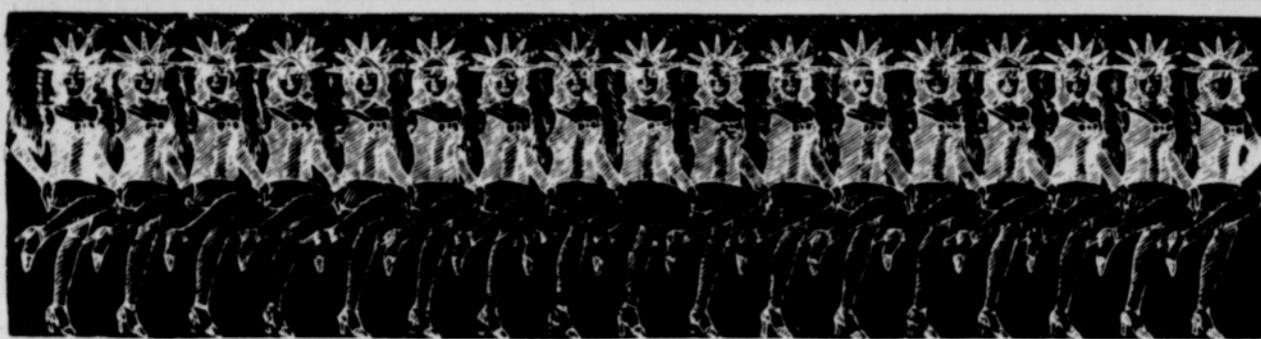


AMERICAN



GRAFFITTI

THE MEMPHIS NEWS AGAIN

by Michael G. Horowitz

It's April in Memphis and already it's clammy. The Canada Dries have petered out somewhere north of Dav- enport, and that bitch goddess of America's East, the Gulf of Mexico, continues to spew its monsoon tinsel into the dharma of Dixie. OM — Peace, Peace, Peace. Vroom — Grease, Grease, Grease.

I'm on one of the remaining routes of the Memphis Area Transit Authority. It seems one steamy spring day only half of Memphis' buses came calling. A lot of white people in cars. A lot of black people on foot. The Authority's explanation: "This change has improved our productivity throughout the system." The People's complaint: "They my bu off altogether. O-F-F. I'm old, I've got asthma and I shouldn't have to put up with walking like this at my age."

But this Oregonian is bunking down at Memphis State University and he gets to ride one of the survivors, the Poplar Limited. "Oregon? That by California?" asks the driver. "Uh hum. North." North! . . . and I'm thinking of lilacs in my backyard with cool drops of rain dripping off the petals. Home-sick for the purple haze.

But the driver's just being courteous. He really wants to talk to the lanky dude with the oil-stained hands who's just finished swing shift at the Tire Center. "You wouldn't think it would take that much time," the kid is telling him, "but those pins go in slow." "Took so long?" "Took an hour!" I've ridden buses East and West. In the West, the drivers talk about the weather. In the East, they talk about crime. In Memphis, they talk work.

W-O-R-K. Gas is selling for only a buck and I figure it's a reward for the labor this city has always done. The cotton off the barges, the textiles into trucks, the music on to vinyl, the records into trucks. And keep them rolling, those barges, those trucks. Rolling on the river.

And what a river! Slow, flat, and wide. W-I-D-E. You don't joke about the Mississippi. For decades, through Yankees and plagues, that lazy stream has been the ticket, the connection, to the American Dream.

Where am I? A local Protestant stop between two Catholic giants. Look on a pocket map of the U. S. and you'll find Memphis on the river — an empty dot between those express dioceses of New Orleans and Saint Louis. But in Memphis, no Passion. Just power and soul.

POWER! I've seen strong people here, people who look like they could lift a house. This is where Paul Bunyan settled after America discovered dieting. Daytime in this city, "Let's Get Physical" has nothing to do with sex — that's for junior executives in Atlanta with expense accounts. When the sun's up here, they've got warehouses to strip.

See, it's not fully Southern, this Sweat Tank in the valley. Somebody told me that Memphis had the lowest per capita book purchases in the country. Well, they have Reading Societies in Charleston. But Memphis is the Southern frontier, the South's West . . . where slavery, Calvinism, and anarchy wrestled with each other. And checked each other, so that Memphis is a muffled dream of wild freedom, mixed with anxiety about sin and uneasiness about race.



Arnold Pander

Samoan marriage. Maybe he's right. For an entire generation, puberty without rockabilly might not have been possible.

And soul . . . at the midnight hour. The reign of Stax Volt Records in the salient sixties: Booker T. and the Memphis group, Sam n' Dave, Carlo and Rufus Thomas, and that Czar of a star, Otis Redding. When you add it up, the rockabilly of the fifties and the soul of the sixties, you get a Memphis menu that crucially altered Anglo-American pop taste. In one of his reviews of pop music (White Boy Singin' the Blues), Michael Cane says that, at times, it's as if there's been a big magnifying glass over Memphis, focusing the musical mettle of the South. . . .

POWER! "Well-a c'mon-a baby, whole lotta shakin' goin' on." They're into New Wave, now, those young sons of Memphis' white working class, who've always been allowed to kick out the jams through music. Been allowed, I should say, until they've either made it or turned twenty-five . . . in which case it's back to family and factory.

Which is where Elvis comes in. Born in Mississippi, but bred in Memphis. Church every Sunday. But when the nights get sultry and the banker's daughter at the dance, you sing Ray Charles. "Be good to me, ohhh yeah-hhh." Black people grin when they visit Elvis' shrine because they know where he learned it. But white people are reverent. For here's a boy from Memphis who sold in New York. . . a boy from Memphis who California women chased all around Hollywood. . . a boy from Memphis who, despite his success, remained a Christian. He made the North and kept the South and died trying. On his tombstone, his father called him a revolutionary.

Even now, when the crowd gets restless on Overton Square, the New Wave groups will lay down some Gene Vincent. "Cherry" Gene Vincent. "My baby now my baby now my baby now." And the tourist from Germany takes notes as if he were covering a

There's purple in Memphis too, but you have to look for it. Like the transcending of civil segregation. The dormitories at Memphis State are half black, half white. Race relations in the dorms seem guarded, but how many dormitories around the world can claim such complete integration? White business people in Memphis appear determined not to have a racist nose thrown around their necks. The city's racist reputation always gave the North a ready excuse not to invest capital in Memphis. So now it's Thoroughly Modern Memphis, with a Hilton, a beltway, and a monument to Martin Luther King, Jr.

In many respects, in fact, the news from Memphis is good. Despite the depression, there's an upbeat spirit among young Memphis blacks. There's been some organizing — not only the kind of unionism that Martin Luther King supported but political organizing as well. The smart money is saying that Memphis will have a black mayor by winter. The agenda will be obvious: economic opportunities to match political gains.

Postwar progress against racism here was partly due to Northern pressure (the liberals, the Feds, the media) but largely due to the courage of civil rights pioneers in the early sixties. The casualties were mostly local and black but it's a mistake to think that there weren't some white people in Memphis who stood up for justice. The day I arrive, singer Margaret Valiant dies. "At one time," writes the Commercial Appeal, "she was the only white person living in a black housing project here. She moved into LeMoyn Gardens because previous landlords disapproved of her race relations efforts. . . . During the New Deal, she met and admired Mrs. Roosevelt, whose silver-framed portrait she kept in her apartment. It is inscribed: "To Margaret with best wishes."

On the way into town, a young Memphian offers me a ride to my destination, which turns out to be a good deal out of his way. When I suggest I contribute some gas money, he refuses. "That's all right," he says. "I like doing favors for people."

Michael Horowitz is a Portland writer. He has a doctorate in urban affairs. His article is reprinted courtesy of RFD Publications, Inc. A runoff for mayor of Memphis between a white candidate and a black candidate is scheduled for November 30.

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