

A celebration of life
Janice MacTaggart

01 January 1954 – 29 January 2021

2.30 – 3.15 pm, Monday 12 April 2021, City of London Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Janice MacTaggart was born on New Year's Day 1954. She came to think of it as a very bad day for a birthday, as who, apart from her, wanted to have a party when they were still recovering from the night before?

One of her earliest friends was Christine, whom she met, aged 11, when they started at secondary school – Maidstone Girls Tech. It was to become a lifelong friendship, and although Christine is slightly younger, Janice would tease her by introducing her as 'my oldest friend'.

Christine has a sister, Maria, who is ten years younger than her, and, as teenagers, the girls enjoyed taking her to the cinema – admittedly not wholly out of kindness, as it meant they could watch *The Jungle Book* or *The Aristocats* without fear of looking uncool. Being cool meant listening to all the latest music, and Christine remembers liking to go round to Janice's house because they had a dining room where the girls could play Beatles records in peace – Janice was already a Beatles groupie.

Janice was a very competent musician herself, singing in the school choir, and playing guitar and piano, which she took to a high standard. When she went to teacher training college, piano and voice were her subjects.

As their tastes developed, they started going to concerts and festivals. It helped that Janice's dad was often on hand to collect them after a night out – her parents spoilt her a bit and even allowed her to go to the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970, despite being only 16, which Christine wasn't allowed to do. But there were plenty of other opportunities nearer home – concerts in Hyde Park and Crystal Palace. Christine remembers seeing the Kinks at the local art college, and Fairport Convention at Cropredy Festival. Martin Carthy was a favourite of Janice's, and she loved bands such as Yes, The Nice, and Emerson Lake and Palmer. She was to develop an extremely eclectic range of musical taste encompassing prog rock, punk and more – including classical music. She once invited Philip to a 'Carmina Burana' concert, to which he replied, 'Who's she?'; and she wasn't above going to hear Vivaldi at St Martin-in-the-Fields with Christine.

The two friends both became teachers, and they shared another strong interest – art. Christine was working at a primary school in Kent, but Janice moved to London, so she always knew what shows were on when, and a day out at an exhibition or gallery became very much a pattern for their outings together. They

sometimes took Christine's children along in the holidays. Her daughters Angela and Joanna recall one Bonnard exhibition with endless pictures of his wife bathing, but they also fondly remember the meal they enjoyed together afterwards. The friends also spent many a happy afternoon at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, often with Maria. It was easy for them to get to, but was also graced by a café that served very nice cake. One memory that stands out is the Olafur Eliasson installation 'The Weather Project' at the Tate Modern in 2003 – a huge sun rising out of the mist. Christine says, 'We lay on the floor to get the full experience and Janice persuaded Gerry (her partner) to take a photo. She put the photo on display in her house and I think it's still there'.

Janice was particularly attracted to the avant-garde – from the Impressionists to the Surrealists, to Russian revolutionary artists like Malevich – anything that was anti-establishment and left-leaning. This was something she shared with Philip, whom she first met after moving from Hampstead to Leytonstone in 1981 – there weren't enough left-wing intellectuals in Hampstead! Janice and her friend Sue were living in a flat on the Whipps Cross Road overlooking the ponds, not far from the Hitchcock pub. But the Fire Brigade condemned it as a 'rabbit warren', and as the flat below Philip and his friend Alan had become vacant, she and Sue moved in there instead – it was just round the corner. Later on, Philip, Janice and her boyfriend bought a house together in Rhodesia Road (the irony of that name cannot have been lost on her) as it was cheaper than paying rent. Philip and Janice ended up living there for nine years and remaining friends from then on.

Janice was to stay in Leytonstone, though she did have a restless phase, and at one point went off to work in Liverpool. She liked the gutsy Scouse 'no surrender' attitude to life, as epitomised by the Hillsborough campaign ('not taking any nonsense from rich bastards', as Philip says), but despite also being the home of the Beatles, it didn't work out for some reason, and she was back after a term.

The social hub at the time in Leytonstone was the Crown pub on the High Road – pretty much everyone pitched up there at some time or another. It was an important place to meet friends old and new, to talk politics, share news and plan events.

Philip talks of how Janice's passion for social justice intertwined with her social life and her cultural interests. In eighties east London there were not only plenty of SWP meetings to attend, but Anti-Nazi League and Rock against Racism rallies

and free concerts in Victoria Park. Janice enjoyed the work of Ray Davies and the Kinks, The Beat, George Melly, the poetry of John Cooper Clark and especially the satirical subversiveness of Joe Orton, whose plays they went to see at the Stratford Theatre Royal. Cocking a snook at the establishment in a witty and provocative way was right up her street. One day they heard that Wreckless Eric was the supporting act for a Neil Innes gig, so off they went, and having seen him play, Janice insisted on departing for the pub – Neil Innes was already too mainstream.

Allied to this was a strong impulse to champion the underdog, underpinned by a good heart. She supported a friend who was arrested for throwing a lollipop at a policeman and then charged with a serious offence. With the help of a good leftie lawyer they managed to get the charges dropped. There were other, more low-key ways that she did this – for example, she went each week to visit a neighbour, Miss Slater, to keep her company and give her a hand when she lost her mobility and couldn't get out so much.

Teaching mattered to Janice. She taught in a number of different schools in London, and although she generally preferred secondary pupils, she often talked fondly about a primary school she taught at, which was run according to Piaget's principles of active learning. When she moved to Hackney Free School she became responsible for 'English as a second language' pupils. She enjoyed helping students who were starting their lives in the UK at a disadvantage, as well as supporting children from a deprived background. She also worked closely with parent groups there and made good friends amongst her colleagues.

She continued her own learning too. Having done French at school, she studied German as an adult, and when she retired she took up Latin classes, which she found interesting because it was the basis of other European languages. There she also made new friends.

Janice had a long and happy relationship with her partner Gerry, who lived with her in Oakdale Road. Christine remembers many good times, in particular Janice's 50th birthday in Amsterdam with Gerry, Philip and Christine's husband Bill. Now, this was a birthday which did live up to Janice's expectations – the New Year's Eve fireworks were spectacular, and to top it all, it snowed. It was very hard for Janice when Gerry died later that year, particularly as her mother and sister had both died

not long before. Her health, which was not robust, suffered particularly at this time, and that prompted her early retirement from teaching.

These were severe knocks, but Janice dealt with them as she always did, with humour and a caustic comment – she was always very aware of the ridiculous side of life.

She had a slightly eccentric taste in clothes. She loved hats, often in retro styles, and was rarely without one. She liked to mix and match her outfits in interesting ways, sourcing some items in charity shops, and if there was a preponderant colour it was probably black. But she would make exceptions – up to a point. Philip found a photo recently of a wedding in York. Just picture this for a moment – in it, Janice is wearing a pale pink bridesmaid's dress ... while holding a dimpled pint mug of beer in one hand and a fag in the other!

Animals, particularly cats and dogs, played a big part in Janice's life. While living in Maidstone she had a dog called Leo. He was a bit of a Jekyll and Hyde character, being friendly and placid one minute and then nipping you unexpectedly! Later, she loved to spend time with Coco, her friend Trudy's dog. And when Janice and Philip sold up their joint house and each moved to different abodes, there was no question about who would have Rover (Philip wasn't even consulted) – it was of course Janice. And for those who are wondering, Rover was a cat! She once had an axolotl in a tank which it had shared with its sibling. Unfortunately, the sibling had bitten off one of its legs, so it became known as Tripod. One night, Janice and Philip realised that the thermostat wasn't working properly. They thought they had managed to fix it, but came down the next day to find one boiled axolotl.

One of the things many people remember Janice for is her generosity and hospitality. She loved inviting all sorts of people round for roast dinners. This suited Philip very well as he was less sociably confident and so, when they were living in the same house, it was an easy way for him to meet new people. The only downside was that, based on their rota, it meant he had to do the washing up!

Janice cooked well. She used to make her own bread and liked experimenting with different flours and recipes, and for a while she had her own allotment for home-grown vegetables, and even grapes. When she became vegetarian she carried on cooking meat for her carnivorous friends out of kindness. But she could also

persuade meat-eaters to enjoy her vegetarian food – even Christine’s husband, a butcher, was won over!

Sadly, cooking for friends, along with many other simple pleasures, became increasingly curtailed as Janice’s health worsened, but she could always rely on help with practical matters from her friends, especially Dave and Alan. She was beset by a number of serious falls, some requiring extensive stays in hospital, and that led to a loss of confidence. She and Christine had enjoyed quite a few city breaks and tours together, one of which was a bus tour to France to look at gardens, including Monet’s garden in Giverny, so in 2016 to celebrate 50 years of friendship Christine and Janice planned a cruise round the UK. But they had to abandon it in Liverpool when Janice had a bit of a breakdown. Their last restaurant meal was at the Olive Tree with Trudy in 2018, and Christine remembers it fondly. Although it was difficult getting Janice in from the car to the table, she had much less trouble reversing the journey after a few glasses of wine! Covid took its toll badly on Janice, as she couldn’t get out to her exercise group. She and Philip had to resort to phone calls, as she couldn’t stand at the front door to speak to him, and he couldn’t go in.

Despite all that, Janice soldiered on, and was often to be found out enjoying her garden. She favoured sculptural plants, such as yuccas, palms and cannas. In later years she needed help looking after it, and Christine remembers once doing some weeding for her while Janice sat in the front room supervising her through the window. But mostly, Christine has happy memories of the two of them sitting in Janice’s little green oasis together enjoying a chat over a glass of wine.

Christine and Philip each have many memories of enjoying a drink or a meal with Janice – simple pleasures combining conviviality, conversation, companionship, and fun. Janice was one of a kind – generous, caring and strong-minded.

Note: Janice’s friends Philip Hall and Christine Ware provided most of the words for this tribute. The music – ‘Comfortably Numb’ by Scissor Sisters and ‘Hang on to a Dream’ by The Nice – was chosen specially by Janice herself, as was the following Native American prayer:

Traditional prayer of the Ishi People

When I am dead,

Cry for me a little.

Think of me sometimes,

But not too much.

Think of me now and again

As I was in life

At some moments it's pleasant to recall.

But not for long.

Leave me in peace

And I shall leave you in peace.

And while you live,

Let your thoughts be with the living.