



# *Introduction*

*"To write about a city, you have to love it or hate it or both." -Raymond Chandler*

Sometimes I hate Los Angeles. When I'm stuck on the 405 Freeway and it seems like all of us are prisoners in our cars, lumbering like a chain gang that stretches all the way to San Diego, or when I pull into the mall at Century City, and autos are cruising up and down the lanes in the parking lot ready to challenge each other for a space, a refrain circles through my mind, There are too many people in Southern California, too many people, and they're all driving somewhere.

Yet, I love Los Angeles. And when I'm driving on the freeway and all the cars are streaming purposefully like blood cells coursing through a vein, and I sense the strength and space of this powerful city, with its wide stance and slender grace, and I see well-dressed people in expensive vehicles and huge overpasses, interchanges and other public works, and I'm listening to the radio, hearing music and commentary, and I'm connected - with my butt on the seat and my tires on the road, and the asphalt poured out of tax dollars, and the movies and songs and mergers, campaigns and computers created in this dream factory of a city. I smile, sitting here in what feels like the center of the universe.

Los Angeles is also a quiet Culver City neighborhood - a cup of coffee and a view through the window of a simple California bungalow that reveals an early LA-area middle-class suburb, with nothing more grandiose than front yards and flower beds. Yet the sunlight strikes some white curtains in the house across the street, and it shines, not just from the surface, but with a brightness that opens eyes, expands vision and connects the mind and heart as it utters the ineffable quality of place that artists feel like warmth on their skin. The house next door, with peeling frame siding and red brick chimney and exotic

palm fronds shooting up like green fireworks, catches the L.A. sunlight and travels to the quiet corners of the world where simple lives are filled with substance.

The light in L A is magical It transforms the ordinary into what it really is: the fantastic and phenomenal fact of existence — one breath, one blink at a time.

History can be boring. Yet, history holds all the answers, all the questions, all the dreams, nightmares, dances and death marches.

Bruce Chatwin, in his book, *Songlines*, traces magical maps of Australia's history through the thoughts and folklore of aborigines. Chatwin contends that our natural state is that of nomads — hunters and gatherers, that standing still and dividing up the ground was a spiritual death. We were made to move, to have our days filled with motion and our steps lead to discovery.

Here in Los Angeles, history is a tale of searching for and experiencing the new, of people questing after material dreams or sublime transcendence. They may not find their paradise, but they inevitably enlarge their lives. L. A, has been criticized for having a rootless population but Angelenos aren't aimless. They are seeking the spirit of life.

And the spirit of Los Angeles is presented in a polyethnic vision of humanity that intoxicates my imagination. I stroll through the garment district in downtown and see hawkers outside stalls and shops beckoning to passers by. I drive down Olympic Boulevard and mile after mile I am surrounded by signs, painted on billboards or flashing in neon, and all are in Korean, or in Monterey Park where the ads are in Chinese. I walk down Broadway in downtown L.A, and I could be in Guadalajara. It's a Latino center, with music and food aromas filling the air, and crowds of shoppers eyeing the clothing and merchandise billowing on hangers or stacked on the sidewalk in front of hundreds of small stores.

The angular, modern skyline of hotels and high finance interspersed with the multicultural melange in downtown, the green estates in Encino and the magical ridge-top journey along Mulholland Drive, the upscale retail establishments on Wilshire Boulevard, the quiet neighborhoods of small, wood-frame

houses, the mansions in the hills, the stately old homes in downtrodden neighborhoods, the tattooed masses on Hollywood Boulevard, the Ethiopian village on Fairfax and Orthodox Jews taking a Sabbath stroll down Highland — L.A. images strike my eyes and transport me on wings of romance. I am a nomad, my mind is everywhere and yet I am where I stand. People are not rooted in L.A., yet they belong. It is a familiar camp. It is an oasis; it is an enigma.

A desert city beside the world's largest ocean, L.A. has been continually besieged by natural disasters and plagued by the ills of humanity, yet it continues to thrive and is a magnet for people of all races, nationalities and economic strata.

Often ridiculed, demeaned and disparaged, Los Angeles nevertheless reigns as a regal empire of plenty and is revered worldwide as an Eden of ideas and trends. There is nowhere else like it on earth. Criticized for valuing the superficial, it is a spiritual haven for many faiths. Despite the political and religious conservatism of L.A.'s mostly homogeneous population up until the 1960s, the area has always fostered a climate conducive to free thought and experimentation. Cults and eccentrics, psychics and profound philosophical thinkers have all been drawn to modern Los Angeles.

Los Angeles is the city of the new soul, and like the soul, it defies physical description, Cities more rooted in the past, with long and distinguished cultural histories, are confined by the image of their locality -the famous buildings, monuments and avenues.

While Los Angeles' geography, topography and clime of beaches, view-top hills and golden sunshine have contributed to its allure, the city's essence is a pure energy that inhabits its residents. It's a magical symbiosis: L.A. draws its power from its population and the city's vital force transforms individuals.

It has been said that people come to Los Angeles to reinvent themselves, The secret of the city's boundless creativity and the source of its resilient vitality is that people are constantly reinventing Los Angeles. L.A. is forever new The city basks in sunlight and shines like a star, wished upon by the world's hopeful and followed by those seeking to navigate a course toward the future.

Rex M. Oppenheimer

Los Angeles – October 2001