

RED-DEVIL SPEEDWAY

BANJO TUNES & FOLK SONGS

A funny, off-center title, *Red-Devil Speedway*. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with the music, which is straight-ahead old-time and American folk songs, played on banjo and guitar. I do speed up most of my songs, toward the end, when they go roaring down to the finish line, so in that respect alone, there is something of a speedway about the music itself.

But that's not it.

I grew up in Culver City, California. Today, the town is an upscale mecca for Hollywood types and wannabes, but in my day it was as if a sleepy mid-western town had been dropped like a UFO into the middle of the sprawling city of Los Angeles. Culver City is still its own town, with separate police and fire, and its own zip code. In the 1950s it consisted of a one-block business center, anchored by the Bank of America at one end. An honest drug store, with a soda fountain was open just across a side alley from the bank. The stools revolved, and had no backrests. In the middle of the block, Steller & Skoog Hardware sold all the tools and equipment, and served fresh popcorn at the back of the store. The last time I was in there, five or six years ago, they still did.

It was a half-mile walk from my house to Lots 1 and 2 of M-G-M studios. The "back lot" is now expensive homes, but Lot 1 remains as the home of Sony. Along the east side of Overland Avenue, on the way to M-G-M, a housing tract from the 1940s obliterated every bit of an old board racetrack that lured drivers, spectators and gamblers to automobile and motorcycle races in the 1920s. These were murderous old tracks, angled like a velodrome, so that the cars and cycles could go faster in the confines of a small oval track.

By my day, the track was gone, but there was a flat-track down in Venice, at the corner of Lincoln and Washington Boulevards. My father and older brother and I went to races occasionally. We watched midget-car racing, and once or twice, motorcycles. We were part of the great Car Culture of the post-World War II era, and I spent afternoons and evenings perusing automobile sales brochures that we brought home from the annual Automobile Show at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium.

So the idea of the "red-devil speedway" was all in me from childhood, without a name to ascribe to it. Then I read a seminal book by Phoebe S. Kropp, called *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place*, which explored and helped to explain the period of aggrandizement for the delights of Southern California living. Part of that romance involved the 21 Franciscan missions that were built between 1787 and 1823 to assert Spanish, and later Mexican dominance over the native peoples who had called California home for centuries. At the turn of the 20th Century, a proposal was vetted to build a road that would duplicate the old Spanish "Road of Kings," the El Camino Real. This road would link all the missions up and down California, and would, parenthetically, provide a road from San Diego to San Francisco that would be suitable for the new motorcars that were making their appearance.

Critics of this road turned away derisively and unhappily, knowing that such a road would lure out speed demons who would endanger the lives of animals and people while rushing haphazardly between California's hamlets.

Bob Webb

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