

What Was Verifiably Great About America... Life Circumstances Under the Present Neoliberal Order

Fragments of a Memoir Set to a Musical Soundtrack

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Having been born in a coal and steel company town but destiny delivered, as an adult, to reside, during extended intervals, in the East and West Coast cities of Los Angeles and New York City, and, at present, the continent of Europe, I have come to conclude, people born into situations providing economic advantage, both liberals and conservatives alike, experience difficulty, more often than not, envisaging the lives of those born into a labouring class existence. Worse, a willful obtuseness, in combination with a supercilious posture is, all too often, evinced, by reflex, towards those scorned as “hillbillies,” “trailer trash,” and “genetic retreads.”

Among groups possessing economic advantage, a lack of curiosity prevails as to the nature of the lives of individuals who have spent their lifetime subjected to the life-defying tyrannies of full-spectrum, company town capitalism. Life circumstances, under the present, neoliberal order, that are, in all but rare cases, intractable; wherein, the meagre and fraught with economic instability livelihoods earned as a mine, mill, factory worker, and, in the service industry economy in the US wage and debt slave archipelago of fast food outlets, Big Box retailers and Dollar Discount stores, and as a domestic worker, presents, for the vast majority of workers, the degrading, anxiety-inducing option of submitting to low pay, no benefits, long hours of tedious, vastly under-compensated labor or facing homelessness and hunger.

I was born in the foothills of Appalachia. I know, bones to brain, the painful plight of the labouring class. I will go so far as to say, the transforming, I would even suggest, redemptive element, in my life was a house stocked with books and an indomitable yearning to seek out the music indigenous to the region.

My family, later, moved to the then small, Piedmont region city of Atlanta, Georgia. Shortly thereafter, in the living room of a musician, science fiction writer, and general Beat polymath my father had befriended, I swooned — was, I suspect, transformed- when a guest in the home (where a young Bob Dylan used to crash when in Atlanta — which was, at the time, a rundown, mafia-owned apartment house but where, decades earlier, Margaret Mitchell had penned *Gone With The Wind* — North Georgia-born folksinger and activist Hedy West played her most famous song, “500 Miles Away from Home” also known as “Railroaders’ Lament.”

During childhood, a period of life in which one is transmigrating through a wilderness of archetypes, for me, the experience of being in West’s presence felt as if I had been transported to glens and gardens inhabited by a veritable muse.

In the year, 1970, in the summer I turned 14, in Piedmont Park, in Atlanta, Georgia, the Allman Brothers, among other bands, would perform free, impromptu concerts for a tie-dye-clad, reefer-reeking, bell-bottoms-caressing-the-Georgia-red-dirt gatherings of “freaks” — which was the preferred tribalist term, as opposed to the media-created, socially pejorative – hippies ... which, when bandied among counterculture insiders, was generally applied ironically.

Although the park was located only a few miles from my family’s home, undertaking the trip presented a degree of peril. To make one’s way to the park included traversing a tough, in-town, White working class neighborhood (now a gentrified into soul-sucking blandness, yuppie enclave) where, from the perspective of its denizens, their world, and all they held in reverence and reference, was under siege.

And, although inchoate, their animus was instantly distilled, simply upon a glimpse of the untamed tresses of a singular, thin of wrist, dirty hippie, commie faggot — whose mere presence was considered an affront to their pomade-crowned, muscle car-thundering parcel of redneck paradise.

Accordingly, the locals were pledged to do their part to fight the scourge ... by increasing their intake of PBRs and Jack Daniels, and, upon sight of said dirty hippie interlopers, bestowing ass-stompings — and for no-extra-charge — involuntary haircuts upon errant longhairs caught in their midst.

Yet as the era progressed, the savage dance between hippie freak and redneck belligerent changed in tone and tempo, an extemporaneous type of metaphysical jujitsu occurred, in which the predator was subdued and seduced by the prey ... as if by cultural contact buzz, redneck fury yielded to counterculture insouciance.

“When the individual feels, the community reels” ... Aldous Huxley

Briefly, this was the anatomy of the seduction: In their pursuit of fleeing freaks into the park, the young males of the cracker tribe happened upon a few of the things of this vast and vivid world even more compelling than the possibility of ass-kicking ... in the form of attractive young women.

Yet to the young men, the hippie sphinxes, sirens, waifs and gypsy queens were baffling, unapproachable; these women were less than taken by their greasy, pompadoured forelocks and aggressive bearing.

In short, and to appropriate the parlance of the era, the hippie chicks didn’t get off on these young men’s “bad vibes ... it, like, really harshed their high.”

But these great, great grandsons of the Lost Cause proved much more malleable in countenance than the ossified in memory, now enshrined in marble statuary, of their confederate forefathers.

Consequently, a kind of cracker Lysistrata started to unfold. The pomade lacquer faded from stiff pompadours, yielding to lank, draping locks of hippie plumage. The habit of rebel bellicosity was sublimated into an avidity to “boogie.” The zealots of ass-kicking became the acolytes of acid and devotees of the gospels of kicking back and getting down.

As time passed, on weekends, as the Allman Brothers preached Sunday sermons vis-a-vis guitar and drum solos, these newly minted freaks could be found in positions of repose and reflection upon the grassy hills of the park, eating Orange Sunshine and drawling, “aw mahn, Dwayne’s guitar is shootin’ sparks into mah brain...”

Or as Marcel Proust put it,

“The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes.”

If the US is great in any regard, it is not because of the psychotic belief in its own exceptionalism or its risible grandiosity involving the claim to be the one and only “indispensable nation.” Conversely, its best quality is evinced in the voices of the country’s economically bereft rabble, as expressed in the blues, in jazz, folk, country/western, and hip hop music, in which the powerless find a voice that moves the heart by inducing the soul to be able to penetrate the thick walls of shame that the class-based capitalist prison state imposes on the laboring class.

Waylon Jennings rendition of Billy Joe Shaver’s outlaw country classic, and its Cracker Zen philosophy of: The more adept one becomes at growing down — even composting — one’s pride, ego, pretensions, and careerist striving the richer the soil of the soul grows.

(Billy Joe Shaver’s mother, eight months pregnant with him, was severely beaten by her husband and left for dead in a ditch. Later spotted labouring in the scorching heat of an east Texas cotton field, a child harness to her back, young Billy at her side, by a recruiter for local honky-tonks scouting the area to fill waitress positions. Shaver’s red-haired mother’s good looks proved providential for exposing him to venues of country/western music.)

The early 1980s. I am attempting to navigate, and failing on a psychical basis, the vales and canyons of Los Angeles. It is the advent of the Reagan years. The idiot stare of the encompassing dome of the LA sky is too much for my Appalachian Hill country psyche. There is no green-on-green canopy to filter the relentless sheen of sunlight. It renders me manic, angst-ridden, and sleepless.

The damp evening air envelops one at sundown in LA. It gets damn cold. A clinging chill wafts from the Pacific Ocean. But the phenomenon is not weather related; instead, the cold is the embrace of the ghosts of the dead dreams of the city’s inhabitants.

X captures in tone and limns in lyric the effects of the atomised LA landscape upon my besieged psyche...I slouch in the direction of The Whiskey to catch them.

This song, by Elizabeth Cotten, here, interpreted by Rhiannon Middens, seems to me, concerns the type of release borne of lament, whereas one has lost everything and made every attempt to right oneself with circumstance and fate but to no avail. Every worldly possession is in hock...but destitution has not been dodged.

Oh Lordy me, didn’t I shake sugaree

Everything I got is done and pawned

Everything I got is done and pawned

Yet a stark, painfully beautiful, indomitable truth rises up from the soul. I am still here. My voice still rises heavenward. The deathless heart of my song endures in the face of misfortune and grief.

Wallace Stevens captures the sentiment in verse: Excerpted from his poem: A Weak Mind in the Mountains:

Yet there was a man within me

Could have risen to the clouds,

Could have touched these winds,

Bent and broken them down,

Could have stood up sharply in the sky.

One can imitate, with virtuoso precision, musical and poetic technique — but the verities garnered from life lived cannot be counterfeited, no matter how perfect the mimicry. The performance will remain at surface level.

Conversely, as is the case with Roscoe Holcomb, the sublimity of his exquisite rawness arrives from the authenticity of his experience. Listening, at least in my case to his Appalachian cadences, causes my wounded heart to bleed lambent light.

As I write these words, it has been dark for hours here in Munich, Germany, as, collectively, we, in the Northern Hemisphere trudge into the long, dark nights of the dying year. Short daylight hours, haunted with grim and grisly news. Our era, lit up but not illuminated, by twenty four/seven artificial light. Perpetual media distractions at our finger tips. Nature banished. Communal experience atomised.

We attempt to grieve, but remain empty, by means of the same Mephistophelian illusion that has left us estranged from the beating heart of earthly life. Conversely, the US blues/gospel/folk tradition captures the cadences of grief wrought by the knowledge of the vastness of creation, within which unfolds the tragic dance between the fragility of human life and the reality of ever present human folly.

This ballad by the Carter Family defines the form and reveals what has been scoured away by Mephistophelian light. (As a general rule, songs about trains are about anything but trains.)

Pete Seeger, a few years before his death, told me and a small group of others this anecdote about he and Woody Guthrie. The two of them were playing a gig for striking coal miners, deep in the Ozarks. Because no one present could afford babysitters, the union hall was filled with women and small children. A short time into their performance, a squad of

large, brutal company goons, wearing long coats concealing clubs and other weapons, entered the hall.

Pete inquired of Woody as to how they should respond. Woody told him to keep playing, and play for all they were worth, which they did. They continued their show and no trouble came to pass that night. Afterwards, one of the members of the goon squad approached Woody and Pete and confessed to them. "We came here to bust up the meeting. But what was going on was not what we were told. You seem like good people."

Pete related, Woody, much taken with the declaration, returned to their quarters and wrote his song Union Maid, in a single sitting. That is what Woody meant by, "this machine kills fascists." His music and that of other inspired troubadours kills the soul-dead ideology of fascism with the life-vivifying veracity of truth.

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