

DEAD AND ALIVE ON THE 4TH OF THE JULY

By Michael Ventura

July 2, 2010

Tom Sawyer is dead. Huck Finn is not. The “can do” all-Americans that Tom Sawyer symbolized are cyber wizards who cannot win wars, educate the masses, plug undersea gushers, or govern. Meanwhile, avoiding officialdom of any kind, Huck Finn lives. Independent, tolerant, skeptical, mischievous, impossible to repress, sometimes miserable but never self-pitying, Huck still smokes his corn-cob (or whatever), laughing at follies, intent on his kind of good time, and, now and then, freeing something or someone enslaved. Stays off the grid. Manifests in several genders. Has no ideology. Doesn’t need a reason. Does things “just because.”

Thomas Jefferson is dead. Sally Hemings is not. Jefferson’s ideal of freedom has been degraded into “I want to do whatever I want” – which enslaves you to what you want. Jefferson’s slave and lover, Sally Hemings, was not allowed to want. Her strength was being -- a strength that these days doesn’t get much ink. (*Grapes of Wrath*’s Ma Joad knew all about it, as did Willa Cather’s *Ántonia*.) This strength is the power of expressing one’s being in spite of one’s circumstances. I believe this is the strength from which originates all that is most valuable.

Jackie O. is dead. Emily Dickinson is not. Every façade Jackie cherished has crumbled, but Miss Emily eternally sits in her garden noting where the real and not-quite-tangible converge into something unique that society may or may not catch up with.

Bruce Springsteen is dead. Bob Dylan is not. The world Springsteen sang was dying as he sang it. (In his early albums he knew that.) Meanwhile, Dylan’s “Desolation Row” has become Main Street. His “Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” has reincarnated as Joanne Newsom, a spooky woman who plays harp and sings tendril-like songs from within events, instead of outside them, as Dylan once did (though she employs means that are nothing like his or anybody’s). Newsom sings with the voice of, sometimes, a 4-year-old, and, sometimes, an old lady of maybe 12. There’s something very wrong and right about that, which amounts to something very alive.

Woodstock is dead. Stonewall is not. Woodstock marked an end, not a beginning. That same summer, Stonewall ignited a profound and utterly unanticipated transformation. The word “gender” will never be the same.

Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres are anything but dead. Winfrey was born in 1954; DeGeneres, 1958. If, in those years, anyone prophesied that a black woman and any shade of lesbian would be welcomed into millions of American living rooms every afternoon – well, no one even imagined such things back then. Hope is often a front for fear, but possibility is endless.

NASA is dead. Marie Laveau is not. We’re not going to the moon any time soon, but sorceress Marie Laveau’s sense of ritual – revelatory, exploratory, and devout – is alive in every household with a Laveau-like altar. (Full disclosure: I have one. So do many of my friends.)

The Grateful Dead, the Supremes, and the Sex Pistols are dead. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Doors are, amazingly, not even a little bit dead. Many high school kids know all their lyrics.

Humphrey Bogart, alas, is dead. James Dean, doubly alas, is not.

Patti Smith, Dolly Parton, and Annette Funicello are dead. Jolie Holland, Carmen Consoli, and Patsy Cline are not.

Michel Foucault is dead. Groucho Marx is not.

John Ford is dead. John Cassavetes is not.

Frank Sinatra is dead. Billie Holiday is not. A sentimentalist singing songs that veer between cheerful belligerency and sticky self-pity – well, poor Frank. When Billie Holiday sings the same songs you hear, not self-pity but self-recognition, not bravado but an often exhausted yet always game willingness to face the odds.

Much that I'm happily ignorant of – hip-hop, sitcoms, animated shows, any band that takes after Nirvana, and what presently comes out of Nashville – is quite alive and/or dead. How would I know?

Marilyn Monroe is not dead, merely absent. She'll return when young women again realize that the flesh on their bones is not an enemy.

Martin Luther King Jr. is not dead, merely slumbering. Nonviolent mass action, performed consistently and with specific goals, remains the most effective means of structural, societal change. People remember this, forget it, remember it. At the moment, we endure a period of forgetfulness.

The Hollywood movie is really dead. TV is not. *Angels in America*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, *Band of Brothers*, *Dr. Who*, *Justified*, *Saving Grace* (the first season), *Burn Notice*, and their ilk – the writing is, well: writing! Like this, from *In Plain Sight*: “Your friends are God’s way of apologizing for your family.”

Male identity is one big question mark. None of the antique male identities functions well anymore and nobody knows what will take the place of traditional male (especially white male) personas. “Nobody knows” is an interesting state of aliveness.

Ahab, to my regret, is not dead. He’s thrashing around Afghanistan. But Hester Prynne isn’t dead, either. Through her, Nathaniel Hawthorne prophesized that America’s lasting contribution to humanity would be the liberation and equality of women. This on-going revolution is the most fundamental change in thousands of years. To paraphrase James Baldwin: The world is male no longer and will never be male again.

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance on and on and on in that realm where dead and alive don’t matter.

Elvis Presley is dead. Muddy Waters is not. Rock stardom, as a quality of being, has been clichéd into a living death, while funky blues seduce in dingy venues where the unexpected is expected and you never know what dream will walk through a dive’s door.

Still, none dare write Elvis’ obit. Kids no longer care about his music, but what he started is far from finished. It has to do with that bugaboo, male identity. As Gillian Welch sings: “He shook it like a chorus girl, he shook it like a Harlem queen, he shook it like a midnight rambler, baby, like you never seen.” In those first gyrating years, Elvis modeled a male relationship to the body that changed, and is still changing, everything.

Johann Sebastian Bach is dead. Duke Ellington is not. The order Bach imposed upon sound is stunning, but it ain’t the way the world works. Ellington’s miscegenation of harmony, melody, and rhythm is the world we experience. As the Duke said: “Come with me to my emerald garden, just off the moon, where darkness is only a translucency.”

Ernest Hemingway is dead. Yogi Berra is not. A man who played great baseball long ago is quoted more often than any writer of the American canon, and what's more American than that? As Berra says: "If the world were perfect, it wouldn't be."

Walt Whitman is dead. Walt Whitman is not. Leave it to Whitman to be dead and alive. America's left him behind, but he never leaves. He did not shatter all conventions, social and literary; he simply and heartily stepped beyond them when, 11 lines into his great poem, he stripped naked and rolled in the grass, insisting that your body is equal to your soul. His "barbaric yawp" still echoes across rooftops. I believe it was Sharon Olds who said that Whitman makes humanity seem like a good idea.

Huck Finn attended his own funeral, don't forget. America may do the same. We'll listen to eulogies spoken over the coffin of our empire; we'll mourn for ourselves a little or a lot; then (for there is life after empire), forever changed and forever the same, with little worldly power to rant of, we will continue being what at our core we are: vast and always edgy, sometimes disastrous and sometime astounding – an ever uncertain experiment in the wonder and danger of liberty.

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