

## ***ROAD NOTES: U.S. 78/MISSISSIPPI 6***

**By Michael Ventura**

**November 1, 2002**

*Atlanta:* My friend Naunie couldn't recall exactly when her great-uncle died, but it was sometime in the late 1950s. She remembered him well: a small dapper man of precise habits who preferred a Homburg hat and lived to be 107. He had been a drummer boy in the Civil War.

Was I speaking to someone who knew a witness to the Civil War? Had the Civil War been touched, its voice heard, its eyes faced, by someone who now, in turn, faced me? A history so close at hand can hardly be said to be "history." And I realized that during the civil-rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s many Southerners shared Naunie's experience and were personally close to the Civil War's combatants, slaves, slave owners, and their direct descendants. No wonder that the fight has been so passionate, so personal, amid the hazy lines between "white" and "black" -- for, especially in the South (and whether or not it shows), many of each color carry the blood and genes of the other. Among such a mixed people, where was the distinction between "then" and "now," "me" and "you"? No one could be sure. Each shade of color was and is a cry of ambiguity; "blacks" and "whites" embodying a continuing story of abduction, rape, love, hate, and a compulsive mutual imitation that shapes every gesture and speech. So their struggle was and is what James Baldwin always said it was and is: a pitched battle for *identity* in a culture based on the lie that you can be anything you want to be. In a culture that says you can be anything you want to be, the question of identity is a matter of life and death, of how far you can go, of whom you do and do not answer to. The dirty little secret of America is that such a culture is based not upon freedom but upon *desire*.

It's a matter of emphasis. Not "you *can* be anything you want" (freedom), but "you can be anything you *want*" (desire). So no wonder America fell into the trap of money: Money supplies the illusion that you may choose, buy, surround yourself with (and so become) anything you want. But this ensnares you right back in the net of all that "identity" means: You can have, choose, buy, become, anything *you* want. If you've developed no genuine identity, how do you really know what *you* want -- rather than what you've been prodded, shaped, and indoctrinated to want? Your real freedom depends upon the integrity of your desire, which depends in turn upon the integrity of your identity. What you want is the measure of your identity.

The South, for instance, once wanted slavery -- a fact that most of "those who imagine themselves to be white" (Baldwin's phrase) have yet to come to terms with.

Naunie's great-uncle, the Civil War drummer boy, preferred Homburg hats. A reserved man in his 90s and early 100s when she knew him, his faculties were intact until the end. Under the Homburg he kept his memories to himself. What use is a silent witness? Of great use, I think, for he stands for the mystery of what he witnessed. Explanations are what we wish to believe, but what we are (and want) is the truest artifact of history. History does not speak to us, but it lives in us. Perhaps we hear it best when we talk to ourselves.

*Tupelo, Mississippi:* In 1935 Elvis Presley was born in a shack outside Tupelo. Enter town on Mississippi 6, and signs will point the way. Unlike Graceland, 90 miles

northwest, thousands do not make the pilgrimage to this place every day. The site boasts no gates, no guards. A plank wood hovel. You can park right in front of it. I paced its dimensions: five paces wide, 11 paces long. (Pace that for yourself. Imagine yourself confined in that space. Then sing. That's what he did.) One small window in front, two more on each side. No insulation, no plumbing, no running water, no electricity. (Their outhouse has not been preserved.) Sticky hot in summer, bone cold in winter. Dirt roads. Thick accents. Virulent bigotry. No books but a Bible. No TV. Perhaps a radio.

Black-white/white-black. The strength of the young Elvis Presley was precisely in his lack of identity: He could not decide which he was, white or black, not in his movements, not in his singing. So he would be both and neither -- thus becoming the epitome of the South and, in an odd way, its most honest citizen. In his exploration of his *lack* of identity, he, more than anyone, defined (by his very lack of definition) the boundaries and terms of what we now call "pop" culture. Suburban white kids devoted to hip-hop are his direct descendants, soaked in the same ambiguities from which he forged a style. He never graduated from high school, but the way he moved became a dream of how we all want to move, and the way he sang became part of how we talk to ourselves.

Today Tupelo advertises itself as a "Certified Retirement City" (Elvis would be 67 now). Just before you get there, there's a hand-lettered sign by the side of the road: LAST DAYS TENT REVIVAL -- ALL WELCOME ... desperate people grasping for a sense of significance. Any day can become poignant, any day can become meaningful, when it's defined as the "last."

*Oxford, Mississippi:* William Faulkner's hometown. He never graduated from high school either.

Drive west on Mississippi 6 from Tupelo for less than an hour, and you're in Oxford. It's a curvy two-lane most of the way, through farmland and woods. Mississippi, the heartland of the blues, as twisted in spirit, as convoluted, as resonant, and as baffling as one of those Faulknerian sentences that goes on for pages, punctuated by inexplicable commas, tentative dashes, and parentheses within parentheses ... sentences that tell all while keeping a secret hidden in a syntax no grammarian could graph. Almost more a state of mind than a place, as Faulkner wrote in *Absalom, Absalom!* "... that dream state in which you run without moving from a terror in which you cannot believe, toward a safety in which you have no faith."

Ask strangers directions to Faulkner's home, Rowan Oaks, and sooner or later one will get it right and get you there. It would have been a mile or so from town in his day. The house was built in 1848 (a time when the crime of slavery was taken for granted in the South long after the rest of the Western world had abandoned it as a blight upon the soul). As with Elvis' hovel, Rowan Oaks (large, but without a mansion-like air) has no guards or gates. I walked the grounds. There were trees that witnessed the Civil War, trees that Faulkner knew. I leaned against the great trunk of one such tree and stood for a long time, watching the house and breathing his air. The gruesome social contradictions from which he forged his fiction are hardly over with here. Through a long afternoon in Oxford, on the campus of Ole Miss I saw only one African-American; in Courthouse Square, the center of town, I saw another; at a gas station, two more. Doubtless there are many more, but driving randomly this way and that, I never found where they are ghettoed. (Said Faulkner of history, "It's not even past.")

In 1935, the year Elvis was born, the 38-year-old Faulkner carried the unfinished manuscript of *Absalom, Absalom!* to New York, trying to get paying gigs, then to Hollywood, where he worked on a screenplay with Howard Hawks. Yet, amid family

tragedy and financial pressure, he somehow finished his book. The lie of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* was the prime Southern novel of the era; *Absalom, Absalom!* was meant, in part, as its antidote. But when Faulkner's novel was published, few read it; few even heard of it. We're still saddled with Mitchell's beguiling lies, while not one in a thousand has read Faulkner's great work, and no producer has been born with the courage to film it. In Faulkner, identity begins as a dream and ends as a curse: You emphatically can *not* be anything you want; your being is part of the place where you're born and the blood in your veins, the sins of the parents are visited upon the children, and life -- as he wrote in a letter dated "Oxford. Saturday" -- is "the same frantic steeplechase toward nothing everywhere." (Tomorrow is *not* another day, but the same day.) Faulkner saw true identity as surrender: When you have no choice but to surrender to your deepest compulsions, you have found the source of your identity.

Not a prescription for sanity, eh? But Faulkner, like Elvis, was not much concerned with sanity. Their lives were emblematic of a harsh law: Once your compulsions have taught you your true nature, only then can you forsake what you want for what you are.

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