

BELOW THE GLOWING VIRGIN

By Michael Ventura

March 16, 2007

I'd just moved back to the Texas panhandle when the documentary *Lubbock Lights* screened in a theatre on Lubbock's Buddy Holly Avenue – a venue the Flatlanders played that night, or the next night. Jesse Taylor (may he rest in peace) played his last hometown gig the night after. Many of the bunch we call "14th Street" showed up for the screening, and it was weird, it was flat-out weird to see that old brick house on 14th and Avenue W up there on the big screen with its most famous residents – Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore. We thought we were pretty outlandish in '71 and '72 when many of us lived there and many others passed through, but we never dreamed anything as unlikely as that one day that house and everything it meant to us would be a documentary lauded at film festivals ... or that Stubb's Bar-B-Q in Lubbock would be a landmark ... or that Stubb would have a statue ... or any of it.

It was a snowy winter morning when I first walked into "the house they call '14th Street'" (the phrase is dear Irene's, and may she, too, rest in peace). Yes, as the film relates, there was usually someone playing music and a party that ebbed and flowed but never quite ended and continuous night-and-day conversation ... but there was something else, something not part of the legend (*if* it's a legend) that impressed me that first day: The house was full of books I'd never heard of.

I was a Brooklyn Yankee (a Brooklyn small-d dodger, too). With Yankee arrogance, I figured I was pretty well-read in history, literature, science, psychology – but there were only six books in that house that I knew. Four of them were Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* (in my Top 10 of the 20th century's fiction); the other two were by Carlos Castañeda. Like most Euro-Americans back then, I wasn't much aware of Islam and had never heard of Sufis, but here were Idries Shah's *The Way of the Sufi*, *Tales of the Dervishes*, and *The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mulla Nasrudin*. And somebody else I'd never heard of, Gurdjieff – many books by and about him. Plus esoteric books on Christianity. And *The Kybalion – Hermetic Philosophy*, "by Three Initiates," a work that Butch Hancock, Janette Norman, and I pondered endlessly (and ponderously). I have a copy in front of me, and I still wonder about its publisher, "The Yogi Publication Society – Masonic Temple – Chicago, Ill." Masonic Yogis! Yogi Masons! Yogi Berra! (Before I got to 14th Street, "Berra" was the only word I associated with "yogi.") And who was Krishnamurti anyway?

That material is more or less familiar to literate people now, what with New Age and all. But "New Age" is a phrase and a spectrum of notions that wouldn't become current for about a decade. From my perspective at the time, I'd landed in the middle of nowhere amongst fantastically talented people who were well-schooled in wildness and who'd collected (and constantly discussed) a mysterious library of philosophies and mysticisms. It's not much of an exaggeration to say I felt I'd been admitted to an isolated, hedonistic, country-western-folk-music-Zen-rock-&-roll honky-tonk/monastery.

I beg forgiveness for the pun (I forget who I'm stealing it from), but: That was Zen, and this is now. I invoke those 14th Street bookshelves to say it's no surprise that some of those people are publishing books nowadays. These friends of mine were always

writing books – thick notebooks of drawings and words. Dream logs. Journals. Verbiage. Nothing taciturn about this crowd.

Terry Allen, for instance. Terry never lived "at 14th" (as we say), but he went to high school with most who did; he's part of "the tribe" (as we also say). Two years ago he published *Dugout* (UT Press). Terry claims not to be one of the mystics, but he also claims (rightly) that we're all liars. I'm opening at random (cross-my-heart-and-spit) ... the narrator speaking in verse and capital letters of his baseball-player father and his honky-tonk mom: "SHE SAYS A PERSON HAS TO DIG INTO THE HEART OF/EVERYTHING ... AND WHAT LITTLE GETS DUG OUT IS ALL/THERE IS ... OR WILL EVER BE./HE SAYS HE REMEMBERS EVERY GAME./SHE SAYS SHE REMEMBERS EVERY SONG./AND IT IS NO LONGER ABOUT JUST THE TWO OF THEM .../IT'S ALL OF IT./MOST OF WHICH CAN NEVER BE SAID./IT JUST LAYS IN SECRETS IN THE DARK ... LIKE THE BLACK/GAP BETWEEN THE TWO BEDS THAT HOLDS THEIR HANDS./IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH GROWING OLD."

Dugout is about baseball, music, love, and a boy being raised by wildness and by the thought of the end of the world. (We used to talk all the time about the end of the world. Vicki had dreams about it, of incredible vividness.) *Dugout* is full-color, with drawings, photos, sketches, as vivid and nonlinear as anybody's dreams: "Odd-painted creatures on porcelain plates./After the fire, they are all that is left." "Once he told a young Busher with a promising arm ... 'Your life just turns into a bucket full of stories ... with a little bitty hole in the bottom.'"

(I knew this afternoon I wanted to write about Terry's book, but I couldn't find it – which was me paying the price for how I despise alphabetical order. Many bookshelves, no order. I called m'lady – she knows my apartment better than I – asked if she knew where it might be, she said, "Below the glowing Virgin." OK, that takes some explaining. A friend gave me a plastic statuette of the Virgin Mary that glows white in the dark. It's on a bookcase. M'lady was right and *Dugout* was below the glowing virgin. OK, alphabetical order has its uses, but if you're too orderly, nobody instructs you to look below the glowing Virgin. Which reminds me of Jo Carol Pierce – who also never lived at 14th but went to high school and cavorted with those who did, befriending this errant Yankee somewhere along the way – and her song cycle *Bad Girls Upset by the Truth*, with its vision of the Virgin's sudden appearance in a supermarket in Lubbock, resulting in the rebirth of Jesus as the prettiest baby girl. Jo Carol called me not long ago and read me a lyric she was working on. Its refrain: "We didn't come here to stay."

So let's don't bitch about getting older. "We didn't come here to stay."

Anyway, I found Terry's book.)

I wish I could find Butch's book, but he hasn't published one. He will. All those thick notebooks he writes and draws in. (Terry will soon curate a show of Butch's drawings in New York.) Butch's book will be like what he wrote me from the Roman works at Bath, England: "The rocks are worn, corners rounded ... colors changed who knows how many times? What? Maybe a couple of thousand generations know. Perhaps a few thousand or a few hundred or maybe only ten or twenty pairs of eyes each generation could remember the fading colors over that generation's span of years ... the living wave of consciousness from generation to generation ... No way to pass that memory on except in dreams and genes."

Joe Ely's book, *Bonfire of Roadmaps*, just came out. (UT Press; it includes a CD). When I hit 14th, Joe wasn't there; he was exploring where I'd been – Brooklyn, the very

blocks where I'd lived – Decatur Street and Myrtle Avenue. Joe walked those streets because Henry Miller (who also grew up on Decatur Street) wrote of them. Joe was checking Miller's veracity. You young musicians, read Joe's book. It's the life of a rocker on the road, written as it happened. As Nelson Algren used to say, "That's the way it is, gentlemen. That's the way it *really* is." When Joe got back to Lubbock, the circus was in town. He and I joined up. I carried stuff; Joe tended animals. When the circus left town, Joe left with it. I didn't because I was in love with Kathy. I left later, on the run, when I started half-believing in Kathy's pact with God, which is all she talked about. I'd lain "below the glowing Virgin," oh wonder ... and I'd best shut up about that.

Opening *Bonfire of Roadmaps* at random: "In Phoenix the crowd stood back/And looked upon us with suspicion/That is, until I turned myself inside out/And served my still-beating heart on a Styrofoam platter/Afterwards I gravitated to the pool table/Where I showed off my skill and insincerity." "Do I attract Psychotics naturally/Or is it that music brings out the psycho in people/Lucinda feels it too, the Prowlers, the Sycophants/In a race with sanity, stalk our skinny white asses." "There are no answers for gypsies who Question/Just questions, mysteries, mazes and riddles/And no good reason for any destination,/Other than living in the present ..." And: "We must live it as it comes, catch it as it passes/The road goes on forever but we'll never be the same again."

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.