

WAKE OF THE RED WITCH

By Michael Ventura

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“Been in the dark/ All of my life/ Waiting for the Wake/ Of the Red Witch .../Waiting for the Wake/ Of the Red Witch/ Waiting for the Wake/ Of the Red Witch” – I listen to this Terry Allen song over and over, surprised at all it evokes, and wondering why, at its end, he needs to repeat that phrase thrice.

“Wake of the Red Witch” is a song about movies and *Wake of the Red Witch* is a 1948 movie that’s haunted Terry Allen as it’s haunted me, but in the dark all his life he’s not waiting for a movie and not waiting to cross the wake of a clipper ship called *Red Witch*, so... what, then?

The album is *Bottom of the World*, issued earlier this year – an album in which the word “world” appears or is evoked in every song. With a lyricist as cannily specific as Terry Allen, such repetition not only connects the songs but creates a maze. In the spirit of a maze (amaze! – didn’t intend the pun, but I like it), one wanders as much as listens.

The opener, “Four Corners,” hails back to Terry’s classic 1975 *Juarez* – but, if you’ve seen *Wake of the Red Witch*, its oceanic imagery and fatal passions sync with the song’s. Looking for coordinates to determine where the bottom of the world might be? This song’s lyrics are a virtual map, radiating out from funky Four Corners and Cortez, Colorado.

“Queenie’s Song” takes you to chichi Santa Fe on a New Year’s Day when Terry discovered some bastard shot his dog. The order of the day is a disorder that spares nothing and no one. Terry sings: “Well I don’t predict the world will end/ And I don’t presume it won’t/ And I don’t pretend to give a damn/ If it do or if it don’t.”

Without getting too cute about it, everything that begins ends. The world and/or our civilization are bound to end sometime. If one or both ends on your watch, or mine, that’s no particular tragedy. What makes us so special that the world can’t end right here where we’re standing?

Which is what “Hold on to the House” is all about: “HOLD ON/ Better HOLD ON ... to the house/ Stand in the Den / Stand in the Bath/ Make your stand in the Living Room/ If you can stand to call it that.”

A little but important world is threatened and may end. Still, there’s something slapstick about desperation. Not laughable, just absurd – a whole society sold a bill of goods only to have the rug pulled out from under it. Nothing funny about it except for everyone’s surprise.

Speaking of surprise: “Do they dream of Hell/ In Heaven/ Are they restless/ With their reward/ ... Is there something/ Strange about Heaven/ They just don’t want you/ to know?” Smack between Terry’s capitalized Heaven and Hell is his lowercase earth, where all the fun is, such as it is.

So, “Maybe I’ll go to the bottom of the world” – which can be anyplace you happen to be, since any world you happen to inhabit can drop out from under you anytime. Terry makes the bottom of the world sound dangerously attractive, so maybe you’ll go. Get into some trouble worth getting into. The song’s ending just sort of hangs there: “Maybe I’ll go.” (Maybe he won’t.)

“Angels in the Wind” doesn’t live in the same existential territory and perhaps doesn’t belong on the album, because it compares “the way that things are/ To the way they should be.” But since no one really knows how things should be, it could be that things should be worse – and maybe we’re getting off easy. (Even Terry Allen doesn’t want to go there.)

In “Emergency Human Blood Courier” nobody gets off easy. Containers of blood head south to bleeding Mexico, “where all systems seem to have failed.” But it’s not just Mexico. Terry speaks the last line: “It’s the story of the world.”

“Wake of the Red Witch” is next, but for me it comes last.

“The Gift” isn’t something you want. “Turn on the news/ CNN / At the end / Of the world.” A Wall Street guy puts his little boy to bed then hangs himself with the dog’s leash. This is “a gift from Daddy/ He lost all he had and he / Gave it to you.” Just a little capitalist ditty.

Or you could get larger and say: These days, in this society, a great failure is our inheritance, and we shall do with that failure what we can.

“Sidekick Anthem” supplies an antidote: “Turn your back on the bastards/ The liars and kiss-asses too / Just give me a call and tell ‘em to screw it all/ And I’ll be leaving with you.”

The song presumes a place to go – perhaps at the bottom of the world. That, exactly, is *Bottom of the World’s* optimism, manifested as fierce zest: “If you got to break out/ And you want me to/ I’m just a call away.” There’s still somewhere to go, if you can find it, imagine it, make it – got the stuff for that? Also: You may not have to go alone.

“Covenant (for Jo Harvey)” ups that ante. There’s somewhere to go, there’s something to find. “It’s everywhere/ It’s in the wind/ Just open up/ And let it in.” The storm has come, “but some light shines through the pounding rain... Gonna find you/ When you’re lost, Babe.” I’m willing to believe that. Willing to try that myself. And I wish us all the best of luck.

But let us not forget “Wake of the Red Witch” and *Wake of the Red Witch*.

In the song, Terry invokes a scene from *The Searchers*, then declares flatly: “John Wayne’s Dead.” (On the lyric sheet the line reads like a billboard.) Next verse, Jesus “hangs/ A naked cameo in space ... in the biblical epic *The Robe*.” Again: “John Wayne’s Dead.” After a chorus, there is *Sands of Iwo Jima*: A sniper kills Staff Sergeant Stryker (Wayne). In the picture (not the song), Stryker’s squad leaves him lying face down on volcanic sand. “John Wayne’s Dead.”

Then the spooky out-chorus: “Been in the dark/ All of my life/ Waiting for the Wake/ Of the Red Witch” ... it’s a line that walks the listener off the plank, where there’s nothing to fall into but oneself.

Terry tells you nothing about the movie, so I will: *Wake of the Red Witch* –either you love that picture or it makes you sick.

It’s a movie of no in-betweens, right to the casting: Stars John Wayne and Gail Russell are utter opposites. Wayne was fierce, large, and certain. As David Thomson wrote, “He moved ... with huge confidence and daring.” Russell was petite, a soul burning with beauty and frailty. In *The Uninvited*, her most respected picture, Ray Milland speaks of “that look in her eyes – that terrible happiness.” Exactly Gail Russell’s look.

In *Wake of the Red Witch*, a terrible, terrifying happiness is what John Wayne’s Capt. Ralls and Gail Russell’s Angeliq discover – a hopeless happiness that fears nothing,

not even death. You wait 40 minutes before Russell appears, yet she's the story's heart from the start. Her spirit permeates the film, makes it glow. Wayne's character knows better than to risk all for mere gold, but to risk for Angelique, for her very soul – that makes sense. In a civilization at the point of collapse (like ours), maybe it's all that makes sense.

As for Angelique – Gail Russell's wild vulnerability embodies risks already taken, risks that leave you no way out and no way back.

What do we wait for in the dark when we're "waiting for the Wake of the Red Witch"? Something so precious we don't care if there's no way out and no way back?

Yes. Exactly that. That's what awaits us at the bottom of the world.

"Maybe I'll go."

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