

Turning 50

Hey, if you live long enough, it will happen. Do you want to look back or start anew?

BY JILL KRAMER

Who's afraid of the big Five-Oh? For some baby boomers, it's just another chance to party. Others regard this birthday with ceremonial solemnity. Either way, when we turn 50, we've gotta face the rock 'n' roll: We're not kids anymore. Our families change shape along with our bodies. Our health becomes a concern and planning for the future takes on a particular immediacy. So, many of us choose to mark our 50th birthday in some special way. The *Sun* recently interviewed a number of baby boomers to see how they were celebrating—and to find out what turning 50 means to each of them.

Marlena Weinstein celebrated in a big way. She rented a hall and put on a show. Weinstein has a theatrical presence, even sitting at her kitchen table. Flamboyantly Jewish, she sprinkles her conversation with Yiddish and has a delivery like a borscht-belt comic. Her nails are painted Day-Glo pink and her hair is a thick mane of flaming red curls. Astonishingly, she works as a tax consultant. Well, a tax consultant to people in the entertainment industry.

Weinstein turned 50 in June, and it seemed that many of her show-biz clients were about the same age. She'd been wanting to produce a show anyway, she says, "and what a great concept for everyone just to relive their last fifty years. We were so outrageous, even if we don't do one more thing, we have really lived. We made it through the sixties and seventies. Think about what we used to do to ourselves. We fucked every other person in sight, we smoked everything in sight—and we're still alive! It was a tribute to all of us who survived."

She hired one of her clients, Rita Abrams—who penned the 1970 hit "Mill Valley," and cowrote the local revue *For Whom the Bridge Tolls*—to write lyrics to familiar tunes. She had singers, dancers and comics portray her life in a series of songs and skits. Highlights included "(Keep Away from that) Runaround Jew," and "These are a Few of the Diets I've Tried." There was Bob-and-Ray-style running commentary by a couple of funny guys. And she packed Joe LoCoco's with her friends and family to enjoy dinner and the show.

She dubbed the celebration a "boom-mitzvah." She printed programs, listing all the guests who were born between 1946 and 1949 and, in a graduation-like ceremony, announced their names as each of them walked to the stage and lit a candle. Because, beneath all the wisecracking, Weinstein takes turning 50 quite seriously. For one thing, she associates it with the death of parents.

"Everyone's parents are dying," she says. "All I do now is consult with people on how to deal with sick parents or how to deal with a living trust. And every day I get another call and I send [convalescence or sympathy] cards. In the last two weeks, nine people called me that lost a parent. So you become your own parent." With no mom or dad around to share your accomplishments, she says, you have to seek your own approval. It's one definition of growing up.

Both of Weinstein's parents died in the last five years.



When Marlena Weinstein turned 50, she rented a hall and put on a show. All her similar-aged clients showed up to celebrate and relive the outrageous days of yore at her "boom-mitzvah."

Her father went first, then her mother stayed with her in the last year of her life. Weinstein now keeps a stuffed-cloth dummy of her mother—complete with housedress, hair rollers and rouged cheeks—seated at the head of her dining room table. The effect is both funny and unsettling.

Of turning 50, Weinstein says, "It's the end and it's the beginning. It's the beginning of your whole body being different. If you're menopausal and you start with that kind of attitude, it feels great to be 51. Next year I start all over again, with one candle on the cake. At 51, my friends will go, 'Happy First Birthday.'"



WEINSTEIN WAS UNAWARE of it, but her intuitive idea of starting over at 51 is a concept in Jewish mysticism. I learned this from birthday boomer interviewee Heather MacTavish. According to the Jewish cabala, MacTavish explains, "things happen in seven-year cycles. And the

seventh seventh year is very important. It leads into what's called the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year. It's clearing the way. I'm not Jewish, but in the Jewish tradition, you pay off your debts, you settle your life as well as you can so that you face the next seven years—or the next fifty years—with as clean a slate as you can."

MacTavish came upon this bit of lore in her readings on mysticism. She began delving into spiritual matters and alternative healing methods two years ago, after being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Her symptoms had progressed over the years to the point where she was falling down, dropping things and suffering from debilitating pain in her right side. "I expected that my life was pretty well over because it's a degenerative disease," she says.

The disease eventually forced a complete upheaval of her life—a kind of death and rebirth, as she sees it. Because she could no longer use or hold a pen, MacTavish had to give up her bookkeeping business—her all-consuming focus for years. Unable to walk to her third-floor San Francisco apartment, she moved to a condo with an elevator in Marin. Desperate to ameliorate her symptoms, she began experimenting with alternative healing. And that exploration introduced her to a world of new thinking as well as new friends.

Getting well has become a full-time job. Her schedule is packed with visits to body therapists—shiatsu, Feldenkrais, holotropic breath work. She's taken up the harp, which, she's told, gives off healing vibrations. She's in a drumming class. "Last year, I couldn't drum," she says. "Now I can do it because I'm stronger." She works out every day in her home gym. "I've embarrassed men with arm wrestling," she says gleefully.

A bronze figure on a pedestal stands at one end of her living room. It's a kachina, made by Pueblo Indians and believed to have healing properties. When she had pain in her shoulder, MacTavish would stand under the figure's outstretched hand. "Like a laying on of the hands," she tells me. "Anyway, my shoulder's fine now." As we talk, the wind whips through her home with an eerie, moaning sound. I find myself glancing uneasily at the kachina.

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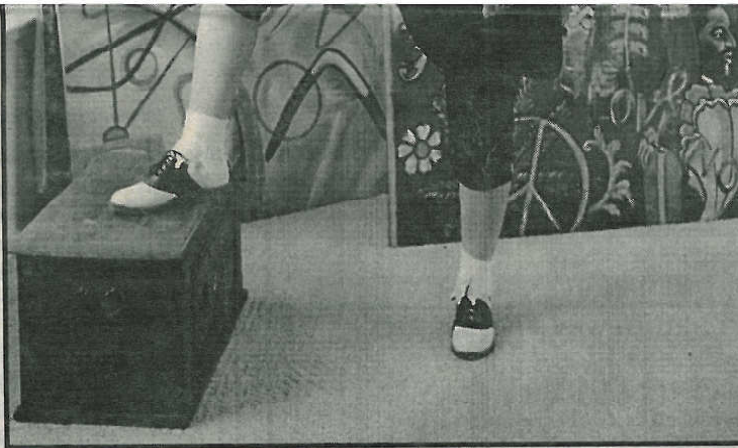
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