

MY HEROES HAVE NEVER BEEN COWBOYS



KINT B.

by Chuck Wilder

I grew up with mostly white-ethnic steelworkers and gangsters in Youngstown, Ohio, where the rivers caught fire and the snow turned gray overnight. The satanic mills are idle now, good news for the Mahoning and the Cuyahoga Rivers but a lingering death for the steelworkers. As a kid I was what they euphemistically called a bad egg. So my family, members of the minority WASP small-business clique, often sent me to my room at night. There I would lie in the dark fiddling with the dial on my Silvertone radio, tracing the contours of the universe like the blind man in the cave. Alan Freed was in Cleveland then calling himself Moondog. At exactly midnight, this unspeakably funky, erotic baritone sax would launch into his theme, "Blues for the Red Boy" by the Tod Rhodes band (I'll pay \$50 for a clean copy on the old King label).

The later it got the more stations you could pick up: Detroit, Chicago, New York, and from Boston, the legendary Symphony Sid. That's when I started listening to Bird and Art Tatum and Hampton Hawes and all those other shadowy, angelic figures who were going to rearrange my life. I was only thirteen or fourteen, but through some genetic fluke I could hear it right away.

I went down to the record store and asked: "Do you have anything by Charlie Parker?" and they brought me this ten-inch LP with his picture on the cover. I took it in my pink little hands and stared at it and thought, "This can't be him. This guy's a nigger." I mean, I really did think "nigger," because that's how it was in that grimy little corner of industrial civilization gone berserk. They were okay in their place — far away from our wives and daughters, company board rooms, labor unions, crime syndicates, etc. They even excelled at certain primitive, glandular stuff, like what you heard on some of the Nashville stations back then or what they had in mind for our wives and daughters. But they weren't supposed to be able to cope very well with the intellectual and moral demands of high civilization, which is why they needed watching rather carefully. They weren't supposed to be able to forge from the crucible of their collective misery our most aesthetically advanced and technically challenging indigenous art form.

Something was awry. My parents, neighbors, teachers, etc., were regular Christian folks. They wouldn't lie on purpose. But music has no purpose other than to be heard, and therefore can't lie at all.

Anyhow, I wanted to learn it real bad and the only way to do that was to go where it was being played. So it wasn't long before I was sneaking out of my room down to the local black-and-tan clubs and roadhouses and after-hours joints. Then on to Cleveland (when I was fifteen my dad took me to hear Sonny Stitt at a place called the Hi Hat) and later Chicago and San Francisco where history was being made every night at the Beehive and Jimbo's Bop City and other teeming, exotic, subterranean conservatories of that era. At certain times they'd let me sit in, and that's how I started learning to play.

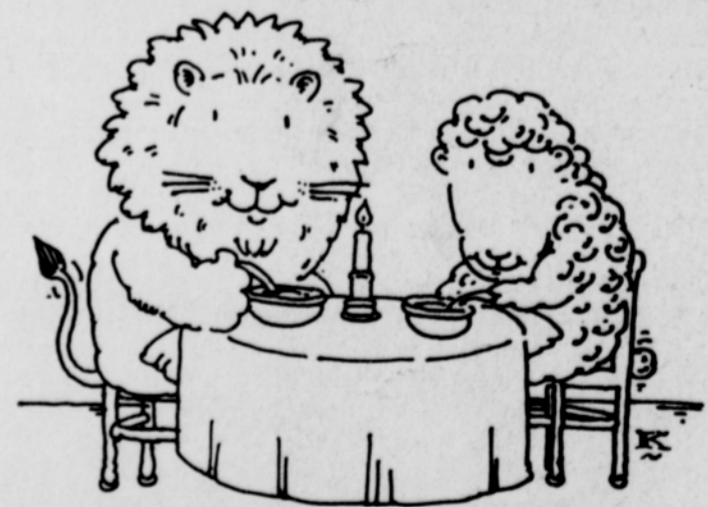
But I learned something else, too. I learned real fast and hard and close up what our lies had done and were doing to a whole beautiful race of men, women and children. Those buttons the Alinsky organizers used to pass around the ghetto summed it up pretty well: "Is there a life after birth?" I got to thinking stuff like "how many Charlie Parkers and Billie Holidays have we effectively maimed, crippled, aborted, destroyed, before they ever got a chance to fly?" And what of all the rest, the one's who couldn't run faster or fly higher than whitey? Don't forget what they had given me. So I didn't have to wait for Viet Nam to experience the kind of radical moral damage (not to be confused with anything so trifling or expungible as guilt) that would push me to the margins of society for the rest of my life.

I gave up music for a long time and started reading and listening to Dr. King and getting involved in Civil Rights activities in the Bay Area. I hung out with Beat poets, anarchists, Trots, neoWobblies, Muslims, SDSers, and even some of those real chilly, straight-looking Party guys who would march right into a neighborhood and say, "Are you ready for the citywide rent strike, folks?" I started making the connections between race and poverty, power and privilege, and so on, taking it out into the streets.

Heady stuff, and for awhile it worked. And partly because it worked, soon enough along comes John Kennedy and LBJ with their War On Poverty hype, saying, "Hey kid, don't get too weird because we'll send you to graduate school and train you and pay you to fight in a way that'll make mom and dad and your President proud, and you'll have a real income so you can play music on the weekends." (Everyone likes to fit in somewhere, get a little status and legitimacy. I was such a pushover that I'm still doing it twenty years later with



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