

The Spider's Web

Terry Anderson

I believe in the music which you sing
I believe in the magic which you bring
and even though
they say it's just a show
I believe you speak the truth
for those of us alone

The Warrior-Allen Mercier

They were screaming for him that night. Screaming their lungs raw till their voices were shrill and stretched like taffy. Their tears could have floated a boat; their clapping could have crashed the walls of Jericho. I can't imagine how many parents must have wondered when the children came home from that concert raving, their faces stained with tears, their hands red and sore from clapping, their nerves torn and frayed by the excitement.

How he played that night! So good they were dancing in the aisles, hugging each other and feeling so fine that nothing could have brought them down. The smoke from the pipes and roaches, joints and turkeys was like a cloud that everyone could bounce upon. That night they were riding on an endless wave. A wave that carried them from one edge of the ocean to a distant shore, exotic and unknown. Somewhere they could only reach through him, and his music.

Allen Mercier was a god that night. He plucked a bit of Brando, Christ, Napoleon, and ever Lucifer from the universe and showed it to them. He strutted and wiggled, kneeled and prayed to them, electrified them with his fantastic musicianship, transfixed them with his lullaby voice.

There were 40,000 kids crammed into that little auditorium. All of them came out in shock, and in love with Allen Mercier. They dreamed they might meet him at a party. They envisioned the day they met him on the street and he just smiled and said in that gentle Georgia accent, "Why don't y'all come over and we'll smoke a little and listen to some good jams."

Allen was born in little McCaysville, Georgia, in the same year Harry Truman decided Douglas MacArthur wasn't suited for the Korean War. His father was a civil engineer with the power company; his mother a piano teacher in the high school. His twin brother Tom was the star quarterback for Georgia in the Peach Bowl; his older sister Peggy an accomplished and recognized artist in New York. But this biography business is so black and white. It doesn't tell you the secrets that were swirling around in his head when he disappeared into the Georgia wilderness for two weeks without even leaving a note to his anxious, fearful parents. It doesn't explain why he quit the University of Georgia and took off to New York to live in roach-infested apartments and subsist on beans and powdered milk.

The money he did make came from studio work, and from pan-handling on the street, neither of which brought in much to live on. New York was a disaster altogether. The winter hurt his health; the struggling strained his nerves. In the spring he wound up in one of the 'modern' clinics trying to shake off the bad effects of some nasty dope he hit.

After he was released, he headed for California and dreams of success and sunshine. He only found the sunshine. Los Angeles is not a friendly town if you're alone and unready for its ways. He tried hard to get an "in" with the recording companies; but nothing, not even the traffic signs, paid attention to his presence. So he packed his suitcase again, and this time headed for the Canadian Rockies. He never made it. A stop in Seattle introduced him to some old friends from New York and a short job as a milk deliverer for a vending company. But things were changing down the coast.

That summer his luck returned. Friends back in L.A. were forming a band and needed a piano player. Allen fit the bill and Sweatshop started spinning. A few hits later, Allen was a minor name on the scene, known for his songs rather than his singing. But now his foot was in the door, and he needed only a shove to push him into the limelight.

The push which opened the door was the Pt. Reyes Music Festival two years ago. You remember the scenes from the movies, magazines, and six o'clock news shows: 300,000 kids camping on that scenic shoreline, listening to their gods of rock music. Three

days of pot smoking and pill popping, nude swimming and group lovemaking, three days of rock music and joyful celebration.

Allen was the final act on the second night. It was really late, and everyone seemed drained of energy and will as they listened to the set before his. But they caught fire almost immediately when he sang his *Universal Suite for the Stars*. That night had to be one of the most beautiful ever. The stars were like sequins on a velvet rope; the moon like a diamond pendant—and with Allen were 300,000 sailing off to another galaxy.

The news media grabbed his performance. They showed the world the scene when thousands of fans swarmed the stage and carried him upon their shoulders as a new hero. Within weeks he was the hottest, highest, most blazing figure in the music world. I remember going to a record store in Dayton and seeing his records gobbled up off the shelf within an hour of release.

It wasn't just a promotion trick either. Allen had talent, real talent that everyone could see. The fat cats who had sat back, their noses turned up listening to the Philharmonic play Mozart, suddenly were standing. He was on top, because as Ezra Pound had said, "He was good."

But what about Allen? When the changes came. When the world was showing him with ovations. Where was Allen?

The answer: he was back in the mountains, living as peacefully and unnoticeably as possible. He was tinkering with his motorcycle, and writing music that was getting further and further into a surrealistic texture. But he wasn't showing off; he wasn't even making ripples.

I remember being up at his house near the middle of September, talking about his new project, a movie. Allen wanted to film a short clip in which he imagines himself a fly stuck to a spider's web. The cocaine he'd brought out was soft and snowy, powdery and cool, and he was loose and very open. He said that he felt like he was being drawn into the spider's web, and that any struggle only entangled him more. He was tired, strained by the sudden rush of attention, I told him. He didn't answer, but went to the piano and played part of *The Warrior*, and said that he had a feeling it would be his final work.

I didn't see him for a long time.

Complications and other business kept me away from the West for almost a year. I'd been bouncing from one end of the Atlantic coast to another like I was a kid on a pogo stick. It was through my work in the East, and I was relaxing at home when I received a call from Allen. He said the movie was finished and he'd written some music for it, and hoped that it could be performed soon. He asked me if I would arrange a performance. I said "Yes, of course," and we scheduled it for the end of October. He told me that he wanted it to be a surprise, so no one—press, critics, not even I—could see it.

The press build-up was fantastic. Critics were waiting in line alongside the kids, eager to snatch up the limit of four tickets per person. Allen was nowhere to be found. Reporters scoured every haunt they knew of for some advance revelations, but Allen had disappeared.

That Friday in Concord was exciting. The radio stations had received permission to broadcast; the T.V. crews, anticipating another Pt. Reyes, had dispatched cameras inside and outside the auditorium. On the street the police tensely waited for the crowds to gather. Inside, Allen joked, saying he hoped the roof blew off and everyone inside and out could see the movie and hear the music.

We talked little. He was busy making sure that every screen, every projector, every amplifier and speaker was placed just right. I was worrying about the crowd gathered outside and the fire marshal's threats that the show would be cancelled if the aisles weren't kept clear.

At eight o'clock I walked on stage and introduced Allen. He went to the piano and opened with a soft set of his more beautiful songs. They were, of course, tight and flawless; but the crowd, a bit restless, was anxious for the new music.

After an hour he took a break and everyone buzzed, "This must be it coming." Soon Allen walked out on the stage to a single microphone in the middle. He waited while the crowd quieted down; and then, when the auditorium was silent, he directed their eyes to the screens along the walls. His movie, *The Spider Web*, was black and white, stark and very tense. It put the viewer in the place of the fly and showed the spider slowly creeping along the sparkling threads toward its kill. Anxiety went up; the perspiration told on everyone's

forehead. Then, as mysteriously as it began, it ended—the spider not quite to the victim, the moment of death not quite arrived.

Without words the music began, at first very solemn, slowly rising and weaving as the film had. It was a long song, intricate in design, but always building in tempo and spirit. By the end they were dancing. No longer afraid like the fly, they were celebrating; they were alive and excited. And that's how he left them, ending the song in a frenzied crash.

Immediately after the show, Allen was gone. He wasn't found until three days later. Dead of course, his strength taken out of him, his lifeless body a cold shell.

I'm sure he realized he was dying, and wanted to finish on the same note his song did, one of jubilation, one of happiness:

The candle which lights our way
And brightens 'gainst the grey
is flickering
burning low
confusing now our path to go
but i'm sure you who see the truth
have pity on us
who must chase our days alone

The Warrior-Allen Mercier.