

der a waterless sky, to reach fertile land. They would find it hard to imagine that such long strides were taken at so great a cost, only to have those who came after driven from the soil, not by nature but by ignorant rule.

Modern ranch hands coming down the Dead Man's Pass travel the 6 percent grade in fourwheel drive trucks, then rumble by yellow flowering sagebrush and flowing wheat to reach the rodeo. Even with a paved road and conveniences, you still sense, as in much of the West, that your presence is tenuous.

The cowboys and cowgirls at the Pendleton Round-Up must be edgy from more than adrenalin when they slip the noose around the neck of the calf: perhaps they know how it feels.

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Letter From the Lower Right by John Shelton Reed Songs of the South



I like that old-time rock and roll. I'm sure nostalgia has a lot to do with it: the older I get the better the 50's look. But there's more to it than that. I like what the music says about America, and especially about the South. Let me explain.

Some time ago, a geographer at Oklahoma State mapped the birthplaces of country-music notables—singers, songwriters, and musicians. The result-

ing map makes his entire career worthwhile. Not surprisingly, it shows that country music has been *Southern* music. Give or take a speck here and there in Canada or Montana or Okie-land California, the people who make it have come overwhelmingly from the South. But it also shows that they're not from just anywhere in the South. Most are from a fertile crescent that reaches from southwest Virginia through Kentucky and the eastern two-thirds of Tennessee, over into northern Arkansas, southeast Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. Country music, in other words, is a product of the fringe, of the margins of the region proper, of Appalachia, the Ozarks, the Southwest. The map defines the South by sketching its boundary: there's very little inside. The Deep South appears as a near-vacuum (although not a black hole like New England).

But when one of my students did a similar map of the origins of blues singers and we overlaid it on the country-music map, it filled in the Deep South nicely. The two maps together clearly showed the South—black and white, separate but equal—to be the great seedbed of American music (or, as John Seelye calls it, "AM"; FM, of course, stands for "foreign music"). But they also made it plain, as I said, that for a long time white folks didn't do much singing in the Deep South, perhaps because they had blacks to do it for them. (The image of Slim Pickens in *Blazing Saddles* comes irresistibly to mind, as does the similar, but not at all funny, scene in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.)

When Deep South white boys *did* start to sing, though, 30-odd years ago, they showed that they'd been listening. What they gave us was "rockabilly"—half "hillbilly," half black rhythm-and-blues, a wild half-breed music. Along with some black folks who were mostly Southerners, too, Elvis and Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis and Charlie Rich and Ronnie Hawkins and Conway Twitty and the Everly Brothers gave us rock and roll.

And although it has been little noted, the musical influence went both ways. Everyone knows how Elvis grew up listening to Rufus Thomas and Big Mama Thornton, thus becoming the answer to Sam Phillips's prayer for a

white singer with a Negro sound. Just so, his fellow Tennessean Bobby Bland talks of how "we used to listen to the radio every morning to people like Roy Acuff, Lefty Frizzell, Hank Williams and Hank Snow," and says "I think hillbilly has more of a story than people give it credit for." Bland, of course, is black.

With this genealogy, rock and roll really was something different, especially for the South. It made for one of the few experiences shared by young Southerners across the racial divide. Opinions differed about rock and roll—they were meant to—but not along racial lines. Black or white, most Southerners now of approximately menopausal age grew up making out to the same music, on the same radio stations. In the Carolinas and Virginia it was gentle "beach music." Over the mountains, in my part of the South, it was tougher, meaner, raunchier—and WLAC, Nashville, was the place to go for it. I was pleased when Don Williams included a reference to WLAC's John R in his nostalgic country song, "Good Old Boys Like Me," and I was amused when Bobbie Ann Mason wrote in *The New Yorker* (of all places) about listening to WLAC while growing up in Kentucky. But I was actually moved when Steven Millner, a black professor at Ole Miss, mentioned WLAC on William Buckley's *Firing Line*. Listening to WLAC's juxtaposition of Hank Ballard and the Midnighters with suggestive ads for White Rose Petroleum Jelly was a mere thread across the chasm of segregation, but it was that.

Some saw rock and roll as a threat to Western civilization, and that was part of its charm. Preachers preached against it. Pious teenagers took to the platform to witness against it. Sanctimonious small-town radio stations banned it. But it was no threat—just the opposite. Consider what it replaced.

Browsing in the record bin at a local thrift shop one day last summer, I came across an old Phil Harris LP. Two of the songs on it, "That's What I Like About the South" and "The Darktown Poker Club," were sides A and B of an old 78 that I must have worn out sometime in the early 1950's. For fifty cents I bought the record and took it home.

LIBERAL ARTS

Why We Love New York

One child talking to another at the Central Park Zoo: "Look, a baby seal! And there's his mother. Or his father. Or his au pair."

—from the November 7, 1988 issue of New York magazine.

I used to love those songs. I remember playing them over and over. But listening to them now, I realize that they are horrible: musically, culturally, in every way. Phil Harris, this white man from Ohio, was working in the coon song tradition. From the middle of the last century until the middle of this one, that tradition produced literally scores of demeaning songs that white folks apparently found inexhaustibly amusing. We need to be reminded of how awful they were, if only so as to understand that black folks really do have reason to be ticked off.

For my part, listening with embarrassment to these songs that I once loved uncritically made me glad that God sent rock and roll when he did — sometime during my junior high years. Even a screaming, eye-shadowed flamer like Little Richard was a more wholesome influence on American race relations than Phil Harris. Rock and roll was a definite improvement, and I don't care what Allan Bloom says.

But the Golden Age of biracial Southern hegemony in rock and roll was short-lived. By 1960, it had given way to the era of the teen idols: Ricky Nelson and Fabian and Dion and the Bobbies — Bobby Vinton, Bobby Darin, Bobby Vee — meretricious, marketed, mediocre. (About the same time, as I recall, something similar happened to the presidency.) When the Beatles came along, they probably got a better reception than they deserved because these guys were so bad. The Fab Four were OK when they did old Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis numbers (Ringo tended to sing them), but "Norwegian Wood"? Come on.

I guess the 60's were OK for those who were stoned the whole time. For the rest of us, though, "A Whiter Shade of Pale" just didn't hack it. If we worked at it, we could find songs worth listening to, and not all of them by Southerners like Delaney and Bonnie, either: Eric Clapton and Joe Cocker and some of the other English rockers knew where the bodies were buried, and the Rolling Stones were arguably the greatest rock and roll band ever. But the dominant, drugged-out stream that flowed from the Beatles and wound up at the Fillmore left me cold.

And sometime in the 70's, I lost it altogether. Now I can't tell the differ-

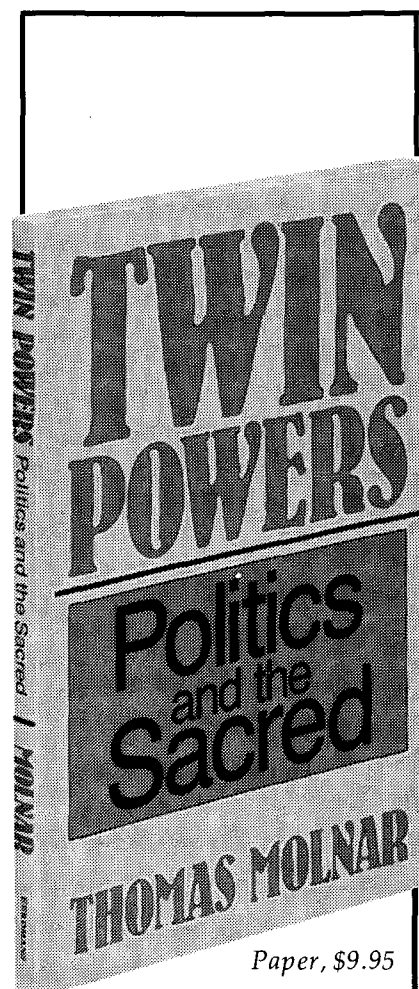
ence between New Wave and heavy metal — and frankly I don't care. I can recognize that Prince is the Little Richard of the 80's, but even that recognition doesn't make him any easier to listen to. Some of my contemporaries claim that the torch has been passed to Bruce Springsteen, but I don't see it. For starters, how can you take someone named Bruce seriously as a rocker? (No offense, you Bruces out there, but it is a lot like Bobby.)

So where does an old rock-and-roller turn these days? Country music is where I turn, back to the source. To me, these days, it often sounds more like rock and roll than rock and roll does. Listen to Hank Williams Jr.'s recent "Born to Boogie" album, for example. The words of the title cut aren't much, but it's got a good beat and you can dance to it. "Honky Tonk Women" goes up against the memory of Mick Jagger and pummels him to a draw. "Keep Your Hands to Yourself" covers a hit by the Georgia Satellites, a neotraditional group I wish well, if only because their leader told *Southern* magazine that "[t]he last vestiges of regionalism should be hung onto like a Doberman with a sweater." My favorite is probably a solid rocker called "Buck Naked" (which Hank pronounces "nekkid," of course, in keeping with Lewis Grizzard's observation that, in Southern English, "naked" means you ain't got no clothes on, while "nekkid" means you ain't got no clothes on and you're up to something). And that's just Side A: five songs, four of them pretty fair rock and roll.

Like the rock and roll of 30 years ago, the rocking country of Charlie Daniels and Waylon Jennings and Hank Williams Jr. should be listened to in smoky dives, on crowded dance floors, or in steamy parked cars. This is, in short, good-time music. Ignoring that fact is part of what was wrong with the 60's, and I've come perilously close to doing it here. Rock and roll shouldn't be treated solemnly.

But that doesn't mean it can't be taken seriously.

From 1961 to 1963, John Shelton Reed was the host of "Rock and Roll Memory Time" on the student FM station at MIT, playing those great old songs of 1956-1960.



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Letter From Albion

by Andrei Navrozov

Prison Pencil, Supermarket Crayon

◆
“Poets in our civilization,” a famous poet wrote in his most famous essay, “must be difficult.” He went on to explain his thought, and his English-speaking audience understood him. When the thought was translated, it went on living in other languages. But would an English-speaking audience understand his famous lines:

Please come with me
When night
Like a man undergoing
surgery . . . ?

Or, for that matter, would *any* audience understand these lines and appreciate them as poetry? Yet, quite possibly, this is just what the opening of “Prufrock” sounds like in another language.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out
against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon
a table . . .

But why translate back into English the words of a hypothetical translation of an English poem into another language? I have just finished translating “Prufrock” for the winter number of *Kontinent*, the Russian-language émigré quarterly, and this is how it begins:

Let us go for a walk, us two,
When the volume of autumn
twilight
Is expanded as through
tears . . .

What gibberish, you may say. Well, I have worked on my translation for many months, and I hope my Russian readers think otherwise. The point is that, unfortunately, of the three quotations above only the middle one can be understood and appreciated as poetry in English.

All this is by way of introducing my reactions to a book of poetry recently published in England. Let us open it at random:

We have learned, indeed,
to throw time into tins

And have stirred in the
condensed night at all times.

This century grows ever darker,
and the next will not
come soon,
To wipe clean the names
off yesterday's prison wall.

Thus begins a translation of a poem by Irina Ratushinskaya in her collection *Pencil Letter*, published simultaneously with her memoir *Grey Is the Color of Hope*. It is astonishing how much this English “equivalent” of the poem sounds like our hypothetical “Please come with me/When night/Like a man undergoing surgery . . .” And yet, there it is.



Why on earth would this poet—any poet—want to “throw time into tins”? If she tried to preserve time by canning, or tinning, it, that would be understandable—that would be a metaphor. But to “throw” it? Throw it *away*—perhaps. Throw it *at* something—possibly. But certainly not *into*, especially not “into tins.” Still, let us imagine that she has something in mind. Surely throwing a thing into a tin is an easy operation; surely throwing it into a tin cannot require a great deal of learning. Then why “We have learned”? After all, that is how the poem begins; there must be some news in the line, some fact deserving of our attention. And, to top it all, that preposterous “indeed”!

If you are so smart, someone said, why don't you just translate it yourself, instead of carrying on like a maniac? I have. But I do not wish to sound

didactic. It's just that I cannot understand how anybody can be so tone-deaf. In offering my own version of the poem to the reader of *Chronicles* I merely want him to agree that—unlike the version just quoted—it *could* have been written by a poet. Honestly, that's all I want. For the answer to the question, “Is poetry simply a set of arbitrary words describing meaningless actions?” has to be, in the mind of a *Chronicles* reader, an unequivocal No. Otherwise I'm out of a job.

As I said, all of this is by way of introducing my impressions of Ratushinskaya, for it is poetry, no more and no less, that she writes in Russian, and it was for the writing of poetry, no more and no less, that she was imprisoned in Russia. The poems she wrote during her ordeal in isolation cells and prison camps are more than a testament to her suffering: they are a new, iridescent incrustation upon the surface of Russian culture. This is why it is so painful to see her work, which years of physical and spiritual torture had failed to emasculate, trivialized and profaned by civilized and carefree men and women who transmute these crystals of anguish into lumpy *vers libres*, often with a “feminist” message.

Grey Is the Color of Hope is a factual record of those years. “Never believe them, never fear them, never ask them for anything!” was the key lesson of the poet's schooling, which began with her arrest in 1982 on a charge of “anti-Soviet agitation.” Judging by Ratushinskaya's public utterances, it seems she is not about to unlearn that lesson now—as the wishful, ever-wishful West reads a desperate faith into her former captors' every pose, including the pose of clemency that they struck announcing her release in October 1986. That particular pose, she understands, was timed to coincide with the Reykjavik summit.

“It's nonsense to talk about limited human rights,” Ratushinskaya recently told an interviewer, “it's like limited breath.” Indeed, is it not nonsense to talk about human rights at all—as if these were a natural phenomenon, more or less limited under different regional conditions? Would it not be more accurate to say that human rights have never been limited in Soviet Russia—for the simple reason that they have never existed in Soviet Rus-