

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Allons, Enfants de la Patrie

It was years ago that I first read the collection of Donald Davidson's essays called *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*. In one of them, "Some Day, in Old Charleston," the doughty Last Agrarian addressed one of his perennial themes, the trashiness of modern civilization and the superiority of the Old Southern regime, by describing Charleston's Army Day parade of April 6, 1948.

Down King Street that day came "a ceremonious procession stepping to martial music, carrying flags and deadly weapons": columns of helmeted and booted paratroopers, Marines in red and blue, sailors "who looked unhappy as sailors always do when marching as infantry," the old Carolina regiments—Washington Light Infantry, Sumter Guards—the Citadel band, the cadets of Porter Military Academy. Davidson was savoring the parade's order and decorum, "traditional and unalterable," when, suddenly, "more music, with a saucy blare in its horns and drums," and a high school band from upstart North Charleston appeared, led by a girl dressed as a blue devil and turning cartwheels—

And behind her pranced a whole squad of drum majorettes. They threw their knees high to the beat of the drums. They tossed and swung their batons, twisted hips and bodies, nodded their heads under their grotesque shakos. They simpered brassily, their girlish features frozen in a Hollywood smile.

Oh, my (I thought). Brassy simpering? Twisted hips? Knees up? Steady, Don.

Davidson went on at lengths about the horror of "the naked legs of drum majorettes on King Street, in old

Charleston." About majorettes "largely without clothes." About "the flesh and the devil" devoid of "any but the crudest meaning." About the traditional drum major displaced by "a follies girl, a bathing beauty, a strip-tease dancer," his baton now "the ornament by which the drum majorette attracts attention to her charms," this for "purposes that will not bear examination."

I've never forgotten this diatribe. You know how some associations are indelible? Like every time I put shaving cream on my face I think about Hagerstown, Maryland—and I don't even remember why? Well, a year later I couldn't have told you much else about Davidson's essay, but for 20 years and more every time I've thought about baton-twirling (which isn't often, I admit) I've thought about his revulsion at "the bare flesh of drum majorettes in their quasi-march."

I thought about it, for instance, when I read a snide but hilarious *Esquire* article on the Dixie National Baton Twirling Institute at Ole Miss, by Terry Southern, the author of *Candy*. (What would poor Davidson have thought of his beloved Southland's taking the lead in this activity, and being mocked for it by a pornographer?) I thought about it again when someone joked in the early days of the Carter administration that maybe a Southern president would come across with Arts Endowment grants for twirling schools? (I thought, too, about Davidson's prescient warning in *I'll Take My Stand* against federal cultural programs.) I thought about it when I went to my hometown's Christmas parade and encountered a half-dozen twirling schools, each with its students marching behind a sound-truck. ("The next logical step," Davidson had written, intending sardonic *reductio ad absurdum*, "would be to abandon the band and to substitute a sound-truck playing phonograph records—a sound-truck which could be preceded by and followed by and covered with a large company of drum majorettes, all twirling batons, all as little clothed as the censor would allow.") Finally, I

thought about it when I read somewhere that the principal twirling stance, left hand on hip, is African in origin. (I don't know what else you do with your left hand when your right is engaged with a baton, but if there's anything to this theory I fear it may confirm the old segregationist's worst suspicions.)

My selective memory of Davidson's essay stuck with me, of course, because his disgust was so *violent*. Terry Southern thinks twirling is tacky—well, OK. But Davidson almost lost his lunch over it. Not just your average misogynist (I thought). ~~Something of a dirty~~ old man. A *repressed* dirty old man. Yuck.

But last July 14 the television coverage of the Bastille Day parade from Paris sent me back to that essay. As the ancient joke has it, it's remarkable how much the old man has learned. I may owe his shade an apology. I'd really lost sight of his point, which was about exploitation and "abstraction" and what would now be called commodification. He saw majorettes not just as an intrusion but as a perversion—perverting the beautiful, just as the big-time sports they often accompany pervert the gallant.

I think I know what Davidson would have made of the French extravaganza.

No doubt you heard that it was expensive. *Newsweek* put the cost at \$67 million, more or less. The prime-time parade was put together by a young French-American named Jean-Paul Goude, heretofore best known for his work in advertising and music videos. "We're trying to prove a point," Goude told a television interviewer; he wanted, he said, to produce "a parade with a content." Of course that content had nothing to do with anything as boring as history or as atavistic as patriotism. "The French Revolution," he said (in an accent you can supply yourself), "is only a school-book souvenir to me. I mean, just cliché. It's a big cliché." Goude didn't even want to display the Tricolor, but he lost that battle.

He billed his parade as "The Festival

of the Planet's Tribes," and its theme was supposedly the Rights of Man. In fact, it began well, with a moving tribute to the Chinese liberation movement smashed by the People's Army shortly before. Chinese acrobats had been supposed to tumble down the Champs-Élysées, but after the events of June they were replaced by a hundred or so Chinese students, simply walking their bicycles. Accompanying them was a float bearing a giant Chinese drum, silent. On the drum was a crudely lettered sign: "*Nous continuons*." The only sound was the spooky ringing of bicycle bells.

But things went downhill swiftly from there. We had the "tribes of France" in Goude's rendition of French coal-miners' costumes and striped stockings, playing a tedious refrain by an African composer on accordions and hurdy-gurdies. (Two tribes, Basques and Bretons, mostly refused to participate.) We had tattered English punks, slouching along in an artificial drizzle, attended by hotel doormen carrying umbrellas. We had a hissing steam railroad, accompanied by sweaty barechested drummers (Dutch, I think). We had Soviet soldiers from Lenin's Tomb goose-stepping through artificial snow, and an ice-skating polar bear pursuing a flag-carrying Russian maiden on a rink carried on the shoulders of Soviet sailors. We had a dozen or so giant, deformed women who looked something like Goude's ex-wife Grace Jones, spinning atop what I presume were golf carts hidden in their voluminous skirts and carrying children who wore the costumes and bore the flags of many nations (including, I noticed, Palestine).

Most Europeans in the parade seemed to be militaristic automatons or outright degenerates, and perhaps this was no accident. This was clearly the ex-colonies' night. A striking African float held a six-sided pyramid of drummers, limbs akimbo, resembling something off a Hindu temple. The television coverage (which Goude mixed himself) returned again and again to a Senegalese float where spotlights and smoky torches illuminated tribal drummers and dancers: the drummers conducted by a maniacal figure in white tie and tails; the dancers, in tutus, a savage parody of Degas.

After all this the Florida A&M Uni-

versity marching band was downright homey as it moonwalked to James Brown's "I Feel Good." The Brit announcer said that Brown—A/K/A Mr. Please Please Please, the Godfather of Soul, Hardest Working Man in Show Business—is "one of Goude's great heroes." (This may be the only thing Goude has in common with Lee Atwater. Atwater visits Brown in the South Carolina hoosegow where he is now pulling time—deservedly, as even *Rolling Stone* seems to acknowledge.)

The announcer observed that the parade gave full play to Goude's "cartoon sensibility on an epic scale," and there's no denying that it was effective theater. But the message it conveyed (to me at least) wasn't the upbeat, brotherly one Goude had in mind. The dim, smoky, pulsating scene pierced now and again by flashbulbs as if by lightning, the techno-primitivism, the Third World flavor—it was a lot like the New York subway at rush hour. (Sorry. Couldn't resist. Actually it was a nightmare vision straight out of *Blade Runner*, and it gave me the creeps.)

The African and Asian and Arab presence, as striking in the parade as it is these days on the streets of Paris, illustrated vividly France's colonial chickens coming home to roost. ("Why are you here?" the Frenchman asks the Algerian immigrant. "Because you were *there*," the Algerian replies.) This phenomenon can be viewed with the fear and loathing of Jean Raspail's disturbing novel *The Camp of the Saints* or with the cheerful equanimity of a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, but for better or for worse the place will not be the same again. I'm sure Goude saw his parade as a celebration of that fact, but I'm afraid I saw it as another half-million votes for the thuggish Jean-Marie Le Pen and his nativist National Front.

"We're all from the Ganges now," some of the less admirable characters in Raspail's novel chirp, and Goude seems to share that view. We were told solemnly that he believes "World music can heal the divisions between nations." This belief "stems from his love of, almost obsession with, rhythms like [those] he heard in Senegal," a "relentless beat" he feels is "at the root of most of today's popular music."

Well, the parade's relentless beat did

go on—and on. People paraded to hip-hop, R&B, and rap; to whining Moroccan music; to African drumming; to generic Oriental sounds. But aside from some Scottish bagpiping I heard no martial music. For that matter the only *French* music I heard was the "Marseillaise," at the end. And even that was sung by an American, soprano Jessye Norman. (Miss Norman seems to rank right below Jerry Lewis in the French pantheon of American cultural heroes, so when she asked to sing it her buddy the Minister of Culture apparently couldn't say no.) With the possible exception of "Dixie," the "Marseillaise" is the most stirring national anthem going; it usually makes me want to go sack a church or something. But Goude's lugubrious arrangement resembled that New Age stuff with whale noises. I perked up when Miss Norman was carried off, singing, on some sort of tumbrel, thinking maybe Goude had scheduled a date with the *belle dame sans merci* as a boffo conclusion. No such luck.

Far be it from me to tell other folks how to mark their historic anniversaries, especially the French. Since it's not my country I don't figure I've got much opinion coming. Besides, anyone who has been in a music video with a midget lady wrestler should probably keep his mouth shut about decadence. But even if you don't think much of the French Revolution, surely its bicentennial deserved better than this. Or did it, perhaps, somehow lead to this? Maybe Donald Davidson could explain.

I must say that it was something of a relief when Goude's festival was over and the channel I was watching reran the morning's military parade. There was something clean and purposeful about the cadets and fire brigades, the airplanes and APC's. Even the bearded Foreign Legionnaires with their leather aprons and axes looked jolly and wholesome, straight from the village smithy, their sinister half-time tread notwithstanding.

And now I begin to understand how Donald Davidson felt at the Army Day Parade in Charleston. As he watched the soldiers he took his characteristic grim pleasure from this "reminder . . . that the processes of government, laboratory science, liberalism, and expertise must be depended upon sometime,

somewhere, to reach a breaking point, at which breaking point the army takes over and the ancient battle begins once more."

Not exactly words to stir hearts in Tiananmen Square, but after Goude's *jour de gloire* one can almost see Davidson's point.

*John Shelton Reed left Paris two weeks before the festivities. As a rule, he views the world from Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*

## Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

### Not a Smashing Success

It's the little things—not the front-page disclosures—that suggest to us that we've been had.

Take, for instance, a 1987-88 study by the Oregon Department of Transportation. ODOT studied 551 students between 16 and 19 years of age who had completed driver education programs, 581 students who said they *would* have taken the course had it been available, and 197 students who didn't take the course and weren't interested in doing so.

The project compared driver examination test scores and driving records of the 1,329 drivers, all of whom obtained their first driver's license between September 1987 and January 1988.

An article in the ODOT magazine explains that students who had taken driver education and *passed* the driver exam scored "significantly higher" on the law and knowledge part of the test, and "somewhat higher" on the behind-the-wheel portion, than those who passed the licensing test but had no interest in taking the course. On the other hand, the flunking rate for all groups was the same, whether or not they'd had training.

More amazing than this, though, was what ODOT Motor Vehicles Division researcher Barnie Jones was quoted as saying, "We found that the *driving records* of those who had taken student driver education and those who hadn't were very similar. The

groups had virtually identical traffic accident and violation rates after six months and 13½ months of driving." In other words, driver ed doesn't change any lifestyles.

Now, in most states driver education is *mandatory* for high school students who expect to drive, and car and liability insurance is lower for kids who have taken the course. That was true even 20 years ago, when we were forced to sit in the simulator (we called it the "stimulator") and watch bloody movies about kids who drank and drove, movies so embarrassing that we giggled through them. Now ODOT has the nerve to say that driver ed really doesn't make much difference.

This also encourages thinking about other "mandatory learning experiences" that our kids don't need. What about physical education class? Does getting frustrated or sweaty for 40 minutes twice a week (and then either being denied a shower or forced to take one, gang-style, and re-dress in a sweaty locker room) teach our kids that sports are fun, that our bodies are temples? No PE teacher I've ever had has looked as if she *enjoyed* the job. Every 1989 American couch potato—and we come by the truckload—was forced to attend years and years of gym class. They just didn't "take." I learned in adulthood to enjoy several sports, moderately, but at the time I would rather have been reading. So sue me.

Then there's "hygiene" or "health" class. It's no secret that even though most teenagers are forced to take this class, they're still having babies during homeroom and making more of them after school. "Health" class *used* to mean learning how important it is to brush one's teeth and wash with soap; now third-graders learn exactly how to do things that I still had to guess about when I was in *college*. These children are also, presumably, being told about Death, and how it looms ever more near these days—after all, sex ed didn't move into elementary classrooms in a big way until what has come to be very wishfully called the "AIDS epidemic." I don't particularly *want* my third-grade son to know about condoms—and if he's not interested, let's give the kid a break. I tried to chat with him about babies one night as we did the dishes, and he finally turned to me and said, "Mom, I'm having a lot

of trouble listening to this." Still, those babies keep dropping, so we ship the kids off to another state-mandated "health" class. Their time would be better spent in driver ed.

Does anyone remember "social studies"? It's still around. I didn't have a bona fide *history* class until I was in high school, and I didn't have *geography* until I was in college. In grade school and middle school we had "social studies," where in a dozen pages kids learn a smattering of the history, customs, and agriculture of a smattering of countries. A fourteen-year-old sixth-grade social studies book our household plodded grimly through last year "did" Italy in ten pages, covering the early Romans, grapes and olives, Mussolini, and everything in between (except the Pope, of course). That same book pronounced Kuwait the "world's most progressive nation," and asked, at the end of one chapter, whether North Vietnam or South Vietnam were the communist nation. (I didn't look, but I bet the Vietnam chapter talked about rice and the manufacture of straw hats.) Kids today still have "social studies," and then embarrass a puzzled nation when they flunk history and geography tests.

Then there's "defensive driving" for adults. Most states make a defensive driving class obligatory for those who have been in a traffic accident, regardless whether they were sober at the time. Now, an adult with a good record who has been in a fender-bender and who is really *interested* in learning a few little tips for driving more safely will take a lot home from such a class. The majority of drivers won't. And yet "defensive driving" courses are a big industry, and make a state or city *feel* as if it's doing something. It is, I guess: creating a cash flow.

But to get back to the driver ed students: I have a solution. If a kid does poorly on his exam or has a lot of accidents, just increase his mandatory PE classes. Make him run more laps and then endure the purgatory of gang showers—or return to class unshowered. It'll keep him off the streets, and will be a right use of every aspect of gym class, which was, after all, *created* to punish.

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