

Ronnie at the helm busting his cruel little britches to rid the land of all us damaged, marginal types). America had found a place for us after all, just like Marcuse said it would in "One Dimensional Man." We would be sequestered in universities and bureaucracies with responsible-sounding names like "Human Resources Development Council, Inc." We could dissect the beast, contrive piecemeal solutions, and do society's dirty work. They even invented an Alice In Wonderland phrase to describe it: "Working within the System" — just to remind us that there was only one and who was in control.

I wonder how much longer I can do it. It's getting awfully cold out there again and we're losing so much ground. Mostly I just want to climb into my bubble and play. Nothing can touch you there, and sometimes you can bring folks a little ways home, back to music as a symbolic form, an evolving of the human spirit, and not just a mindless vortex of sensations. Sometimes I even imagine that if I play good enough, if I squeeze it out of the deepest chambers of my soul like the heart pumps blood, maybe it'll help to bring a few people closer together for a moment or two.

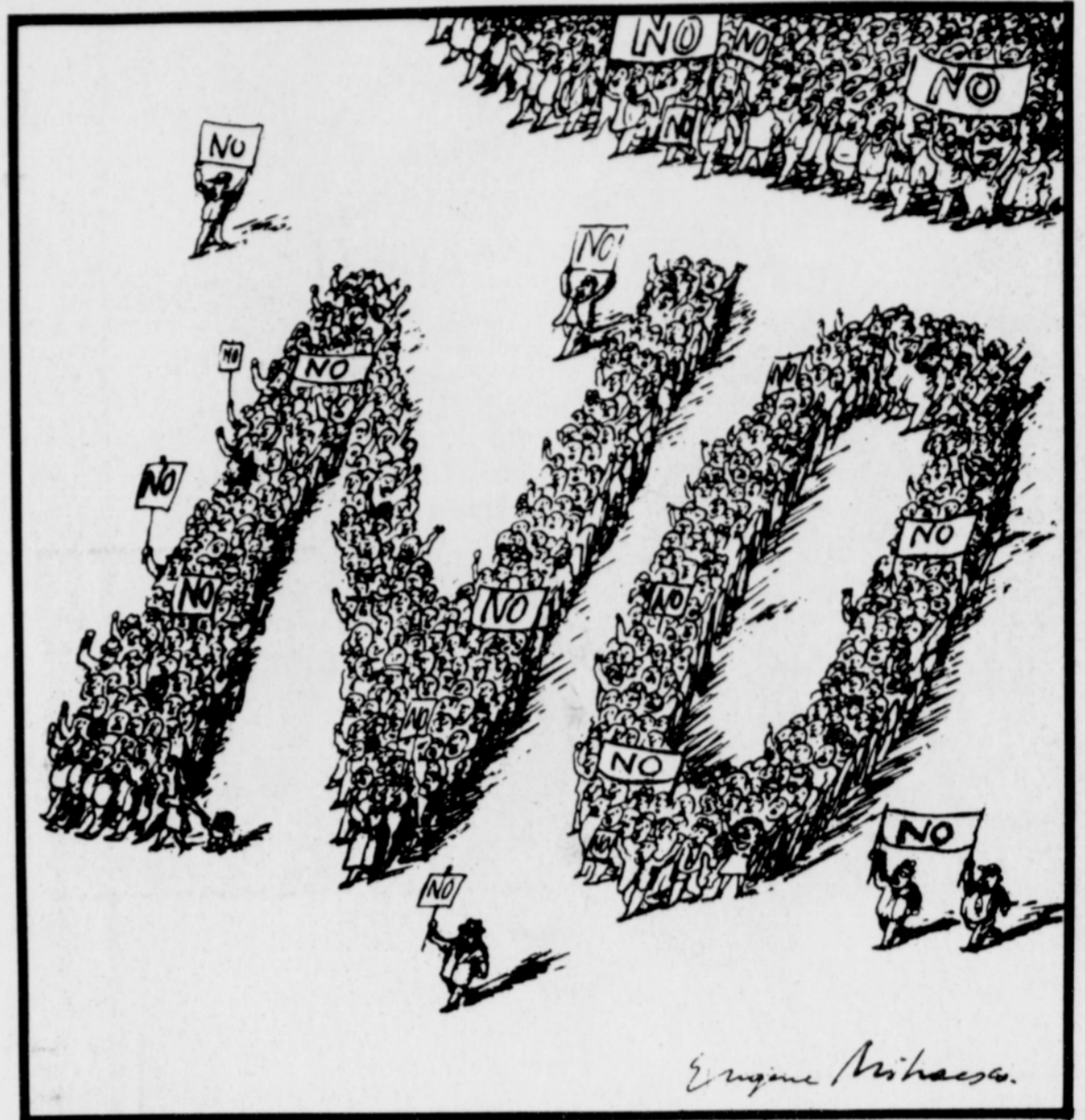
That's what it's all about anyway, what Dr. King really tried to teach us. Which poet said it best (Rexroth, Auden, Rene Char)? "We must love one another or die." And at least for that brief, turbulent historical moment lots of us seemed to believe it — to believe that it was possible for each of us to identify with the suffering and thwarted hopes and aspirations of other human beings wherever they were and whether or not we ever got to know their names or faces. And from that would come solidarity and commitment, sister and brotherhood, vision and steady work — the things Dr. King's birthday will forever stand for and that America has already forgotten.

In fact, some people still don't understand why we should have a national holiday for Dr. King. There are too many other deserving candidates, they say (chiefly white males). But I remember in the early '60s when I first started organizing in places like the Mission District and Hunter's Point where you had families of seven living in two-room high-rise apartments and tenements with rats and roaches, rotten pipes and plaster, enforced dependency, degradation, despair. . . . And two out of three times there would be a picture on the wall — usually one of those cheap mass-produced red, white and blue tapestries — a picture of Martin Luther King. And I'm here to tell you that's it. That's all the hope there was in that home and millions like it across America.

Today we focus our national shame myopically on those who have no homes at all. We invent a new sociological category ("the homeless"), a new codeword for wholesale, systematically induced and thoroughly preventable human misery and despair. The Administration dawdles and broods over the onerous prospect of spending a couple hundred million dollars on the problem (not really "the problem" at all, only its most conspicuous casualties), after it has just finished decimating conventional public housing and other critically needed mainstream social programs in this country, after it has annually approved five times as much money for military bands as it has to house the homeless. And we let them get away with it! It's supposed to be our land, too — that's another thing Dr. King tried to teach us — but it isn't anymore.

I think maybe we should try and take it back. I think we should quit screwing around, get off this "networking" kick (another codeword for some sort of quasipolitical masturbation), and get down to some serious, sustained organizing, coalition-building, social and political action. If this strikes some of you as rather old fashioned and utopian, you're right: old fashioned because it's the only means short of violence by which a powerless people has ever managed to shape history rather than let it grind them into human fodder; utopian because you've got to have a pretty big, powerful dream just to lever the real thing forward a few inches at a time. And, one way or another, you've got to start at home.

Look around the North Coast at all these little enclaves and coteries of artists, craftspeople, intellectuals, antinuclear groups, women's and human rights activists, hip entrepreneurs and profes-



EUGENE MIHAESCO

sionals, KMUNies, Times Eagle muckrakers, and so on. But nothing much ever seems to happen — just more coffee and conversation, more frazzled indignation, more "networking." (Some groups will take issue, saying, "Well, you know, our impact is subtle, diffuse, prefigurative. You just can't measure it that way." Right. I'll be damned if I can get it to register at all — which, I hasten to add, is not to dismiss either its intrinsic value or latent potential. Without these groups, we wouldn't even have that). Why, for instance, are we content to hand total initiative for community and economic development over to the Chamber of Commerce, the Port Authority, the military, the absentee corporations? Why do we only react at best? Why not get our own dreams and our own act together? If we don't, you can bet your quiche who's going to lose out, and then you may have to go someplace else to get away from the beast and talk about what needs to be done without bothering to do it.

Of course, we're not unique. It's the same all over America these days. Why try to keep it secret? We're through trying. We've washed our hands of it. We just want to be left alone with our toys, our career paths, our self-fulfilling little projects and diversions, our omniverous pursuit of meaningful relationships and rosy self-images. And that would be just fine (Who am I to kock it?), except for two things.

First, we have no right to allow other people, very large numbers of people indeed, to suffer as a result of the same institutional arrangements that make it possible for us to carry on this way. Obviously, I am convinced not only that we have no such right, but also a positive obligation to change those arrangements. But I can't prove it to you. Either you understand it or you don't.

Second, there is growing (many say conclusive) evidence that the planet itself cannot endure arrangements of this kind much longer. It needs us to come back to each other, just like the poet said. It needs us now. To these ears, it cries to us almost the way Billie Holiday did when she sang "Strange Fruit":

"Southern trees/Bear Strange Fruit/Blood on the leaves/And blood at the root./Black bodies swinging/In the Southern breeze,/ Strange Fruit/Hanging from the poplar trees."

Once upon a time, Martin Luther King was my hero because I thought he stood for the kind of person we should all try to become in order to make a better world. It's no fairy tale any longer, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe he stood for what we must become to keep the one we've got.

Chuck Wilder is a jazz musician and community organizer living in Astoria. He is director of Clatsop Community Action, a local antipoverty group, and plays piano in Astoria and Cannon Beach. He has a doctorate in social welfare from the University of California, Berkeley, and is a member of the newly formed North Coast Jazz Quartet. He wrote this article on Martin Luther King's birthday and dedicates it to his daughters Adelaide, Cara and Emily Wilder.

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