

HOMAGE TO A ROAD

By Michael Ventura

March 19, 1999

In the music of the Southwest, one image is constant: the road. Whether it be blues, folk, rock, swing, conjunto, country, or those unclassifiable singers who combine and transcend all categories -- if the road isn't invoked directly, its presence is felt, somebody is always arriving, always leaving, and there's always something immeasurable just past the outskirts of town. For there's no place in the Southwest where you can't get from downtown to open country in a half hour or less. And then ... you can drive a thousand miles in most directions and still have more distance to cover before you reach a glacier or an ocean. Unlike urban music, the music of the Southwest is alive with the possibility of unfettered movement. Walt Whitman, who never actually saw it, imagined it well in his *Song of the Open Road*: "Here a great personal deed has room."

Which can make the lack of a great personal deed all the more galling. The road is an inspiration and a joy, but it also dictates the terms of despair: for to lose one's sense of possibility where the very landscape beckons you to possibility in all directions is to feel trapped not by the world but by yourself. The endless sky mocks you. In terrain where the concept of infinity cannot be ignored, you're never sure whether your argument is with society or God. And under the great Southwestern sky, it's possible to feel very, very small; but also to feel, as you hear so often in Townes Van Zandt's songs, an undercurrent of wonder no matter how bad things are.

The road is such a powerful universal symbol in Southwestern music precisely because each road is specific, real, fateful. No way to tell you how but to focus on a particular road. For instance, US84.

Eighty-four begins in southern Colorado, at Pagosa Springs -- near Summit Peak, which is more than 13,000 feet high; and near the source of the Rio Grande, where that great river is just a deep, swift stream. Eighty-four winds down into New Mexico, southeastward, crossing the Great Divide not far past the state line. (It's called "the Great Divide" because all rainfall east of it drains toward the Atlantic, all rainfall west drains into the Pacific.) Here 84 curves, climbs, and descends through mountains, and every time it crests a hill the vista takes your breath away. On this stretch, not more than 20 or so miles on either side of the road, are the cliffside ruins of the Anasazi, which means "ancient ones" -- tribal people who lived in a continent untouched by Europe, a continent without horses or guns, an (in this terrain) arid vastness, subject to extremes of heat and cold, which could only be dared on foot. Then, at Espanola, 84 divides the two greatest extremes of human behavior:

About a half hour to the east there's Los Alamos, where atomic bombs were first perfected, and, in the name of fighting evil, human beings raised a god-like ax of radiation above their heads and have since waited for it to fall; to this day, weapons of mass death are invented there. Almost the same mileage to the west is El Santuario de Chimayo, a small adobe church to which thousands make a pilgrimage every Easter, some walking miles on their knees, a few carrying crosses, to worship at the shrine of a crucified Jesus clad in a blue dress. The chamber of that Jesus has a dirt floor, "healing dirt," they say, and it is claimed by many that they've been cured of all manner of disease by rubbing that dirt upon them as they pray. Crutches line the walls outside that chamber,

left by cripples who walked away. Where else in the world are Hell and Heaven juxtaposed in such absolute terms?

About a half hour's drive south, 84 becomes Saint Francis Boulevard as it passes through Santa Fe, the oldest inland European settlement in North America, founded 390 years ago. Most of the Hispanic people here are not Mexican; they're descendants of the original Spaniards, with four centuries of marriage with the Pueblo peoples, who are in turn descendants of the Anasazi. Most barely get by these days, for affluent Texans, Californians, and Yankees buy their land and hike up every price tag. They can't afford to live and can't afford to leave; they have been here longer than any of us.

From Santa Fe, 84 becomes I-25 for an hour or so, heading east. Then, at Romeroville, near the headwaters of the Pecos River, 84 turns sharply south, then directly east for a little while as it joins I-40 -- old Route 66, *The Grapes of Wrath* highway -- until it cuts southeast again at Santa Rosa. Santa Rosa's Main Street is old 66 itself; the Club Cafe has been closed for years, but the building and its sign are still there, where Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston once ate their biscuits and gravy. And at Santa Rosa, 84 crosses the Pecos for the last time -- hundreds of miles southeast on the Pecos was the hamlet of Langtry, where Judge Roy Bean meted out justice, of a kind, on the porch of the Jersey Lilly, the bar named for an actress whom he worshipped and never did see. (Yes, that story's true, more or less.)

Now you're out of the high mountains, in terrain of rolling plains, mesas, arroyos, where you can see for miles and miles unobstructed in every direction. Here 84 heads south until Fort Sumner, where Billy the Kid is buried. His assassin, Pat Garrett, was himself assassinated years later, not a long drive from here. Now 84 heads due east to Clovis and becomes the main drag of that town. I think the building in Clovis in which Buddy Holly and the Crickets recorded some of their greatest tunes is long gone, and I'm not sure where it used to be, but I know you pass within a stone's throw of the site as you drive 84 through that town. No one could have guessed at the time that the most historically worthy thing ever done in Clovis was being accomplished by some Panhandle kids playing what many thought then was "the Devil's music." And soon there's the Texas border, where just off the road a billboard used to advertise Holly's hometown thusly: "Visit Lubbock -- For All Reasons."

For whatever reason, you're driving now where Holly drove many times, a hundred and more miles into Lubbock, where the land is flat as the palm of God's hand, so they say there. Once the prairie-grass was horse-high here, and buffalo roamed by the hundreds of thousands a herd, hunted by Cheyenne. As 84 goes through Lubbock, it becomes Avenue Q. About midway through town on Q, there's a big statue of Buddy Holly holding his guitar. And as you continue past town, there's a big warehouse-type building on the plains, the old Cotton Club, where a not-yet-famous Elvis Presley played his music, as well as Holly and Roy Orbison; and, years later, the legendary Flatlanders -- Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, and Jimmie Dale Gilmore; and where I don't think Jo Carol Pierce performed (she wasn't doing that in those days), but where I know she danced.

South and east you drive now, through Abilene, through Brownwood (a stomping ground of gunfighter John Wesley Hardin's), then 84 heads due east: Waco. The immolation of the Branch Davidians -- the terror that made for the final twist of Timothy McVeigh's mind, and would result in another terror, the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The American Dream on fire. The American Century in a millennial panic to find some kind of certitude, some kind of meaning, at any price -- the higher price, the more absolute (and useless) the meaning. If you can't live in the City on the

Hill, blow it up or burn it down, praying for deliverance with every lick of the flames. Somewhere long ago and far from here, some people wrote us a Constitution, a document that tried to include everything on US 84; we read it now in the light and heat of Waco's flames.

It's a long drive on 84 east from Waco to the Atlantic, from the dry Texas plains through the steamy lush growth of Louisiana, and just before the Mississippi River (which is to rock & roll what the Nile is to Egypt), you go through Ferriday -- 84 is its central street. Birthplace of Jerry Lee Lewis and his cousin Jimmy Lee Swaggart, demon-driven men, great balls of fire, whose whole lotta shakin', for the beat and for the Bible, embodied every contradiction in beat and Bible both.

You cross the Mississippi into Natchez. You can still smell slavery in the air in this country. Sites of old plantations. Civil War graveyards. Fiery Ku Klux Klan crosses. The sad brave eyes of the first black children who dared their way into the "white" (i.e., public) schools. And Alabama the same. And crossing the Chatahoochee into Georgia, the same. A sense of historical suffocation that, like the thick humidity, make it equally hard to breathe. Until finally, just south of Savannah, 84 ends near the Atlantic.

In the music of the Southwest, song after song invokes the road. The people who make the rules in this country, and most writers who interpret its meanings, mostly fly. They miss it all. But musicians serve their apprenticeship on the road, driving gig to gig, learning, as Townes put it, that "you can't count the miles until you feel them."

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