



DAVE JOHNSON

—On a Roll—

BY DAVE JOHNSON

Oregon Bus Project activates youth, gets out vote.

On a spring day 35 years ago, an imperialistic misadventure was raging in S.E. Asia, Eugene was shape-shifting into a political animal with sharp teeth, I was covering an anti-war rally for a local underground monthly and a young Chicago bluesman named Charlie Musselwhite was playing harmonica in a bowling alley turned rock venue across from the McDonald Theatre.

Fast forward to a glorious morning in early April, 2004. A dubious hostility was in full throttle in blood-drenched Mesopotamia, I was in Eugene, covering the launch of a progressive political group for this slightly above-ground weekly and still-truckin' Charlie Musselwhite was blowing harp in K-Falls and heading north.

Life is less and less linear as time goes by, I thought on this uncommonly balmy Saturday, as I strolled toward mayoral candidate Kitty Piercy's campaign headquarters around the corner from the Keystone Café.

Folks were relaxing and kids were playing across Washington Street in a greenway that was once the residential heartland of West Eugene before they flung the bridge across the wide Willamette.

The setting and parallel circumstance suffused me with bittersweet nostalgia for my days as a rebel with a ponytail and a world to save, and a lingering affection for the lumber/college town that had redefined itself as a safe harbor for lively dissent and alternative lifestyles.

My assignment was to write about the launch of a local

branch of the Oregon Bus Project, a youth-driven outfit in its third year of jumpstarting placid constituencies in the Oregon outback. With today's action, the project was challenging Eugene to hop off its liberal laurels and "get on the bus."

Key to the great notion of motoring about the electoral landscape is that it is a means to engage young people in the political system. If they are sent out to knock on doors and stir up dust, their enthusiasm will lead to meaningful change in our society. Or to borrow from Pogo, we have seen the future and they are us.

Two days ago, I had listened to my landlord in his curmudgeon mode snarl, "I'm not voting for Bush or Kerry — they're both liars!" Disgruntled folks in anarchistic factions are also loathe to vote and thus support a rigged and corrupt regime. As a result, elections are won by those who show up and the system muddles along.

I entered Piercy's HQ to discover a safehouse from this rampant cynicism and despair. A hive of worker bees was handing out name tags, slicing bagels and sipping java while revved up volunteers intermingled with the campaign staff and bus crew. I counted 30, all watched over by Jennifer Yocum, the calm, hands-off director of operations for the Oregon Bus Project.

It was pleasant to make eye-contact with a few gray-bearded and silver-tressed veterans of past skirmishes, heartening to see mid-stride politicians organizing the gig in the true spirit of Joe Hill, and a hoot to notice a good turn-out of more than a dozen teenagers.

The proceedings began with a greeting from James

Mattiace and Heather Brule, co-chairs of the Lane Branch. They invited volunteers to grab one of the clipboards stacked on the table in the corner and hit the streets to visit the registered voters at addresses highlighted in yellow. The pertinent question to ask was, "Do you plan to vote for Kitty Piercy? If not, thanks for your time and if you're undecided, here's a pamphlet listing Kitty's viewpoints and achievements."

The next speaker was County Commissioner Peter Sorenson, a familiar face and voice, with a long history of populist politics in Lane County.

"This Bus Project is the best thing happening in Oregon politics!" he enthused. "It's a refreshing innovation and I'm glad to have been an early supporter."

Sorenson played to his hometown crowd with an affable jab at the original site of the bus project — a pocket-sized metropolis he described as a ways "downstream."

I currently live in Portland so I'm familiar with the smug self-absorption that permeates that beacon of cultural and intellectual superiority. But not all Stumptowners are full of their urbane selves. Jefferson Smith for example.

A downtown attorney and the alpha sparkplug of the Oregon Bus Project, Smith is familiar with the political history of riding buses for social justice. As he reminded the Portland media when the project began in 2002, Freedom Riders promoted integration of segregated buses throughout the South in the early '60s by refusing to sit in the back. A shrewd politico, he's also hip to the popularity of whistle-stop campaigning from town to town, outpost to village.