames out forever. We hitch a ride to town, get a tow truck and tow the dead hulk of a bus to John Storm's ranch. John, a tattered old warrior, and a friend of Alex's, lives on a ranch against the Sierra Nevada Mountains, near Olancho. He knows Alex from the stories he wrote about the water wars in area. The leather necked Texas cowboy and liked that Apostolides had sided with the ranchers in the Los Angeles underground papers.

Storm is a spry and quick wound spring of a man. He was said to be near 100 years old. He came to California from Texas in 1903, and homesteaded his Eastern Sierra ranch. He has a bulldozer and a contract to maintain the winding road into the mining town of Darwin.

Alex said he once found him filing a 12th notch into the blade of the bulldozer. "What the hell are you doing?" Alex asked. "Oh, this marks the 12th man I killed." Alex explained that evidently he'd straightened a curve on the winding road and miners, returning drunk from Lone Pine kept trying to round a curve that was no longer there, crashing into the canyon below. We make up a silly song to sing in our happy hippie group about "the road to Darwin being a long and far one," We never write and forget the words.

"Caint cut a notch on your pistol anymore," John told Alex, "so the 'dozer blade has to do." John had fought for Owens Valley water in the war against the Los Angeles militia back in 1924, and may have had some real notches on his pistol. The ranchers lost that war and Storm was still angry still.

He allows us to leave the bus there, even though we're from Los Angeles. We're with Alex, so we can't be all that bad, he allows. Storm feeds us—big dinner, great family, meat and potatoes by the ton. Storm has his grandson take us to the bus station, which is a gas station in Olancho. We catch a Grey Hound to Ridgecrest.

Somehow being on foot sets us free, and life becomes a buoyant joy. We bounce on to the bus, traipse to the back, and actually turn all heads as we take our seats. Alex and Anita are wearing Mexican sombreros. Alex wears a serape of many colors, over khakis. He always wears sunglasses that seem to imply beat generation. Actually, it was said his eyes had been damaged in some sort of explosion during World War II, and the glasses were necessary protection.

Anita is 18, but looked 13 back then. She's from Maine, and always wears a perpetual pink sunburn from the Mojave sun. She looks like a happy flower child, with granny glasses and pulled-back blond

hair. My son Billy wears a sombrero too and carries a bb gun, presents from Alex.

Billy is filthy dirty and joyous at the thought of the bus ride. Wife Diane wears a yellow coreopsis flower in her hair. In those days she knows how to relax and let adventures happen.

Eric, Mark and I wear the hippie, John-Denver uniform of the time: long hair, beards, work shirt, Levi's, and waffle-stomper boots. We are decorated with packs, cameras, and frosted in trail dust. Judging by all the turned heads, we don't look like local folks to the other bus riders.

We ride in a circle of great chatter to Ridgecrest. From there, Alex calls another friend who takes us to Bickel Camp. By the time we got back to camp Alex had agreed to loaned me his truck. Jack Herring and I took my 1953 Ford back the next weekend. Jack gets a ticket on the way home. The cop stops us because anyone towing an '59 VW bus it a '53 Ford must have weed. He gives us an equipment ticket and we escape.

We come back the next weekend looking for more fun and adventure, and find it. Some time later, Alex comes back from Greece with a strange fellow he met while traveling. The man, evidently became rich from something he invented, and realizes he never has to work again. He decides to go off into the world, "Looking for the teachers," he says and finds Alex. "What a coincidence," I tell him. "I'm a teacher." This man was very serious in his quest, and invites me to accompany him and Alex backpacking.

We load packs and hike out into the Desert. He turns out to be a great camper, and shows how to actually see the Earth rotate. By looking north, focusing on a star and a rock, one can actually see, and then believe they feel the Earth's movement. He had been traveling for years and has endless campfire tales of his adventures. He tells us he had once tried to sail around the world in a small boat with no motor. The boat becomes trapped in a storm; he seals

the small craft like a bottle and rides with the storm for almost two weeks.

When the storm finally releases him, he has no idea where he is, but said it didn't matter because he had been reborn. I don't remember the strange man's name, and Alex couldn't remember it many years later. I call him The Seeker who especially enjoys Alex's stories and wants to hear all he can about Carlos Castaneda.

At the time, I had never heard of Castaneda. I was looking for meaning in "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." Anita laughed hysterically when she heard this asked me to bring up Castaneda with Alex.

It wasn't necessary as when we are setting around a small campfire up on Sandy's Mesa; I discover there are new ways of experiencing reality. Alex and The Seeker talk for hours about a strange foreign world of sorcery and shamans. A few years later I've devoured every word Castaneda had written. One might say I'm off the deep end in what became a religious quest. I hear the voices of my twin sister Bonnie and first wife Diane telling me my soul is in jeopardy. Alex and I walk the bridge that leads from El Paso to Juarez, Mexico.

On the other side, there's a cultural museum that has crafts from every region in Mexico. There are beautiful young women explaining each display. Every dark-eyed lady knows Alex well. They flash knowing glances as we chat. At a small apartment, a friend of Alex's introduces us to ice-cold Membrillo, a quince liqueur. "Few new things under the sun," Apostolides says, as he toasts the wonderful new drink. Membrillo has a fruity quince flavor, a kick like tequila, and a strange dry-wine after taste. It is indeed one of the few really new discoveries along the way. From there we go to a bar of another friend, and I begin to feel like I'm living in a Hemingway novel. We enter a macho contest with some Sonoran cowboys. We drink many beers, each with a mound of progressively hotter and hotter sauce on top of the can. The idea is to drink the sauce and beer at the same time. We leave, thinking we've won this contest, but I have

intestinal distress for the next three weeks. So life was in those days, traveling a path with heart. Alex used to write a column in the El Paso Herald-Post and one gets a feeling for how he organizes his world into luminous moments.

– In a 1987 column I love, and have saved over the years, he recalled a fleeting reaction to Thanksgiving at Walt’s. “Last Chance—and Bickel—and one Thanksgiving Day that will burn brightly in the memory as long as we draw breath. Thanksgiving Day saw people converging on Bickel Camp from all points of the compass. Friends who’d slogged long desert miles with us on surveys, others who’d found sanctuary here down the years...which included everybody there—Bickel Camp was sanctuary for the soul.” I remember the Thanksgiving Day Alex writes about, and many other days like it.

How nice it is to enjoy again words that flowed from Alex’s heart, and came out his old Olympia typewriter. He’d bang these thoughts out in one sitting, one draft, and the memories have lasted. “There were 23 people crowded into that desert cabin that Thanksgiving Day of long ago,” Alex remembered. “Good friends tested down the years.” I especially enjoyed gatherings like this when Walt and Alex would tell parts of the same story, each adding memories with deep-belly laughs. At such dinners, it was best to position ones’ self at mid table so as not to miss anything.

And this is not to mention an easy shot at the passing feast spiced with desert herbs. Good Lord, thank you for that food. “There were yams, glistening sunrise-orange beneath their syrup coats and extra stuffing ‘just in case.’ Cranberry sauce and crusty French rolls and shepherd’s bread...and then the talking all would stop and there would be nothing but the sound of reverent chewing as the goodies disappeared,” Alex observed. “And then, there was the good and lazy talk of friends replete with something far richer than turkey on the table. It was the talk of people grown into Family” We all read these words from the column Alex published after that golden afternoon, and are pleased someone is talented enough to express

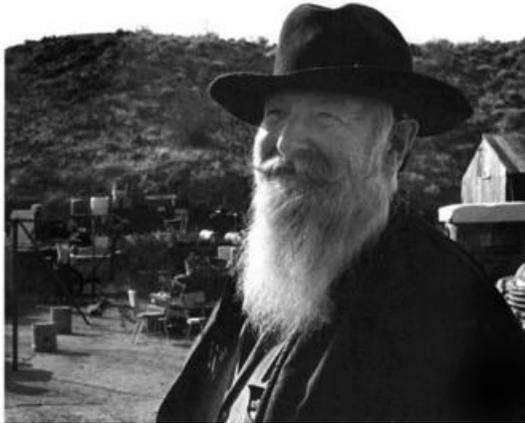
our feelings.

We tip our dusty hats to The Roundhouse in the East. We didn't know then how few of those days we had left. At least, through Alex, we had learned to live as if each day were our last. In a year, Bickel himself would be driven from the canyon by age and the ignorance of bureaucrats. Bickel Camp would change forever, but not for the better.

Our desert family would scatter like spirits in the wind. "They're gathering out there again this year," Alex said of those of us who had survived another winter. "And I find a deep thankfulness in my heart for having had them as part of my life, that crazy miserable gang of desert-rat bandits who are Family to me. God bless you, one and all."

Alex Apostolides passed away at age 81 on September 27, 2005. His wife Patti, along with a group of friends, scattered his ashes on Sandy's Mesa at the base of Black Mountain. This is his place of predilection. Sandy's Mesa is just north of Bickel Camp and is named for Alex's deceased son. Alex's ashes join with those of Sandy, and Bickel, and the dust, and the canyon wind.

The Many Lives of John Bullock



The many lives of John Bullock.

John Bullock was a joyous spirit who loved life so much he reincarnated many times and ...

...believed he was over 800 years old. He carried in his heart the spirit of Chief Joseph.

I knew John Bullock when he lived what was evidently his last life on Earth. In the late Sixties, Bullock came to the canyon by taking over the Gerbracht Camp. Della Gerbracht known to her chagrin as “Della The Queen of the El Pasos,” was Bullock’s a long-time family friend, and a gun-slinging desert rat in her own right. Her story, however, is for another life and time.

Bullock and his young mining partner Mark Aslin took over Della’s cinder block cabin at a time when I was young and seeking the cosmos. Della’s father Fred had established the gold camp in 1905

on a high hill near the west end of Mesquite Canyon. From this perch Aslin and Bullock had a commanding view of Last Chance Canyon and Black Mountain. As it turned out, Aslin and Bullock also practiced shamanic magic from this lonely spot.

I knew little of the paranormal aspect of Bullock's life in those days. To me he was another canyon character. He was over seventy, and wore a long white beard when I first met him at Bickel's Camp. Aslin, then in his late teens, told me many years later that he was in fact Bullock's apprentice and on a path to becoming a shaman in his own right. Bullock, a product of the Beatnik era, had been a key figure among a group of Los Angeles area poets, philosophers and writers. According to Aslin, Bullock was a friend of his parents and even lived with the Aslin family. Young Mark grew up hearing Bullock tell stories about adventures with the likes of Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Willie Lay, Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Herbert, and L. Ron Hubbard.

In particular, Mark remembered Bullock telling of a dinner party at Clarke's house. It was at this party that Hubbard was said to have presented his idea of Dianetics. "According to John," Aslin recalled, "Hubbard never meant to start the Scientology religion. Hubbard was just looking for a way to help people learn how to think." Nonetheless, Hubbard's ideas were manifested in Herbert's books. Aslin feels, for example, the Bene Gesserit witches of "Dune" represent the epitome of the mental discipline Hubbard envisioned. Bullock was Walt Bickel's neighbor and good friend. In 1970, he wore a black ten-gallon Stetson hat, and carried a pear-handled six-shooter slung low on his hip like an old West gunfighter.

He was a giant of a man, standing around 6'7" with a booming voice and was given to loud raucous laughter. Back then, I assumed young Mark was a son or nephew John had taken to raise. Bullock told great stories around the wood stove in Bickel's one-room cabin. His magical tales on cold winter nights were far better than television. One night Bullock claimed some of these tales came not from his

imagination, but from “past lives.” In fact, he told those of us around the fire that he had perfected the ability of hypnosis. Further, he could “regress” willing people to former lives. So intrigued was I by the idea of regressing to former lives, I couldn’t get the concept out of my head. Eventually months later, I paid a visit to Gerbracht Camp.

It was sunny, warm, and the sky was a blue crystal dome. At the Gerbracht cabin table, I was sharing a cup of Mormon Tea (ephedra) with Bullock and Aslin, as we passed a hookah filled with dried Yerba Mansa leaves. John knew a great deal about useful and medicinal plants and made mixtures of desert herbs for a variety of uses. Perhaps one might find some explanation in this for what happened next. The view of Black Mountain out the cabin window seemed painted by a great artist, and was far too clear for mere reality.

So it was, I ask Bullock if he could really do hypnotic magic. The old warlock’s blue eyes sparkled, as he smiled and said, “you’ll have to be the judge of that.” That spring in the Gerbracht cabin when I was still a young 24 years old, the experience I was about to have seemed far more intense and meaningful than it does now. I did actually see former lives and wives, or at least believed I did. I can’t remember the exact technique John used to establish my hypnotic state, but it might have been the traditional pendulum and the suggestive, “you are getting sleepy.”

Regardless, deep in a trance I recall wondering when the bright sunny day had suddenly become darkness. Even the cabin was strangely dark and Bullock was an echoing voice across the room. Aslin could be perceived in the room but not seen. The young man sat just out of the lantern light watching. He was learning his trade I suppose. A series of Technicolor movies played in my mind as John’s reverberating voice spoke. I saw the movies in great clarity, and the images seemed to be projected behind my eyes. I recall being surprised that Bullock seemed to be seeing the same images.

True enough, I was likely just seeing ideas he planted. Yet, at times he would ask me to look at something more closely, and at other times would insist I ignore something I couldn't pry from my imagination. Imagined or not, I recall being fascinated by the sight of a beautiful new barn that sat surrounded by a lush green cornfield. The corn was tasseled and the ears would soon be ready to harvest. The barn was newly built, erect and stood square. This sight pleased me to no end. The woodcuts on the barn wood were still blond and had not yet darkened. It was an indescribable joy to consider that this was my fragrant barn and my verdant corn crop. Yet, John's distant voice annoyingly insisted I move on. He said this had indeed once been my life but it was unimportant. I should regress further, he insisted, to a far more interesting place.

Still I couldn't tear myself away from the pleasing pastoral scene. Several events from this bucolic life flashed past. There was a beautiful red-haired woman, a wagon, a team of horses, and a nearby town. My spirit wanted to follow some cloudy past experience. "No, no no," don't waste my time with this," John insisted, but I couldn't stop. At that point the trance-like state seemed to clear and I was suddenly visiting quite normally with Bullock and Aslin. Bullock seemed a little angry and asked what I thought of the experience. He said from his perspective, he was rather disappointed with the result. I, on the other hand, was delighted with the outcome.

I couldn't get over how real the experience seemed. Bullock shook his head and said he might not be able to regress me to any place of importance because I was too easily distracted. I recall we took a short break, and I was astounded that so much time seemed to have lapsed. Where had the sunny day gone? I went outside to urinate and couldn't help but notice the brilliant stars in the desert sky. Bullock came outside too and saw me looking at the extraordinary night. "Now that's where you should go," he said cryptically.

At that point, I felt quite refreshed and asked Bullock if he felt we should again try regressing. We went back inside and in a short

time I was again in an altered state. I was also soon back at what John said was a relatively recent life of a corn farmer. This time, however, the life flashed by in quick disturbing images that John insisted I ignore. There was a drunken event in town where I had lost all my money to whores and gambling. I saw anger and sadness in the eyes of the red haired women. Finally, with John saying, "Just go on it's not that important," I saw the barn and the cornfield burn.

John tried to get me to see another far older life I supposedly once lived here on Earth. This time the images weren't clear at all. All I could see were my own sandaled feet as I walked an endless dusty road. I hated the path I was traveling and felt miserable. There was nothing in that life I wanted to see. I was depressed and couldn't lift my head to look around. Suddenly John said, tell me what you see now. Unexpectedly, I was in a strange place surrounded by unusual machines and equipment of various kinds.

It appeared I was in some sort of laboratory. I felt quite comfortable and at home. There were various projects and experiments set up on tables. I moved from one experiment to another making observations. Each project brought great satisfaction, as I moved about a room of wonders. Curiously I knew what was going on with the various cell cultures, plants, animals and moving machine experiments. Yet, I had no words to explain what I was seeing. Finally I came to what seemed to be an enormous reclining chair with a vast number of controls and levers built into the arm rests. Setting in the chair, I was able to control not only body positions and movement, but also a vast array of other surrounding machines.

Then suddenly I was back talking normally with John and Mark. This time Bullock seemed more pleased with the results, but again insisted I had made a foolish mistake by not exploring the life of dirty sandaled feet an endless walking. He shrugged his shoulders and allowed that we might try that another time. We never did. There isn't much to add to my recollection of the night when I allowed John Bullock take me on a magical mystery tour of past

lives. There was his interpretation of the life in the science lab. Bullock insisted that this life was spent almost entirely aboard a spacecraft that was traveling from a distant star to Earth. In fact, at the time John even gave me the name of the planet

I was supposed to have traveled here from. I've forgotten the this planet's name, and I really didn't believe the story. Truthfully, I passed off most of this evening as science fiction enhanced by herbs. I've forgotten many of the details Bullock shared with me that night. I do remember him telling me my space-traveling job had been to create wonderful things aboard a starship. Bullock added that the chair was among my greatest achievements. So it was that somewhere in time I perfected the cosmos' greatest Lazyboy. For some reason we never talked much about the night again.

In fact from then on I began to see less and less of John and Mark. Once after my dad had given me a Buck Knife, I stopped by Gerbracht Camp to ask John to help me put an edge on the blade. John was a skilled machinist and knew much about steel. John and I sat in the shade of the cabin as the old miner showed me how to hold a blade to the light and see the fine bead of a razor edge. He also brought out several knives from the cabin for me to use to hone my new skills.

As we worked, John talked casually about his past lives. He told of ancient space travel and how his people colonized earth. He talked of early history as if he had been present to see it happen. He claimed that he was once called Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt and was the leader of a people white men called the Nez Perce. He said history remembers him in that life as a Native American called Joseph. About a year later, John told me I had done him a great service by bringing him the love of his life. He was talking about a night I had forgotten. One night, a group of young people came to visit Bickel Camp. Alex Apostolides had just returned from some photographic adventure in Mexico and wanted to show us his slides.

My VW bus was filled with freethinking Hippies off to use John and

Mark had a power generator for Alex's slide projector. One girl in the back said she really hated the canyon and couldn't wait to go home. She said everyone living there seemed crazy. She hadn't met John yet and I wondered how talk of past lives on spaceships would go over. There was also a beautiful young redheaded girl among the travelers that night. This girl, named Jenny, pointed out to the unhappy young women that she was now among the most sane people she would ever meet.

Bullock told me that bringing Jenny to his cabin was one of my important tasks on Earth. Jenny was then in her early 20's and that night she fell in love with the old white-bearded Bullock. Perhaps the crafty shaman had cast his spell on her. Regardless, they were married a few weeks from that meeting, and soon after Jenny was with child. The daughter was born in the Gerbracht cabin and called Amber. In 1972, Amber was a unique and unusual name. In fact, as common as the name is now, this is the first time I knew of the name being used. I saw baby Amber once at Bickel Camp.

She had honey red hair and a beautiful golden glow. Mark Aslin moved from the canyon near this blessed event and wasn't heard again for decades. He only recently popped up and is now the caretaker at Bickel Camp. I don't recall ever seeing John or Jenny much after Amber's birth. I understand the family lived in the canyon for years until John's Death. Jenny and Amber, I'm told, live someplace in Arizona. I once met Jenny's mother at a reunion of old canyon friends. A few quick questions about John, however, made it clear she didn't much like the man. Suffice it to say, she didn't have a very high opinion of the old man who lured her daughter to the wilderness.

So that's the John Bullock I knew—good, bad, true or false. From what I saw of his last life, he did a pretty good job of living to the fullest. I can't speak about his past lives. But then, there are those historical pictures that Mark saw as a boy. These are pictures from the Civil War, and later of World War I that show a man who eerily

resembles Big John. Who knows? I haven't seen those old pictures, but I did have the weird and wonderful related experience. A little over a year ago, a picture of old John popped up on my computer screen.

I was writing for a desert discussion board about my experiences in and around Bickel Camp when a woman posted a picture of Bullock. She said she found the shot while hiking in Last Chance Canyon, and wanted to know who the man was. The woman, who called herself "Jayhawker," said she saw the picture "blowing," as Bob Dylan once observed, "in the wind." There's a button on this page leading to that cyberspace thread for those interested. Another person at that Website said he had once seen the shot on the outhouse wall at Burro Schmidt's cabin. Probably no meaning in this, just a strange coincidence. Still, I like the idea of the old shaman speaking to us in images, and sending answers on the wind.

About the Author



Bill Gann

Bill Gann is a photojournalist and teacher of the desert.

He writes adventure stories, and tends chickens in the hills of Yucaipa. He claims that these stories are all true.



Juan Magg

Juan has produced documentaries, photographed and written.

He was accidentally placed in Bill Gann's English and photography classes at the American international school Escola Graduada in Sao

Paulo, Brazil. Juan actually learned to speak English watching slide shows and hearing Gann's stories of life in the California Desert.

Appendix A: Desert Playlist

Mighty Fine Blues_ by Eels -
Jeff Bridges - Fallin' and Flyin'[Live] -
Orange County Suite - The Doors -
The Doors _ Ghost Song -
The Doors- Whiskey Mystics and Men
When Johnny Comes Marching Home - Christelle Berthon -
Best 60s Dancer Boy Ever - The Nitty Gritty -
Black Sabbath - Zeitgeist -
Captain Beefheart - Her Eyes Are A Blue Million Miles -
Chingon - Cascabel (Machete Soundtrack) [HD] -
Dream On by Aerosmith lyrics -
Friend of the Devil - Grateful Dead -
Iggy Pop - The Passenger -
Jethro Tull- Mother Goose -
jimi hendrix - rare - seven dollars in my pocket. -
Johnny Hammond_Duane Allman - Shake For Me (Southern Fried_-
Anthology) -
Kashmir - Led Zeppelin -
Ketty Lester - Show Me -
L. A. Woman - The Doors -
Land of Ono -
Lou Reed - Perfect Day -

LSD for your Ears - House of 3 Doors - First Door (Psychedelic Instrumentals) -

Marion Ravn - Unforgivable Sinner -

Misfits - This Magic Moment, Dream Lover and Dianna. -

New Order - Blue Monday -

No Doubt - Settle Down -

Peter Murphy - Your Face -

Pink Floyd - Eclipse -

Ray Harris - Where'd You Stay Last Nite -

Rochell and The Candles - Once Upon A Time - Early 60's Doo Wop Classic -

Santana - Flor De Luna (Moonflower) -

The Doors Been Down So Long (Alternate Version) -

The Doors Love Her Madly (Alternate Version) -

The Doors - Fever -

The Doors - I will Never Be Untrue -

The Doors - Love me Tender -

The Doors - Love Me Two Times -

The Doors (Wild Child rare version) -

The Doors Cars Hiss by My Window Live at Aquarius Theater *Private Rehearsal* 1969 -

The Doors Yes, The River Knows -

The Doors_ Mr. Mojo Risin - The Story of LA Woman extras -

The Doors- Someday Soon -

The Mills Brothers - The Old Man of the Mountain

The Misunderstood - Never Had A Girl Like You Before Fontana,
Psychedelia, Blues. -

The Velvet Underground - Heroin -

Time by Pink Floyd -

Ultimate Spinach - Ballad of The Hip Dead Goddess -

Velvet Underground - Venus in Furs -

We are Match - Violet (Acoustic) -

Whiskey, Mystics AND Men - The Doors -

ZZ Top - I Got The Six -

Appendix B: Select Desert Mystics

The Doors (Whiskey, Mystics and Men)

Well, I'll tell you a story Of whiskey and mystics and men,
And about the believers and How the whole thing began.
First there were women and Children obeying the moon,
Then daylight brought wisdom And fever and sickness CON-
SUMED.

You can try to remind me Instead of the other, you can.
You can help to insure That we all insecure our command.
If you don't give a listen, I won't try to tell your new hand.
This is it; can't you see

That we all have our ends in the band.
And if all of the teachers and Preachers of wealth were arraigned,
We could see quite a future For me in the literal sands.
And if all the people Could claime to inspect such regrets,
Well, we'd have no forgiveness,
Forgetfullness, faithful remorse.

So I tell you, I tell you, I tell you we must send away.
We must try to find a New answer instead of a way.

The Doors (Ghost Song)

Awake. Shake dreams from your hair My pretty child, my sweet
one. Choose the day and choose the sign of your day The day's
divinity First thing you see.

A vast radiant beach in a cool jeweled moon
 Couples naked race down by it's quiet side
 And we laugh like soft, mad children
 Smug in the wooly cotton brains of infancy
 The music and voices are all around us.

Choose they croon the ancient ones
 The time has come again
 Choose now, they croon Beneath the moon
 Beside an ancient lake
 Enter again the sweet forest
 Enter the hot dream
 Come with us
 Everything is broken up and dances.

Indians scattered, On dawn's highway bleeding
 Ghosts crowd the young child's,
 Fragile eggshell mind

We have assembled inside, This ancient and insane theater
 To propagate our lust for life, And flee the swarming wisdom of the streets.

The barns have stormed The windows kept, And only one of all the rest
 To dance and save us From the divine mockery of words, Music inflames temperament.

Ooh great creator of being Grant us one more hour, To perform our art
 And perfect our lives.

We need great golden copulations,

When the true kings murderers Are allowed to roam free, A thousand magicians arise in the land
 Where are the feast we are promised?

U2: In God's Country (The Joshua Tree)

Yeah Desert sky Dream beneath a desert sky
 The rivers run but soon run dry
 We need new dreams tonight

Desert rose Dreamed I saw a desert rose
 Dress torn in ribbons and in bows
 Like a siren she calls to me

Sleep comes like a drug In God's Country
 Sad eyes, crooked crosses
 In God's Country

Set me alight We'll punch a hole right through the night Everyday
the dreamers die To see what's on the other side

She is liberty And she comes to rescue me Hope, faith, her vanity
The greatest gift is gold

Sleep comes like a drug In God's Country Sad eyes, crooked crosses
In God's Country

Naked flame She stands with a naked flame I stand with the sons
of Cain Burned by the fire of love Burned by the fire of love

Mills Brothers (Old Man of the mountain.)

The old man of the mountain With his long white beard and his
crooked staff He tramps along while the folks all laugh

With a twinkle in his eye he passes them by The old man of the
mountain

He wears long hair but his feet are bare They say he's mad as an old
march hare His cares are none and he owes no one The old man of
the mountain He talks with the birds when he's lonely Sleeps with
the stars for a tent While the bees spread a feast when he's hungry
And God charges no rent He'll live as long as an old oak tree And
laugh at fools like you and me I often sigh and wish that I were The
old man of the mountain. The old man of the mountain The old
man of the mountain He talks with the birds when he's lonely

Sleeps with the stars for a tent While the bees spread a feast when
he's hungry And God charges no rent The old man of the mountain

The Mattoid: Burn and Rob

Lyrics are online if you google them.

Steve Noonan: Wild and Free

Lyrics: Catfish swimming at the bottom of the lake, charcoal
shadows on the water He's got three women three times a week,
he's got several sons and daughters He don't care 'bout no atom
bomb – he don't make no war Life's just fine at the deepest levels

when you live how you were born And there's something 'bout bein
wild and free tryin to be what they say you cannot be Bein free –
wild and free

Blue-jays squakin in the redwood trees, next door neighbors of mine
They seem to have a pretty good life, getting along just fine They
don't need no diamond rings to show you who they are They get
by on what they got and they sleep out under the stars And there's
something 'bout bein wild and free tryin to be what they say ya
cannot be Something 'bout seein above the trees where there's oh
so much to see When yer free – wild and free – wild and free

Racoons scramblin in the night – bandits by moon light Wish I had
their will of sight – knowin just what's right Stealin my dinner and
my silver ware – yea that's part 'o their plan But Maybe if I just pat
attention they'll show me who I am

And there's something 'bout bein wild and free – livin like they say
ya cannot be Somethin 'bout seein above the trees, where there's
oh so much to see Somethin 'bout being wild and free – to find that
place in me where I can be Free - Wild and free – wild and free –
wild and free - wild and free...