H is road began in Worcester, the Massachusetts city of seven hills and no thrills, on Nov. 30, 1936 at 4:30 PM, double-trouble in a triple-decker house.

The end of the road came on April 12, 1989, when Abbie Hoffman was found lying peacefully in his bed outside of New Hope, Penn., with a stomach full of barbiturates and a legacy that will be felt for as long as the rest of the human race survives. The fact that the coroner said he committed suicide does not for one moment erase all the good he did while serving his life sentence on planet earth. Abbie was the captain of his own ship. He did everything on his own terms, including die.

He was a friend of mine. But his loss will leave a gaping black hole for many who mourn his passage, including millions around the world who never met him, except when he entered their living rooms through the television set, pioneering a new method of guerrilla warfare on the electronic battlefield of the mass media.

His was a long and winding road that, indeed, led to your door. It took him down dusty brown Mississippi dirt back roads in 1964, past the little shacks and big hearts of the Southern civil rights movement. He drove through a cultural explosion of free speech, hallucinogenic drugs, the sexual revolution and the emergence of a counterculture. He labored to organize that youth culture into a potent political force against the war in Vietnam and more.

But if his life is to be fairly described as a road, one cannot ignore all the tailgating behind him. Eleven state legislatures once passed laws banning Abbie Hoffman’s entry, by name. (Hoffman, of course, would hop on the first plane he could into each state to challenge and subsequently overturn the law in court.) The FBI compiled 68,000 pages of files on him, and hired two psychologists to analyze him from afar.

Superspy G. Gordon Liddy was commissioned by the U.S. government to draft a plan to kidnap Hoffman to Mexico. Federal agents repeatedly posed as political allies, followed him around, illegally tapped his phones, broke into his home and prosecuted him for conspiracy to incite a riot in the case of the Chicago 8 (a.k.a. Chicago 7). The American Civil
Liberties Union would later call it the most important political trial of the century.

Hoffman made enemies in high places.

During the 1971 May Day demonstrations against the war, President Richard M. Nixon’s White House tapes recorded an Oval Office conversation between the president and his chief of staff, H.R. “Bob” Haldeman:

Haldeman: We need some things to go in there and beat those guys up.

HALDEMAN: Yeah, strikebreaker types, real murderers who can go in there with gusto and smash some noses.

NIXON: Like the Chicago Seven. Aren’t the Chicago Seven all Jews? Rennie Davis is a Jew, you know.

HALDEMAN: No, not Davis.

NIXON: Abbie Hoffman! He’s a Jew.

HALDEMAN: Yes, Hoffman, definitely a Jew.

NIXON: Then at least half of the Chicago Seven are Jews.

Hours later, Hoffman’s nose was broken when he was chased down a Washington alley by a gang of uniformed police who smashed billy clubs down upon his face.

Abbie survived a series of mind and body blows that would have knocked any of the rest of us out of the ring long ago. He wrestled with a condition known as manic depression. His thunder and lightning-bolt creative streak was balanced by lonely plunges into the depths.

In 1973, Hoffman was busy at work on a sequel to Stalk This Book. Hoffman had written the first book as a guide to getting everything for free. Two million copies would eventually be sold or stolen.

As part of his research, he was interviewing drug dealers—on his wiretapped telephone. His natural curiosity for the study of underground commerce, and his legendary willingness to try anything once, led him to be present during a cocaine deal between those whom he had helped to bring together. There were undercover agents on both sides. It was the very first night that the tough new Rockefeller drug law took effect. For his role, he faced a mandatory 15-to-life sentence in New York state. He would later write, “I shouldn’t have been there.”

The tires screeched as Hoffman crashed not into a dead end, but into a new life, underground—in reality many lives, many names, many homes, a constant road due to the need to be a moving target. As a most wanted and famous fugitive, easily recognized across the globe from his photos on the evening news and morning papers, his only hope was plastic surgery. He went under the knife and emerged with a nose job.

His years underground are perhaps the least well-known in his life’s story. In Mexico, orange PEMEX stations pumped diesel fuel alongside dusty roads. The language was español; the rhythm, Latin; the poverty, legendary. But even the poor had a name, an identity.

And it was there that Abbie Hoffman met Johanna Lawrenson, his running mate. She kept him alive for 15 years. In his writings from that time, he called her “Angel, who led me into the valley of life.” They ran together in a land of brujos and ruined cities of stone, and through Europe and the sad, gray American underground. He was madly in love with her until the end.

At times during his seven-year flight, Hoffman would make press conferences. In 1979 he turned up at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library in Boston for a rendezvous with reporters at a building that President Jimmy Carter had dedicated 10 days earlier. After the death of Judge Julius Hoffman, the nasty little man who had presided over the Chicago conspiracy trial, Hoffman appeared in a Groucho Marx nose and glasses and danced on Julie’s grave for a photographer in fulfillment of a courtroom promise.

One place Hoffman could not show up was at his father John’s funeral in Worcester, where his brother John was harassed by FBI agents hunting for Abbie.

Last week, Abbie’s mother, Florence, 83, mourned her first-born son in the same Temple Emmanuel where he could not mourn his father.

In the late ‘70s, Johanna brought Hoffman to her Thousand Islands home on the border of upstate New York and Canada, where she had spent so much of her youth with her mother, author Helen Lawrenson, and her father, maritime union organizer Jack Lawrenson. The road became a rolling river. Cars were replaced by boats. The international border would provide a convenient escape if necessary. Abbie took up fishing, cooking, even relaxing, and settled under the alias of Barry Freed. For a while, it almost seemed as if there could be a happy ending in sight—blissful obscurity.

But then the Army Corps of Engineers announced their plan to bring winter navigation to the St. Lawrence River, destroying the quiet beauty of the Thousand Islands. Abbie—ahem—Barry decided he could not sit back and allow his new home to be despoiled. Together, Abbie and Johanna organized Save the River, a grass-roots citizens movement that would become a textbook case for community organizers everywhere. "They won. Today, the St. Lawerence flows freely still.

Disguised as mild-mannered citizen activist Barry Freed, Hoffman was appointed to a federal environmental commission by President Carter—and awarded a citation from New York Governor Hugh Carey for his environmental work. After the disguised Hoffman, in a suit and tie, gave calm and reasoned testimony to a U.S. Congressional committee, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan leaned into his microphone and reportedly said, "Mr. Freed, after listening to you, now I know where the '60s have gone."

In 1980 the road surfaced again as Barbara Walters was whisked through a labyrinth of islands by speedboat for the secret blockbuster interview that would mark the second coming of Abbie Hoffman.

Working with his lifetime lawyer, Gerald Lefcourt, who never once sent him a bill, Hoffman made arrangements to turn himself in and face the charges.

I met Abbie Hoffman after he came up for air, in April 1981, at the Rowe Conference Center in western Massachusetts. A week later he was sentenced to three years in prison in New York. We corresponded while he was in jail. Before he was released on parole one and a half years later, he did community service for the Veritas Community, raising money and publicity for the treatment of drug addiction. In 1982 he produced for them a public-service announcement—one of the first rock videos ever made. He was always one step ahead.

On Christmas Eve, 1982, the recently freed Hoffman called me into his Manhattan apartment. He asked me to join him in his next battle. He said he was on his way to Bucks County, Penn., to fight a pumping station that would divert the Delaware River 40 miles inland to the Limerick nuclear power plant. "But I can't leave today," I pleaded.

We left on Christmas night. I gave him a 10-day commitment and ended up staying for a total of eight months. We won some battles, including a May 17, 1983 referendum vote to dump the pump. But the war would eventually be lost in 1987, when the courts overturned the stated will of the people and construction began again on the Point Pleasant Pump.

In his later years, Hoffman traveled the campus lecture circuit. He was well known for his disappointment in the Me Generation. "Don't trust anyone under 30" was his new motto. He called today's campuses "hotbeds of rest." But the scolding came from a man who, more than anyone else of his generation, cared to work with the politically active young people of today. He respected youth. He invested in us.

He was immensely proud of his children. His youngest, Americo, child of Abbie's second wife and fellow organizer Anita, campaigned to overturn a curfew in his hometown, and was published in the LA Weekly at age 16. Today he's 18. "He's gonna inherit the family business," his dad proclaimed while they were arrested together at the pump site in 1987.

His first two children were from his first marriage, to his Brandeis classmate Sheila. His oldest, Andrew, 28, is an artist near Boston. His daughter, Ilya, 26, works with juvenile delinquents for the state of Massachusetts. "Not a yuppie in the litter," Hoffman would boast.

He loved the topical music of young artists like Billy Bragg. Michelle Shocked and the Washington Squares, who performed at the opening broadcast of Abbie's syndicated program, Radio Free USA at Art D'Lugoff's Village Gate. He was a guiding light and mentor to many
less-well-known youthful organizers, including Lisa Fithian, Monica Behan, David Maloney, Prakash Mishra, Abbie Fields and the current organizers of the National Student Action Network.

Also in his later years, his passion for environmental issues grew like vines in the tropical jungle. Hoffman was very pained by the destruction of the rain forests, and traveled there. After his success on the St. Lawrence, he helped organize a federation to save the Great Lakes. For the last six years of his life, the Delaware River war was a constant commitment. In his final days he told a neighbor that he was so sick over the oil spill in Alaska that he wanted to organize a boycott of Exxon.

With Amy Carter and other co-defendants. Hoffman was arrested at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in November 1986 on trespass charges stemming from a protest against CIA recruitment on campus. It became known as the “CIA on Trial” case. They put expert witnesses on the stand, from a former U.S. attorney general to a former CIA agent—and convinced a jury of six that the CIA had broken international law and committed higher crimes.

On April 15, 1987, while the jury deliberated, I walked down Main Street in Northampton, Mass., with Hoffman as he waited for the ax to fall. “Not guilty” was the verdict. Cheering crowds flooded out into the street. It was a great and happy day. Hoffman’s moving closing arguments to the jury were later reprinted in the Nation and Harper’s. He told the jurors that a verdict of innocent would say, “Young people, don’t give up hope. If you participate, the future is yours.”

Hoffman believed that ideology had become irrelevant to modern political action. Whether it was capitalism, communism, socialism or anarchism, he said, “isms are wasms.”

I keep looking over my shoulder, thinking that the door will suddenly swing open, or the phone will ring, and Abbie will be there like he always was, smiling, telling jokes, giving us the best times of our lives. I will remember him best as a jack-of-all-trades, teaching me how to fish on the St. Lawrence, to hustle pool in the Applejack Tavern in Point Pleasant, Penn., to work mercado negro (the black market) while we were in Nicaragua together, and how to practice free speech wherever I go. If the truth be known, he spent many a frustrating hour trying to teach me how to give speeches, and how to write.

“There is absolutely no greater high than challenging the power structure as a nobody, giving it your all, and winning,” he wrote while he was on the run. Of all his accomplishments, he would probably like to be remembered as the guy who levitated the Pentagon. But the real miracle of Abbie Hoffman was how he raised the collective spirit of our nation, and of the human race.

It’s as if the last acre of jungle rain forest has been cut down. Abbie Hoffman cultivated an endangered species of plant known as a Democracy. He spent every waking minute toiling in the garden, stamping out the weeds of greed and repression, sowing the seeds of rebellion and revolution, drawing water from the well of history.

Two nights and 200 miles from his sad death, in the post-midnight sadness of Northampton on April 15, the gray stone walls of the Hampshire County Courthouse began themselves to cry out in mourning. “Steal this courthouse,” shouted the graffiti facing Main Street. “Abbie did justice here,” yelled the words on the Gothic Street wall. The letters CIA had been slashed in red. And a lone spray-painted heart graced the entrance.

It had been exactly two years since the day that Abbie, Amy and the others were acquitted in that courthouse.

That very same morning, in Mercur, Nev., former Pentagon analyst Daniel Ellsberg, the man who compiled and leaked the Pentagon Papers a couple of decades ago, delivered an elegy for Abbie Hoffman. Ellsberg had been one of the witnesses who testified in Northampton about the CIA’s crimes and the necessity of citizens’ taking direct action to win back our democracy and save our dying world.

According to photographer Paul Shoul, Ellsberg fought back a flood of tears, as we all have been prone to do since Abbie went underground one last time. He then picked up a banner that said “For Abbie Hoffman.” He held it to his chest. And he walked into the desert sun, across the barricades, and onto the Nevada nuclear test site, where he was arrested with 1,047 others—and the memory of a fallen friend.

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