

On Route 66, destination: Paris

By Richard Block

The grass on the Champ de Mars, the long park at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, was brown and crunchy on Bastille Day 2009. My friend Stephanie and I were sitting on the lawn, roasting in the sun, eating Brie on crusty bread, and sipping Bordeaux.

I'd been living and teaching on the French Riviera off and on for two years and had learned the language pretty well, and I was in Paris to catch a plane home for the summer. Stephanie was just passing through town and couldn't speak French. She asked me how I had gotten the hang of saying "R" in the back of my throat. You know when you gargle mouthwash? I asked. It's the same sort of sound, only without anything in your mouth. For practice, we took mouthfuls of the Bordeaux and gargled it around in our throats, and I tried not to stain my clothes as I laughed, dribbling red wine down my chin.

It was hard to hear her because around us, three-quarters of a million Frenchmen were singing along with Johnny Hallyday. They just call him Johnny. He was on stage at the base of the tower, bellowing his original hits and French translations of "Drive My Car" and "Back In The U.S.S.R." He's the "French Elvis," and in France he's huge: in 1966, The Jimi Hendrix Experience opened for Johnny.

For this day to be any more stereotypical, I thought, I'd have had to grow a moustache, find a poodle to walk, and put on a beret.

Later, we stood in the street and watched the fireworks explode in the sky. The buildings blocked much of the show, but the façades lit up with each flash. I had missed our own Independence Day a week and a half before, so it felt like the display was setting something right.

At the end, as the crowd emptied into the narrow avenues, I noticed that many of the Johnny

fans' T-shirts were printed with a familiar shape: the Route 66 sign.

The same one plastered on mugs, decorative license plates, and beer coozies for sale in gas stations and gift shops from the San Gabriel Valley to the Grand Canyon and beyond. But the logo had been altered to read "Tour 66": Johnny had turned 66 that year, and these were to be his final concerts. To me, it's just the road sign on the way to the eye doctor in Glendora, but their biggest star uses it as the logo for his last hurrah, and I was surrounded by thousands of Frenchmen with it plastered across their backs.

This is just one example that I've seen of the French fascination with America.

In the French high schools where I taught English, just about every class had at least one kid with a Yankees hat or a Knicks sweatshirt. There is a thriving subculture of country music fans who dress in boots, hats, and denim and go line dancing; I've been told that French people see this as an exotic revival of the town dances that had started to disappear. When new friends hear my accent, in English or in French, they usually ask right away where I am from. When I say "California," sometimes their faces brighten and they say, "It's my dream to go there!"

It sometimes takes Americans by surprise when I mention all this. The notion of the French as effete whiners holding their noses in the air and white flags in their hands does not go away easily. I know just as many hardworking, decent, warm-hearted, unpretentious people over there as I do over here, but the stereotypes persist. Sure, in Paris, some people look sour and ignore me, but I've also been surprised, map in hand, by a grim-looking old lady offering not only directions but to personally show me to my destination. And I feel as likely to come across impolite city-dwellers in London or New York, or even Los Angeles, as

in Paris.

Nor is it true that the French hate or scorn us or our country. I've often been asked about America's foreign and environmental policies, Americans' dietary habits, and our sometimes-violent pop culture, but people almost never cross the line from discussion of issues to mockery or personal attack, despite my unabashed passion for big cars, heavy metal, and Domino's pizza. And it is French people who have most enthusiastically declared to me their awe of the national parks that crown California, Arizona, Utah, and the rest of the nation.

I love their country, too. I miss the Mediterranean Sea, which is just five minutes' walk from my apartment and is a deep blue that I had only seen before in flowerbeds. The five-hour dinners featuring fresh bread, wine, vegetables that burst with flavor, and ... um ... aromatic cheese, where the conversation meanders from poetry to surfing by way of business and impolite jokes. The enthusiastic, polite teenagers to whom I taught English, who would wave and smile if they saw me in the hall or the street. The way that people dress stylishly for an occasion, or for no occasion at all.

So, sure, I want to go back. But California has its own versions of those things, too. I have returned, at least for now, because it has something France can never have: my culture and my loved ones. As Johnny sang in his mother tongue: Gee, it's good to be back home.

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