

HIGHWAY 99 REVISITED

In search of the real people's drinking hole BY WILLIAM KENNEDY

"I was burned out on people, their talk and their bullshit"
— Henry Rollins

A friend of mine recently moved back to Brooklyn. I wrote to her: "Oh M., you moved away just when things here were getting so...exactly the same." Tonkin is my partner in crime, and we were in a rut. We'd been beating a path on the sidewalk to the same coffee, the same food, drink and cocktails for too long. When you are beginning to relate to the pathos of a serial killer, it's time for a change. So I told Tonkin to clear her schedule on a Saturday night, and we hit the road.

Highway 99. Jack Kerouac wrote of you in *Dharma Bums*. He doesn't mention Eugene, but he does mention pancakes in Junction City. He hitched his way through this area, in the days when you were *the* road, king road, winding lazily through the valley and cutting directly through Eugene. Around you sprung up motels, many of which still exist — glorious relics of a mid-century era when traveling by car was something to be celebrated. As well as mills and scrap-yards, temples of American industrial power and the Oregon timber juggernaut — many now abandoned, and some still in use. When I-5 came along, you were largely abandoned save for local commuter traffic, and much of the commerce that traffic once brought shifted east.

As Tonkin and I drove past the four-corners area of Eugene and Highway 99 stretched out before us into the night, I began to wonder what we hoped to find out here. What is it that keeps us mired in our routines — our little neighborhoods — prattling on to the same like-minded people about the same like-minded things over the same microbrews? Was it naïve, idealistic, (condescending?) to think that by barhopping along this old stretch of road we'd find the real America, the real Oregon, the *real* Eugene? What the hell does that mean anyway? Before leaving Tonkin's house we did a shot of tequila and she said to me, "I'm scared." As the tequila warmed my gut, I knew how she felt.

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Our first stop was the Spare Room Pub next to Strike City bowling alley. Immediately it was clear this was not the place we were looking for, if for no other reason than that it really is a nice place. And by nice I mean clean, and well-lit — the same beer in the same taps you can get anywhere in town. Some guy was barking a Metallica song on karaoke. On the table was propaganda about eating organic meat and being a "locavore." Tonkin and I observed some posse of sexually frustrated college kids, I downed a beer that quenched my thirst but not my nihilism, and just when some



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

Photographer's note: I did not go out with William Kennedy on his Tour de Ninety Nine. The gentleman pictured above is one of the fine patrons I encountered at Embers on my own tour. His name is Harry and his moustache is cool as shit. And so is the "Supper Club."

dental hygienist began to bellow the Dixie Chick's "Not Ready to Make Nice" on karaoke — we knew it was time to move on. This couldn't be the *real* Eugene.

Back out on the road, we drove further north — past closed food carts, a pet-grooming place called "Doggy-style" and a group of girls waiting at a bus stop, much too young to be out this late. Our next stop was the Brew-N-Cue just south of Beltline Highway— also a very well-lit place, but more in a prison cafeteria sort of way. If Tonkin and I were discovering the real Eugene, it sure likes karaoke — because here again was some transmission repairman shouting along with Black Sabbath. We ordered more beers at the bar, and began making up our own dialogue to the Charlie Sheen coverage muted on the TV.

We were closer here to finding what we were looking for. These people seemed real, working-class, salt of the earth. The old woman emceeding the karaoke looked like she'd been around the block a few times. Hank, in full motorcycle leathers and Budweiser in hand, boozily told us he'd lost his girlfriend. We suggested perhaps she was just in the ladies room. Yet still I was unsatisfied. Some squirrely dude began screeching on karaoke "I feel good! Motherfuckin' Good!" ala James Brown, and Tonkin said to me, "as your partner in crime, I'm advising that we move on."

Our last stop was Embers. The interior of Embers is like a wood paneled man cave. Tonkin and I made our way through the crowded room to the bar. On stage was a group of pot-bellied middle-aged men working their way through

Johnny Rivers' "Secret Agent Man." Old-timers danced, dressed to the nines — like the days when you dressed up to go out dancing — because it was important. As we dug into more beer and an order of fries at our barstools, someone at the other end of the crowded bar exclaimed, "I've been killing brain-cells here since '79." The barfly next to him slurred, "'79? Try '73!"

I thought to myself, "I think I've found what I'm looking for."

But just then Tonkin turned to me and said: "As your partner in crime, I think this is all bullshit. I mean, who's to say one lifestyle or set of values is more *real* than any other? We all want the same things. A place to drink, dance, blow off steam, where we're comfortable and accepted."

Of course I knew she was right. And I felt a little sorry. How could I try using these people to quell my own malaise? Be an interloper in their culture, their circles, as if they know something I don't — just because their neighborhood is different than mine? Mr. Brain-Cell-Killer-since-'79 hugged the cute young bartender in a Montgomery Gentry t-shirt. She said, "Drive safe, and happy birthday."

We downed our beers and pushed back from the bar. It was time to go. Driving back across the overpass where 99 becomes 7th Street, past the Whit and the Sam Bond's crowd, past the Barnuda Triangle and Soriah, I thought of these sidewalks I'd walked a thousand times. And I looked at those kids gathered smoking outside their drinking holes, like a stranger all over again. ■

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