

BOB MOREEN – A Memoir

By Brian Bland, Phi Kappa, Class of 1963

It would be hard to overstate the great memories I have of the talented Bob Moreen in Phi Kappa at the University of Illinois. Although I was one class ahead of Bob, we were fellow Postulants in autumn, 1960. Our pledge class was a lively, convivial, group of young men who, it turned out, did fine in school and had a helluva good time, as well.

You get to know people on a number of levels, and Bob had no reluctance to display his talent at the piano right away. His self-confidence reflected years of experience, even at that age, and his relaxed, seemingly effortless, improvising on the piano in the House living room echoed the “cool jazz” style of the great Dave Brubeck, so popular at that time. But Bob was equally comfortable playing (and singing) comedy songs *a la* Tom Lehrer, such as “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park.” Bob was a hit in the Crow house as a creative individual, an entertainer and an easy-going guy.

Naturally, we turned to Bob for musical inspiration when events such as the campus’ annual Stunt Show rolled around. One production that sticks in my mind had a courtroom setting, with the jury being asked to decide whether the centennial of the start of the Civil War should be marked by a re-creation in gory detail – one extreme – or banned as a waste of time – the other extreme.

The lead parts, of course, required some singing, so I can’t explain how I was picked to be the lawyer defending centennial celebrations. I think it was Bob himself who played the prosecutor – making him the producer, director, lyricist and co-star, all in one. Other Crows were mostly cast as jurors, a mixture of nutty characters that only Bob Moreen could’ve created. Here are samples of the lyrics, as the defense attorney (yours truly) remembers them, telling the jury why war centennials should be celebrated with re-creations, and why the other side was off base (and not just off-key):

*“We must remember the time our nation was in its prime,
We had to fight, or we would fall.
We must remember our George, who fought at Valley Forge,
But he’d do away with it all. (Pointing at the prosecutor).
“He says that we should not be thinkin’ of good old Abie Lincoln,
A man both in stature and in action (?) so extremely tall.
Yes, we should recall all the gore of that fightful Civil War,
But he’d do away with it all.”*

I don’t recall the lyrics for the prosecutor, but Bob’s cleverness was evident in this musical parody, as he showed how some flag-wavers enjoy refighting every war, while some others want to forget them altogether. The takeaway for me was: honor and remember the sacrifices, and do it with dignity.

The last time I saw Bob was soon after I returned from Vietnam in 1968, a civilian once again. I drove from my hometown of Memphis, heading for Chicago, but stopped in Champaign/Urbana to see a former instructor and to ask about the job market in St. Louis and Chicago. Bob was still living in Urbana, so we spent an enjoyable afternoon together, with plenty of laughs and shared memories. A few weeks later, I headed to California, my home ever since.

As time goes by, some of us have chosen to stay in touch, others have chosen to leave the past in the past. Bob lived in the present. I was aware of his career, though not in detail, and am gratified to know his talent enabled him to make a career of doing what he loved to do: delighting audiences by performing and celebrating the kind of music he loved.