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A Tribute to RYNN BERRY, Jr. (1945-2013)

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

Rynn Berry, a vegetarian since 1964, embraced veganism in 1981, when few people knew the word or its tenets. Hoping to remedy veganism's minority status within the ranks of vegetarianism, he devoted his life to chronicling the histories and to teaching the philosophies of both.

In pursuit of those lofty goals, Rynn Berry was a writer and lecturer, an athlete and aesthete, a researcher and scholar, a reader and translator of Latin and Ancient Greek, the Historical Advisor to the North American Vegetarian Society (NAVS), and speaker for 26 consecutive years at its Vegetarian Summerfests. In addition to his perennial talks charting the history of vegetarianism and encapsulating the biographies of noteworthy vegetarians, he also scripted short plays in which members of the Summerfest audience brought to life such luminaries as Leonardo da Vinci and Pythagoras.

Now, however, only Rynn's writings remain. His sparkling writing edifies and captivates. His very literate reviews of New York City restaurants can be savored even by someone seated in an armchair in Los Angeles. Ever erudite, had he written a car owner's manual about home repair of the Model T Ford, his guide would be worth reading just for his brilliant writing style alone.

But don't go poking around the internet looking for Rynn's writings. Google will point you virtually nowhere. Rynn conceived no windbag's website nor braggart's blog, his Facebook profile is nearly a blank page, and he seldom resorted to email. With his uniquely cursive calligraphy, he handwrote most of his correspondence.

Conducting research for his books, Rynn read the dead, but interviewed the living. Kitchen tables turned, *New Vegan Age's* Tom Epler recently interviewed Rynn. An interviewee's answers can be only as good as the interviewer's questions, and Tom asked all the right questions. Rynn's answers are insightful and eloquent, and are the closest likeness you will find on the Web to Rynn's writings. The interview is posted at:

<http://newveganage.blogspot.com.br/2013/06/interview-author-and-vegan-champion.html>

If Rynn shunned the internet, it was because he hailed from the Socratic school of pedagogy. Notoriety on the Web sometimes can go too viral, while for Rynn no audience was too small. Following in the footsteps of Walt Whitman who peddled his poetry on the street corners of Manhattan, Rynn engaged passers-by in conversation at its farmers markets, passively selling his books while stridently espousing the virtues of veganism.

New York urbanites know Rynn best for his *Vegan Guide to NYC*, now in its 20th edition. Rynn was a raw foodist at home, and a fruitarian at heart, but to review restaurants for his guide he selflessly donated his body to science and strayed widely from the uncooked path. Kicking and licking, he sampled the city's abundance of vegan delicacies, ranging from conventional but affordable tofu cheesecake at Angelica's to exotic but expensive saffron cashew wild mushroom hand stuffed whole grain ravioli at Candle Café.

Those of us who live outside the NYC metro area can equally relish Rynn's other books, most notably *Famous Vegetarians & Their Favorite Recipes*, a biographical history that spans three millennia, and *Food for the Gods: Vegetarianism & the World's Religions*. He loved veg food, and loved writing about veg food, and loved writing about other writers who loved veg food. Among his favorite writers were Leo Tolstoy, Percy Shelley, and George Bernard Shaw. Not coincidentally, they were vegetarians, and in addition to their novels, poems, and plays, all three wrote essays promoting their pioneering diets. Indeed, Rynn credited Shaw for converting him into a vegetarian. Shelley's writings on the raw food diet, too, influenced Rynn.

During one NAVS Summerfest, Rynn lectured about Shelley's life as a vegetarian, and concluded with Shelley's death as a victim of drowning. The audience was small and informal, so someone asked in jest if Shelley had been skinny dipping. "I don't know," Rynn quipped, "But his body was naked when it washed ashore."

Our deaths provide punctuation to our lives, sometimes with conclusive periods, sometimes with question marks, sometimes with exclamation marks. Rynn was an avid runner. He twice completed the NYC marathon, and recently participated regularly in track meets in Brazil, as their summers heat up when NYC winters freeze up. Two days before he was scheduled to embark on a jet flight to Brazil where he often was a speaker at an animal rights annual conference, he went for a routine run in Prospect Park near his Brooklyn home. On that fateful bitterly cold day in late December, Rynn suffered cardiac arrest and collapsed in his tracks.

For several days, the name of the hospitalized "Prospect Park Jogger" was unknown. The only clues in his pockets were keys and an asthma inhaler. (Winter runners with asthma are at high risk of cardiac arrest because extremely cold air constricts the lungs' passages, which strains breathing, which strains the heart.) Ironically, the biographer of others was stripped of any identity of his own. In essence, his body was naked when it washed ashore.

Still more ironic, the soft spoken gentleman of quiet demeanor who never hired a literary agent or publicist, and who never queued up for media attention, now was under the spotlights of police and in the flashes of cameras. In a campaign to identify their comatose comrade on life support, local runners clubs circulated photos of the "Prospect Park Jogger." The news media, including *The New York Times*, took note. His death shined a light on his life...and, intrinsic to Rynn, also upon his books, and upon the vegan diet which his books championed.

History (and biography) is not the record of what has happened, but of what has been written about what has happened. If no one writes it, then history vanishes. Who next among the living will take up the pen and step up to the plate?

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Mark Mathew Braunstein, a longtime friend of Rynn and longtime contributor to *Vegetarian Voice*, is the author of three books on veganism, including *Radical Vegetarianism*, which upon reading it in 1982 inspired Rynn to contact Mark.



**Rynn's favorite song
"I Can't Get Started"
with Bunny Berigan**

(<http://www.releaselyrics.com/3e2a/bunny-berigan-i-can%5C't-get-started/>)

I Can't Get Started
Bunny Berigan

Music-Lyrics: Vernon Duke, Ira Gershwin 1936

I've flown around the world in a plane
I've settled revolutions in Spain
And the North Pole I have charted
Still I can't get started with you

On the golf course, I'm under par
Metro Goldwyn have asked me to star
I've got a house, a showplace
Still I can't get no place with you

'Cause you're so supreme

Dream day and night of you
And I scheme just for the sight of you
Baby, what good does it do?

I've been consulted by Franklin D
Greta Garbo has had me to tea
Still I'm broken-hearted

'Cause I can't get started with you

MONKEY TRAITS:
Intelligent,
dignified,
optimistic,
romantic,
sociable,
quick-witted,
confident,
agile,
motivator,
gregarious.

**Rynn's Chinese zodiac:
Monkey**



**Rynn enjoyed singing
"Aba Daba Honeymoon"**

(<http://www.releaselyrics.com/2ab5/debbie-reynolds-%26-carleton-carpenter-aba-daba-honeymoon/>)

Aba Daba Honeymoon
Debbie Reynolds-Carleton Carpenter
Music & Lyrics: Arthur Fields and Walter
Donovan. 1914

Aba daba daba daba daba daba dab
Means monk I love but you
Baba daba dab
In monkey talk means chimp I love you too
Then the big baboon one night in June
He married them and very soon
They went upon their aba daba honeymoon

Way down in the congo land
Live a happy chimpanzee
She loved a monkey with a long tail
Lordy how she loved him
Each night he would find her there
Swingin' in the coconut tree
And the monkey gay
At the break of day
Like to hear he chimpie say

Aba daba daba daba daba daba dab
Said the chimpie to the monk
Baba daba daba daba daba daba dab
Said the monkey to the chimp
All night long they'd chatter away
All day long they were happy and gay
Swingin' and singin' in their
Honky tonky way

Aba daba daba daba daba daba dab
Means monk I love but you
Baba daba dab in monkey talk
Means chimp I love you too

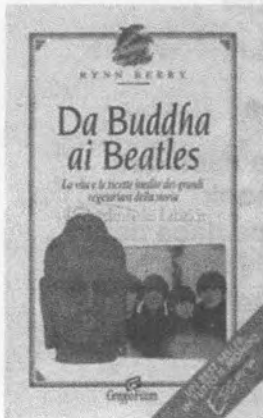
Then the big baboon one night in June
He married them and very soon
They went upon their aba daba honeymoon

One night they were made man and wife
And now they cry this is the life
Since they came from their aba daba
honeymoon

Aba daba daba daba daba daba dab
 Said the chimpie to the monk
 Baba daba daba daba daba daba dab
 Said the monkey to the chimp
 All night long they'd chatter away
 All day long they were happy and gay
 Swingin' and singin' in their
 Honky tonky way

A ba daba daba daba daba daba dab
 Means monk I love but you
 Baba daba dab in monkey talk
 Means chimp I love you too
 Then the big baboon one night in June
 He married them and very soon
 They went upon their aba daba
 honeymoon

Then the big baboon one night in June
 He married them and very soon
 They went upon their aba daba honey
 Aba daba aba daba
 Aba daba honeymoon...
 Honeymoon.



*Rynn's books
 have been
 translated into
 Nepalese, Italian,
 Hindi, Taiwanese,
 Chinese,
 Bulgarian,
 German,
 Hungarian,
 French, Russian,
 Polish, Dutch.*

“My perspective of veganism was most affected by learning that the veal calf is a by-product of dairying, and that in essence there is a slice of veal in every glass of what I had thought was an innocuous white liquid - milk.”

Rynn Berry

Rynn's historical vegan-themed plays



TEA WITH THE TOLSTOYS



THE BUDDHA'S LAST SUPPER



THE MONA LISA'S SMILE