



THE SOUTH

The soul of good old boys

Fig. 15

Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South
By Bertram Wyatt-Brown
Oxford University Press,
581 pp., \$29.95

By Kim Lacy Rogers

They were often as volatile as the thunderstorms that drenched the landscape. The most attractive possessed a languid, seductive charm and an inclination for alcoholism and self-destructive personal risks. These were the young white men of small Southern towns, the boys Southern girls warily dated, and for whom we assumed a perfectly smooth feminine surface. A nice girl disclosed nothing to these men; you had to avoid getting got. As great-aunts, grandmothers and mothers warned: they are necessary to your happiness, but you cannot trust them.

The women, of course, were right. Beneath the lean, sensual athleticism of the most beautiful Southern jocks sometimes lay dormant desires for danger, conquest and blood. They gratified these appetites with contact sports ("Root, you hawks," the backfield coach used to tell his players) and with casual sexual conquests. The boys also engaged in the ritualized violence of fights, drinking, drag racing, hunting and the occasional terrorizing of blacks.

Many of the young men of my high school years headed for the military and Vietnam in the late '60s and early '70s. As fighter pilots, infantry captains and grunts, they expanded their rituals of young manhood in combat—and behaved as honorable Southern men.

They conformed to what has long been described as a distinctly regional form of masculine development. From William Faulkner's doomed romantics, trapped in primal "innocence," to the teenage alcoholics of Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*, this kind of man has been understood in terms of impulse and ritual, risk and violence.

The right stuff.

This masculine ideal still flourishes. We see adult-variants in the form of astronauts, test pilots, evangelists, military officers—men with the "right stuff." The South has long supplied the military with numbers of officers and enlisted men far in excess of its population's representation in

other fields. As late as the early '70s, a majority of army officers still came from small Southern towns.

As a regional character, this kind of male might be dismissed as some sort of macho dinosaur, sure to vanish when the newest of the New Souths finally achieves a suburban sunbelt homogeneity in step with the rest of the country. But I doubt it. In life under Reagan, we are perhaps seeing a renaissance of heroic gentlemen bent on conquest, risk and the preservation of jingoistic gringo honor.

Bertram Wyatt-Brown's book, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, one of the most provocative essays on Southern history in recent years, addresses the character of Southern masculinity and its consequences for the Southern social order.

Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor* is a creative and interesting book, but many professional historians may object to it on standards of its criteria for analysis and proof. Wyatt-Brown has speculated a great deal on the basis of essentially literary evidence (meaning manuscript sources), and has generalized broad cultural patterns from tendencies he has pieced together from documents. His historical analogies are interesting, but strange. He finds antebellum Southerners exhibiting forms of frontier behavior that were rooted in their Celtic origins. But Wyatt-Brown sees this same behavior as similar to patterns of ritual violence common to Mediterranean cultures. Using several anthropological arguments, he has written a piece of historical analysis that replicates some of the weaknesses of anthropological description: his Old South appears to be a static civilization, frozen rather than changing.

Southern Honor works best when approached as a speculative essay, rather than as a monograph of assertion and proof. At its center is the figure of the Southern white man, an intensely physical, externally motivated hero who dominates a culture that grants him access to white women, children and blacks. The Southern gentleman—whether a planter, lawyer, farmer or gambler—has lived according to a code of honor, chivalry, hierarchy and entitlement.

At the heart of Wyatt-Brown's notion of honor lies the "evalua-

tion of the public." Honor is an inner conviction of self-worth that is based upon public judgment. Honor is reputation.

In the antebellum South, a more archaic culture of "honor and shame" persisted, long after a Calvinistic culture of "conscience and guilt" began to develop in the industrializing, urbanizing North. In the Northern states, individuals began to internalize notions of right and wrong and judge themselves accordingly. But in the South, community values and judgment determined individual self-esteem and success. The community exercised its right to judge through rituals like the charivari (pronounced "shivaree"), which involved the public shaming of an offender, as well as the more famous Southern community festivity of lynching.

Racism was intrinsic to white male honor. Thus, in the post-Reconstruction South, any economic, political or social advancements by blacks were "read" as threats to the sanctity of the white family. These threats were perceived and dealt with as fundamentally sexual in nature. Hence, the lynch mobs' penchant for castrating their black victims.

Families themselves assumed that masculine expression would often be violent, according to Wyatt-Brown. Parents were permissive about their sons' "childish aggression against peers and

Racism was assumed to be a problem of poor white folks. But history shows the "best white people" led the fight to preserve the segregationist status quo.

underlings." This permissiveness "encouraged egocentrism and violent self expression" in boys whose rites of passage took the forms of "fighting, horse racing, gambling, swearing, drinking and wenching."

The plantation society that sanctioned this kind of masculine behavior offered few alternative role models for young men. Planting and planter-related professions like law and medicine were the goals of most upper-class young men, and the economy afforded few of the alternative occupations that were available in the urbanized North.

Southern feminine honor.

What did this mean for relations between men and women in this hothouse of family and kin relations? Wyatt-Brown claims that "the encounter of antebellum Southern male and female was intense, competitive and almost antagonistic." Women had the power to "shame" men, to force them to live up to their frequently murderous and suicidal codes of honor. This was their "unconscious revenge" for being forced to live in the "multitude of negatives" that defined female honor—the restraint of "every thought, action and word." Feminine honor was based on a lack of disclosure, an eternal concealment of the self, an essential social dishonesty and deception.

Given these polarities of male violence and female abstinence, masculine licentiousness and white female purity—and the quality of honor as a public performance—Wyatt-Brown's analysis of Southern lynchings and community violence makes terrible sense.

The virtue of *Southern Honor* lies in Wyatt-Brown's analysis of Southern violence and extralegal civic rituals as products of the culture's ethic of masculinity instead of an aberration from codes of gentility and courtesy. As late as the 1950s and '60s, scholars liked to attribute the vitriolic rhetoric and racial violence of white segregationists to lower-class ignorance. Racism was assumed to be a problem of poor white folks, the ignorant crackers who needed to be educated into humanity. Many recent studies, both of Southern history and the Civil Rights movement, have disputed this line of wishful thinking. A number of writers—among them William Chafe and

Harry Ashmore—have analyzed the role of the "best white people" in leading segregationist groups and in attempting to maintain the segregated status quo.

But what Wyatt-Brown does so very well is to point out that it is the honorable Southern gentleman who was most likely to fight duels; to acquiesce to, if not lead, a lynching party or charivari; to ignore or abuse or condescend to the women around him. It is this brittle structure of masculinity that Wyatt-Brown describes as the flower and curse of Southern history: the terrible, damaging male ego, leaping into the world with daring, bravado and romantic abandon. Even the Civil War became a simple test of manhood.

At the center of masculine honor is, of course, romance. Wyatt-Brown's menfolk share the same love of risk, death and blood that have drawn national leaders into numerous genocidal frenzies in this century. But fundamentally, these Southerners are quite different from the more modern corporate merchants of disaster. As a pre-technological elite, the honorable Southerners and many of their Klannish descendants shared an essentially archaic and personalized notion of beauty—the chivalric and honorable ideal that makes the horror of their violence so much more appalling than the mechanistic aggression of the best and the brightest who brought us Vietnam and other massacres.

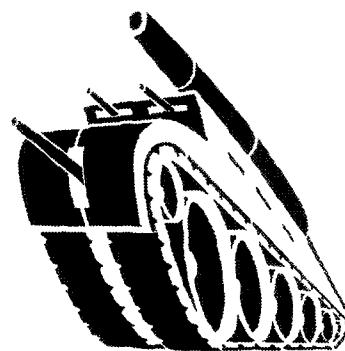
These chivalric, deluded Southerners were extreme forms of masculine development, but are no less extreme in their violence, self-absorption or emotional turbulence than are many of the men who have held high offices in our national government over the last several decades. As economic times get tougher, the forms of masculine virtue that flourish in our culture might well become harsher, more destructive, more indifferent to the costs of their actions. As Americans, we continue to be seduced by mannequins with money, riding boots, horsepower, *cujones*—good old boys who will trot the national standard abroad to continue their "honorable" adventures.

Kim Lacy Rogers, who grew up in Plant City, Fla., and teaches history at Dickinson College, is writing a book on the civil rights movement in New Orleans.

ART«»ENTERTAINMENT

Midnight Oil: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 (Columbia)

The U.S. debut of this Australian quintet marks the arrival and commercial support of an important band. And even though there are several tunes on this long album that could be marketed commercially, Midnight Oil's relentless infusion of politics into its music might make the selling of the group tough for Columbia



Records (remember how long it took to "break" the Clash, another act in the Columbia stable?)

Fronted by Peter Garrett, at nearly seven feet surely the tallest singer in rock'n'roll, Midnight Oil has fashioned a suavely produced disc with the drama of a countdown, the immediacy of a news bulletin.

Its 46 minutes feature 10 tunes that embrace styles as diverse as those of the Clash and Pink Floyd, and the songs—from the strangely personal "Scream in Blue" to the urgent "Somebody's Trying to Tell Me Something"—flow into one another effortlessly.

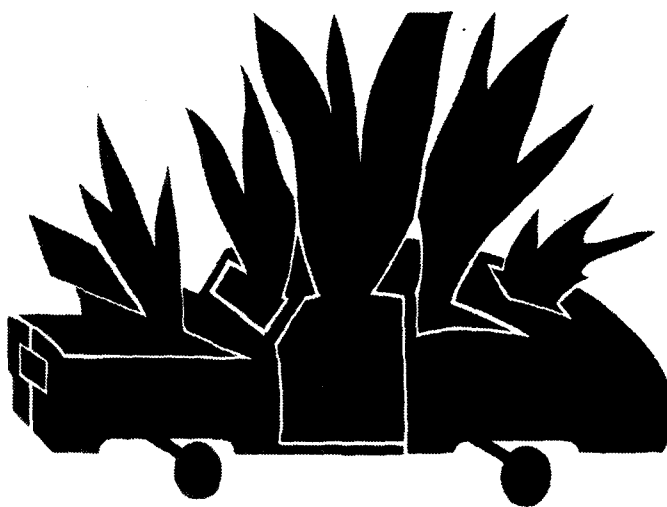
Topics include the environment ("Maralinga," which starts with striking, Duane Eddy-like guitar), brainwashing courtesy of the military-industrial complex (the eerily jaunty "Tin Legs and Tin Mines") and United States imperialism ("U.S. Forces").

And in "Only the Strong," a stentorian, beat-heavy plea for community, and "The Power and the Passion"—the first hard-rock tune in years to sport an interesting drum break—Midnight Oil has two potential hits.

The group has played many antinuclear benefits, has spoken out against U.S. companies' uranium mining in their native country and, generally, has tried to forge a political identity in a country whose rock bands are usually associated with such headbangers as AC/DC or popsmiths like Men at Work.

Midnight Oil is the first band

STOP THOSE SONGS



V-EFFECT

DISCUSSIONS

I've heard in some three years to tackle difficult political themes in music and lyrics that stress the power of the human will. Even though this album takes getting used to (Garrett's voice at times has a zealot's tinge), its musical ambitions and the sweep of its concerns signal a group with a long, problematic and rewarding future.

C.W.

V-Effect: Stop Those Songs (Rift)

What can you say about a three-piece ensemble who list their inspirations as the Sex Pistols, free jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman and Mao Tse-Tung's work *On Liberalism*, and who

sound as if they should also list the Talking Heads, early Bob Dylan and J.D. Salinger's work *Catcher in the Rye*? Strange. Ambitious. Earnest. Ground-breaking. Challenging yet catchy. And very interesting.

V-Effect welds the free-floating improvisation of experimental jazz with the furious frenzy of punk, thus erecting themselves a unique musical platform from which to analyze and agitate. Everything from workplace power dynamics to upper-middle-class consumer fetishes is under scrutiny in these stinging, strident and often clever songs. There is a bit of art-school precocious alienation at work here but there is

also a wide swath of sincerity and genuine musical and intellectual talent. Recorded in Zurich (where the band has been adopted by the radical youth movement), Brooklyn and at live shows in West Germany and Czechoslovakia, some of the cuts sound like archival recordings from the Weimar republic, but that seems to fit in with the other jumble of musical influences. Avant-garde but not tedious, political but not boring, V-Effect ought to be heard by the musically adventurous. *Rift Records, P.O. Box 839, New York, NY 10002.* —J.W.

Los Lobos: And a Time to Dance (Slash)

To Reagan and his ilk, the world's widespread love affair with American popular culture is a sign of the vitality and essential goodness of our economic system. But more discerning observers know it is actually a sign of the vitality of our multi-ethnic society—fruit of the countless cross-pollinations of ideas, traditions and passions between people of all shades and shapes. In fact, it's those who have gained least as a group under the current economic set-up—blacks, immigrants, poor rural whites, renegade kids—who've contributed the biggest chunks to our distinct national culture.

So I guess it makes a kind of ironic sense that in this year of official hysteria about Hispanic hordes swarming across the Rio Grande to eat us out of house

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By Kathleen Hulser

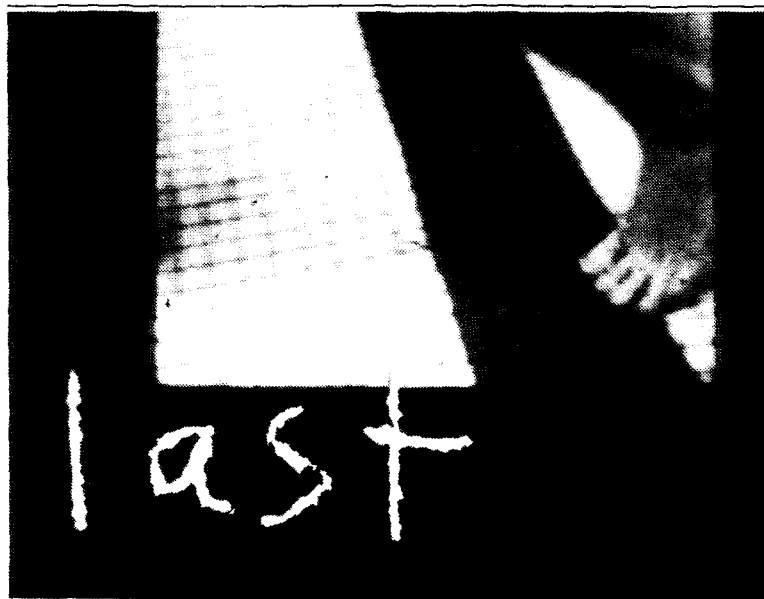
WOMEN'S FILM

With a modest movie coming safely home at \$10 million, Hollywood and its subsidiaries can't afford to risk money on unknowns and outsiders. So even though there's been much talk of improvement over the last decade, a crack at the big-time is still as rare for women directors as a pomegranate on a pine tree. But elsewhere things are changing.

The 10-year-old Women in Film (and video) organization held a national conference this fall to draft a constitution for its approximately 1,800 members. And when the Independent Feature Project (IFP), a group of autonomy-loving cineastes, gathered at its annual market in New York, you could count a fat 34 out of 80 features directed or produced by women—a far cry from the handful of women with completed flicks five years ago when the IFP began.

Even these healthy indications of feature film and TV production don't exhaust the recent evidence of women's celluloid activities. Operating out of lofts, workshops, living rooms and media arts centers, women also create many experimental works, poetic films and short documentaries. Most turn up in out-of-the-way places, like art institutes and film clubs. But once a year, the Women's Film Festival rounds up recent work for a week of cinema aimed at the adventurous.

The 1983 Festival, held in New York this fall, assembled a couple dozen films from five continents containing a multitude of perspectives. On view were political sci-fi, lesbian-feminist visual verses, dramatic shorts and intel-



Dream sequence: Su Friedrich's *GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM*

A cutting room of one's own

lectual polemics.

Perhaps the most important aspect of such a festival is a dual opportunity for the public to encounter the individual voice of the filmmaker both in the images of her film and in person from the podium. In Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* personal vision is paramount. Culling 14 dreams from her diaries, the filmmaker invents a visual equivalent for each and then laboriously scratches a brief narrative by hand on every frame of the silent film—an homage to the handiwork of women. Though

her subjects range from a toppled madonna to veiled threats in the street, the tone is consistent, portraying a dreamscape where society's conflicts step on stage in muted, mysterious forms.

Another short film that speaks in the first person personal is *Killing Time*, a whimsical suicide portrait. Black filmmaker Fronza Woods adopts a musing interior monologue for her gently shocking narrator who putters around her apartment, taking care that she will be well-groomed and well-dressed for this, "the most important event in my life." Ra-

tioning out her ironies like a Solomon, she calmly leads us from one bleak revelation to the next.

The time barrier.

Killing Time lasts only nine minutes, and that's one reason it needs a showcase such as the Women's Film Festival. Especially for women, length is a function of resources. For example, the sophisticated theme, style, decors and dialogue of Julie Dash's *Illusions* demands a feature format.

Format restrictions notwithstanding, *Illusions* deals provocatively with a black movie executive who passes for white during a World War II talent shortage. All too soon the protagonist realizes that she must force the issue or be destroyed. The moment of truth arrives when a black singer comes to the studio to dub the voice of a screechy (white) contract actress. In helping the shy singer, the executive blows her cover.

Forced sterilization in Puerto Rico is the subject of Ana Maria Garcia's *La Operacion*. Rapidly paced to the point of eliciting audience gasps during repeated shots of abdominal incisions, the film handles its 50-minute format admirably. While some feminists disliked Garcia's implicitly pro-natalist outlook—there's but paltry mention of other forms of birth control—the film's marshalling of facts and a snappy tone won an appreciative audience.

The international contributions to the women's festival ranged from *On Guard*, an Australian radical feminist TV show, to *Hearts and Guts*, a surrealist Brazilian drama in a convent school. Standing head and shoulders above the rest was an Eng-

lish experimental film *Bred and Born*. It blends the feminist tradition of intimate concerns with the feminist penchant for documentary, finding a new form to suit its subject. Starting from the view that the renowned sociological tract *Family and Kinship in East London* missed the point, the film follows actual mothers and daughters from that area, demonstrating that even in these times, intergenerational advice still shapes the minds and mores of both groups.

Despite its inordinate talkativeness—much of the film dwells on oral history and anecdotes—*Bred and Born* achieves a beautiful tone. In one lovely story a venerable granny tells her children the well-worn tale of her wedding. The cameras, meanwhile, shoot out the front of a red two-decker bus slowly winding its way from the granddaughter's house to her gran's flat nine miles away. This expressive scene is enough to revive anyone's faith in documentary as a form that can penetrate the human heart.

The realities of distribution, unfortunately, guarantee that most of these films won't turn up in many local moviehouses. Until the time exhibitors and distributors take a fancy to the unusual, events like the Women's Film Festival are a necessary supplement to our cultural diet.

Most of the films mentioned can be obtained through either Second Decade Films (P.O. Box 1482, New York, NY 10009, [212] 222-1185), or The Black Filmmaker Foundation (WNYC, One Centre St., New York, NY 10007, [212] 619-2480).

Kathleen Hulser edits *The Independent*, a film and video monthly.