



NATIVE AMERICAN DRUID Chris Matthews at a spiritual gathering in Montana

A Poet and a Patriot: Chris Matthews (1946-2008)

A larger-than-life character, a lasting legacy and a damn good bar **BY GEOFFREY DUNN**

Bio-m

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*How far in life's bag can a man see?
Ten years, twenty? All of it?
Does anybody know?
Can he see at all?
Was it really life?*

—CHRIS MATTHEWS, 'AN EGG LIKE ME' (1976)

I will always remember the first day I met Chris Matthews, because it came during a time of crisis and potential violence, a long-forgotten moment in Santa Cruz County history known as the Ohlone Occupation, a battle to protect Native American burial grounds just outside of Watsonville.

It was 1974, and Matthews, who had earned his paratrooper's wings in the elite corps of the U.S. Army's 508th Airborne Division, quickly emerged as a leader of the ragtag band of activists who had come together to protect the sacred Ohlone burial site from destruction. With guns.

That is correct: with guns. It was an incredibly tense moment, and Matthews, tall and articulate, with a gravelly voice

soaked in the refinery fumes of his native New Jersey, made it clear to the Santa Cruz County sheriff's deputies surrounding the site that there would be no surrender and no compromise. He was fearless.

Matthews seemed larger than life to me back then—and so he would for his remaining 3 1/2 decades here in Santa Cruz County. His was a journey that was as vast as it was profound—a life so rich and passionate that it inevitably defies any effort to confine it to words on a page.

It is inconceivable that a presence that big can be mortal, but mortal it be, as Matthews succumbed to lung cancer this past Saturday, at the age of 61, following a courageous two-year battle with the disease.

He was brave and valiant until the end.

Chris Matthews was born and raised in Elizabeth, N.J., to Irish working-class parents. He lost both his brother Rickey and his mother, Elizabeth, at an early age, and joined the Army out

of high school. He served most of his military career in Panama, where he first encountered the vestiges of American imperialism.

Matthews arrived in Santa Cruz County in 1973, and he immediately immersed himself in the local political and poetry scenes (Night Owl Press published a collection of his verse, *An Egg Like Me*), and began fighting for both jobs and affordable housing for veterans and ex-convicts.

In January of 1979, Matthews was appointed county supervisor by then-Gov. Jerry Brown for the Pajaro District, following the death of conservative board member Cecil Smith. It was a slap in the face to the white, often racist power brokers in South County. They were outraged.

A year earlier, there had been a political coup d'état in Santa Cruz County, when conservatives successfully recalled a pair

of progressives on the county Board of Supervisors, Phil Baldwin and Ed Borovatz. As a result, Matthews found himself in the minority on the board, with Santa Cruz progressive Gary Patton.

Intensely competitive, Matthews refused to kowtow to the conservative board majority. He was adamant about his political values and he engaged in a steady bout of political drama, most notably with Aptos Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat, who was straight out of central casting as an Eisenhower-era conservative. The weekly headlines made for entertaining reading, but it gradually turned combustive.

His 18 months in office empowered a new generation of traditionally disenfranchised progressives and Latinos who would topple the conservative white power structure in Watsonville.

The frustrated Matthews began to drink excessively, with unfortunate and public results, including a DUI arrest. When he ran for election in 1980, he finished a distant third. While his career as an elected official was over, he had made a lasting impact on the political landscape in South County; his 18 months in office empowered a new generation of traditionally disenfranchised progressives and Latinos who would topple the conservative white power structure in Watsonville during the ensuing decade.

In the early 1980s, Matthews picked up the pieces of his life. He continued writing and also began acting in local theater with his younger brother (now the accomplished television actor Dihlon McManne). He also met his future wife, Sue Heinz, with whom he pursued his dream of opening an Irish pub, along with his brother and his longtime pals Ed Alheit and Tim McCormick.

Named in honor of Irish poet Padraig Pierce and patriot James Connolly, the Poet and Patriot became a second home for an entire generation of Santa Cruz writers and political activists, Vietnam vets

and Irish partisans. Matthews was always center stage.

Following a trip to Ireland in 1985, Matthews came back committed to sobriety. He also came back recommitted to writing. His award-winning play, *A Flag to Fly*, was based on the history of the San Patricio Battalion, Irish soldiers who switched over to the side of Mexico in the Mexican-American War. The play was staged internationally and brought Matthews widespread literary acclaim.

When Matthews was diagnosed with cancer two years ago, I was already well into my own battle with the disease, and we had long conversations about our sense of mortality. For Chris there was only one way through the process: with a wicked and robust sense of humor.

Only a few months ago, I ran into him at Dominican Hospital when he was getting a treatment. I told him that our mutual friend, Don Yee, was near his death in the hospital. Chris insisted that we go upstairs so that he could pay final his respects. Matthews had been a chaplain in the Bill Motto VFW Post, and it was both beautiful and spiritually uplifting to watch him say good-bye.

I spoke to Matthews a week before his passing, and I could tell that he was struggling. His sense of humor was still intact, his spirit strong, but his body was betraying him. He sensed his time was near. I couldn't help but think of the lyrics to the classic Irish ballad "Danny Boy":

*Oh Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes
are calling
From glen to glen, and down the
mountainside.
The summer's gone, and all the
roses falling.
It's you, it's you must go and I
must bid
But when ye come, and all the flow'rs
are dying
And I am dead, as dead I well may be.
Ye'll come and find the place where
I am lying
And kneel and say an Ave there for me.*

As is the Irish custom, let us all say a prayer for our fallen comrade and lift a toast to his great life and pray for his beloved wife, Sue, his two beautiful children, Celene and Rory, his brother Dihlon and his sacred Ireland. Good-bye, my brother, the pipes are calling. I kneel and say an Ave for thee.

There will be a celebration of Chris Matthews' life on his birthday, Saturday, Sept. 13, at 2pm at a site to be determined. A wake will follow later that afternoon at the Poet and Patriot Irish Pub, 320 Cedar St., Santa Cruz.