

ART <> ENTERTAINMENT

BOOKS



Nathan Irvin Huggins

Slavery was not their destiny

BLACK ODYSSEY: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery
By Nathan Irvin Huggins
Panthcon Books, New York, \$8.95

In a volume of some 250 pages, this is what Professor Huggins has tried to do:

- to compress within that space the story of the Afro-American slave experience (together with the African background);
- to "touch wherever possible the emotional and spiritual essence of [the slaves'] experience;"
- to focus, not on the protagonists of overt rebellion, defiance and escape, but on "the vast ma-

jority who adapted" to their condition.

That focus is motivated by a belief that beyond the manifest heroism of open resistance there was "a quality of courage still unsung" in the efforts of the vast majority to forge a family structure, "a cosmology and moral order," and the elements of a culture—all of which served to preserve human integrity and nurture the development of a community.

All this, Huggins asserts, represented a "triumph of the human spirit over adversity that is the great story in Afro-American slavery."

His concern with the emotional and spiritual leads him to choose a style that is "evocative and impressionistic." He warns the reader that in doing so he has "risked some distortion," citing as an example his construction of a model to describe the West African background, even though this background, which extended through two centuries and a great variety of locales, cannot truly be reduced to any single model.

Style, as well as brevity, is served by jettisoning such academic conventions as footnotes. However, a brief bibliographical note is appended, and the prefatory acknowledgments refer to the other pillar of scholarship upon which the book rests: research in several African countries and in the archives of the U.S. South. Indeed, the description and analysis of what was entailed in the forcible transplantation from Africa to America constitute an impressive portion of the book.

Huggins has produced a concise history of the Afro-American slave that is credible, eloquent, stimulating and thought provoking. Most thought-provoking, of course, is the contradiction between external adaptation to slavery and an internal refusal to concede its legitimacy. As Huggins puts it, in the perception of most slaves, "slavery was their condition, not their destiny." And further: "The slaves' tendency to adapt to their condition rather than to defy it, attests to their realism rather than their contentment or inertia. Never did Afro-American slaves assent to the rightness... of slavery."

Much of the drama in this history lies in the tension between the realism of adaptation and the underlying reality of discontent.

—Al Richmond

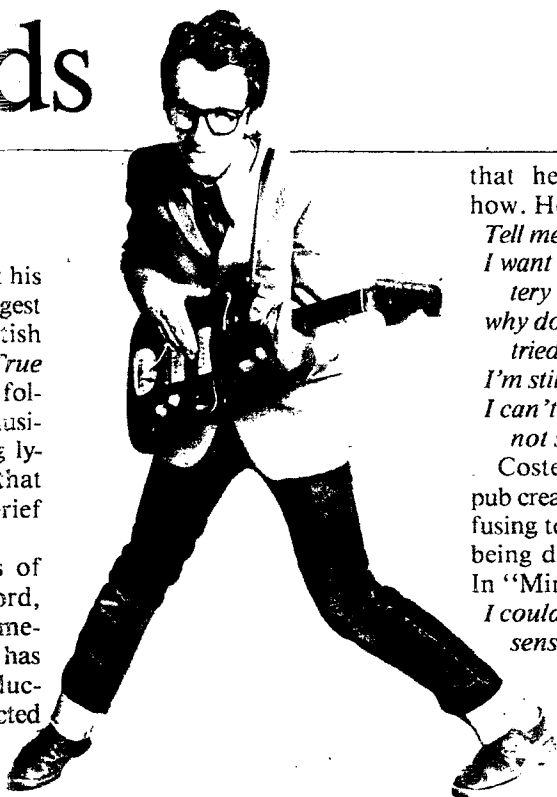
Al Richmond is a journalist and the author of A Long View from the Left.

Records

MY AIM IS TRUE
Elvis Costello
(Columbia Records)

His first name is Elvis, but his picture, words and music suggest an urban angst-ridden, British Buddy Holly. *My Aim Is True* should be a clear joy for rock followers. It gets down to the musical basics, without sacrificing lyrical poise or the humanity that creeps through on the 13 brief cuts.

Coming fast on the heels of Graham Parker's latest record, Costello's work confirms something that the punk explosion has obscured. Britain is still producing rockers, intimately connected



that he doesn't exactly know how. He screams:

*Tell me about the mystery dance
I want to know about the mystery dance
why don't you show me, cause I
tried and I tried
I'm still mystified,
I can't do it anymore and I'm
not satisfied.*

Costello's album is another pub creation, full of action and refusing to obscure the main points being discussed at the moment. In "Miracle Man," he sings:
*I could tell you that I like your
sensitivity*

*But you know it's the way you
walk.*

My Aim Is True is exactly that. It hits the mark with musical honesty and intensity. It's a fun record, and it announces the arrival of another promising artist who remains committed to the vision of rock'n'roll.

—Joe Heumann

Joe Heumann reviews records regularly for IN THESE TIMES.

with an earlier music who are representing it with new-found vitality.

The sound is limited to two guitars, drums and bass. The production values are sparse, and Costello's voice controls the foreground, mixing teenage lament with sardonic criticism of contemporary society. This is working class music, covering factory miseries ("Welcome to the Work-

ing Week"), misguided love ("Alison") and fear of the *Rebel Without a Cause* cataclysm ("Waiting for the End of the World").

A song like "Mystery Dance" summarizes Costello's view of the power of sex to the uninitiated. Frustration is the guide here, a dominant mode of discourse for the modern young. A guy wants to do it, but is willing to admit

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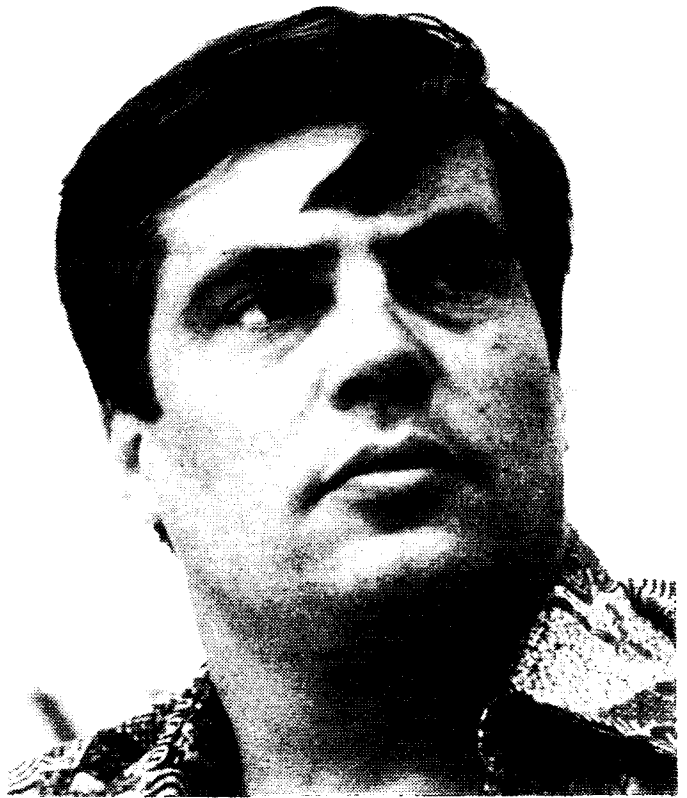
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Ed Sadowski



NEXT WEEK IN THESE TIMES

A report from the International Women's Year conference in Houston; Dan Marshall on the reforms made by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; Diana Johnstone on

the West German and French views of "international terrorism"; an interview with allegedly murdered South African leader Stephen Biko; a report on a rightwing public interest group.

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Records



Leonard Cohen, singer/songwriter

Cohen himself has expressed dislike for the album although he thinks it may represent some sort of artistic landmark.

DEATH OF A LADIES MAN

Leonard Cohen
Songs by Spector & Cohen
Produced by Phil Spector
(Warner Brothers Records)

Leonard Cohen is known for writing bitter-sweet tunes with sometimes insightful, sometimes amusing lyrics, which he renders in a plain but appealingly plaintive voice. Too bad you can barely hear either one on *Death of a Ladies Man*, the new album on which he shares equal billing with his producer, the legendary Phil Spector. A generous gesture on his part, perhaps, but don't forget that half the credit carries half the blame, and Leonard is able to claim that once Phil got hold of the tapes, the entire project was out of his control.

Spector, of course, made his mark as well as his first million in the early '60s as the Boy Wonder who produced groups like the Ronettes and the Crystals. It was then that he introduced his famous "Wall of Sound" technique that blended voices, brass, violins, guitars, drums and glock-

enspiels into one melodious swell of noise. But with the advent of British Rock, Spector found himself squeezed out of a steady job and forced to resort to the occasional free-lance assignment, most notably the Beatles' "Long and Winding Road" and the first couple of John Lennon albums. However, while Phil may have been sufficiently awed while in the presence of the ex-Beatle to give him a share in the mixing, Cohen exerted no such influence.

The result is a weird clash of music at odds with itself. Cohen is either drowned out by the excessive orchestration, or else dogged insistently by the use of instrumental frills where a lone voice would have served as well, if not better. Breathless is the best way to describe the relentless accompaniment, which, unlike the sparse arrangements on Cohen's previous records, doesn't pause for a minute. The beat never lets up to allow for the moment of silence that was obviously intended by the author.

Perhaps realizing his predicament once Spector got into the studio, Cohen has included more than the usual amount of "throwaway" numbers that serve primarily as one-shot jokes. Among these are "Memories" (which employs a cumbersome musical crescendo leading up to the ludicrous hook line, "won't you let me see your naked body?") and "Don't Go Home With Your Hard-On" which is probably saying enough right there. Cohen is joined on this particular cut by Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan, who can't be heard above the din any more

than he can.

A few of the other songs are bearable, and the title tune itself is almost good, except that it practically begs for a simpler arrangement. Cohen himself has expressed dislike for the album although he thinks it may represent some sort of artistic landmark. (Something on a par with smell-o-vision, perhaps?).

A lot of famous names lent their talent to help him out on this record, but like they say, with friends like that...

—P. Hertel

P. Hertel reviews films and music for IN THESE TIMES.

A WORKING MAN CAN'T GET NOWHERE TODAY

Merle Haggard
(Capitol Records)

AIN'T IT SOMETHIN'

James Talley
(Capitol Records)

In the era of the good time sound, the appearance of an album with real social lyrics is good news. When two show-up, it calls for a celebration.

James Talley and Merle Haggard both sing about what Woody Guthrie called "the plain thoughts of plain people." They write honestly about real, day-to-day joys and heartaches of working people. Talley is a virtual unknown while Haggard is king of the country hill. Both have recently released socially conscious albums, for which neither is likely to get the attention he deserves.

Merle Haggard's *Working Man Can't Get Nowhere Today* is the best C&W album of the year. Lyr-

ically, it's one of the most significant albums of the decade. Here is an accepted superstar saying loud and clear that things just don't work in the system.

I owe every dime I make to every soul I know

The higher up I reach the further down I go

This old broken heart of mine is all I got to show.

To be sure, Haggard offers no solutions, and no one will confuse him with Karl Marx. But then Karl never had the backing of Norm Hamlet on pedal steel and the impeccable Roy Nichols on guitar. Led by this duo, the Strangers show why they're the tightest back-up band in the business.

The rest of the disc is a foray into the best white country blues of the last 40 years, including:

- a moving tribute to the late Lefty Frizzell, an early Haggard influence;
- "Blues for Dixie";
- a rendition of "Moanin'"

that's so crisp you'll think you're listening to the Hank Williams original.

Some people will consider this album an attempt at some sort of country chic. It's not and hasn't had an easy time getting on the AM charts. They remember Haggard as the author of "Okie from Muskogee" and "Fightin' Side of Me," and forget that Merle Haggard was also writing songs like the inter-racial love story, "Irma Jackson" and "Tearin' the Labor Camps Down." He is a very complex, easily misunderstood human being, who refuses to be pigeon-holed.

It would be nice to say that Merle has turned left. That's not the case, as the albums finale clearly demonstrates. In the sure-to-be-misunderstood "White Boy," he returns to convenient scapegoats like welfare and asserts that "if you want to get ahead, you gotta hump and git it."

Contradictory? Probably. But

also an honest reflection of the nature of much of the American working class. If you want to find out where much of Middle America is at, this album is as good a place as any to start.

Ain't It Somethin' is James Talley's fourth album. As in his earlier classic, *Tryin' Like the Devil*, which was a milestone in the fusion of social lyrics with high quality Nashville music, Talley sings about people's problems in a way that hasn't been matched since Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger teamed up about 40 years ago.

While the lyrics are not as overtly political as in *Devil*, Talley's populist message rings true, particularly in his songs about the ill-fated plutonium workers from "Richland, Washington" and in a touching, tragic paean to the "Poets of the West Virginia Mines."

As always, Talley is backed by some of the finest musicians in Nashville today, including Josh Graves on dobro, Johnny Gimble on fiddle and mandolin, and the omnipresent Charlie McCoy on harmonica.

Talley's commercial appeal has not yet matched his artistic ability. After dismal sales on his first three albums—largely the fault of poor promotion—Capitol apparently decided to change his image. Judging from the album, they hadn't agreed on a new identity when they went into production. The result is a musical grab-bag. There are several country songs (of which half are country blues, half country rock) and a couple of folk tunes. The rest is brassy, bleached soul. Individually these songs are fine; collectively they create a blurred image.

Let's hope the next time out, the producers and the promo people can get it together and get Talley the commercial success so long overdue.

—Sheldon Sunness

Sheldon Sunness is a free-lance writer in New York.

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