



LENI SINCLAIR

BY JAMES PARKER

The Weathered Men

The Motor City Five, from Detroit, were a hell of a '60s band. Musically they blew minds with their high-voltage Who/Sun Ra fusion, and politically they did their stuff with more swing and more of what we now

call attitude than anybody else.

Alone among their peers, they played outside the '68 Democratic Convention in Chicago, taking off just before the truncheons came down. They lived in a commune, advocated cultural change through rock'n'roll, dope and fucking in the streets, constantly baited the pigs, and in solidarity with their revolutionary black brothers they formed the White Panther Party. Now, with the release of the documentary "MC5: A True Testimonial," they finally have their day at the movies.

It's a wild, sad film. Being in the MC5 took its toll. Two members—Rob Tyner and Fred "Sonic" Smith—are dead, and the rest seem to have arrived in late middle age disabled to varying degrees by the intensity

MC5: A True Testimonial Directed by David Thomas

of their young manhood. Bassist Mike Davis, interviewed on his desert ranch, is creased and crazy-eyed, with great vacancies in his speech. Drummer Dennis Thompson reeks of confinement: A ranting, unsettling presence, he sits in a small room, looms into the camera and says he dreams about his band every night. Wayne Kramer, lead guitarist, is the most impishly healthy and quick-thinking of the three survivors and almost commandeers the film. But speaking about the band's breakup he becomes desolate. The MC5 was brought down by the usual demons—drugs, squabbles, industry indiffer-

ence—but it is the height that they were brought down from that makes them exceptional. Peaking on self-belief, they felt themselves to be, in Davis' words, "at the center of the yin-yang"—agents of change, superheroes, for whom the world would either tilt toward the positive or spin off into hell.

Director David Thomas and his wife, producer Laurel Legler, have worked on the project since 1995. They love the MC5—no doubt about that—and as filmmakers they took an editorial stand to indulge the band and to swallow their story whole. Some wistful notes are sounded by the ex-wives, two nice, shrewd women who sit by a crackling fireplace and reminisce about sewing stage costumes for the

boys—"He liked ruffles, he did like his ruffles"—but there are no non-believers onscreen. A hint of real dissent, not just intra-band bickering, might have been nice as something to waft away the odor of hippy bombast, the gaseous declarations of ex-manager John Sinclair: "We were plugged into the Universe! And we were doing what the Universe wanted us to do!"

The fact that the Black Panthers considered the MC5 to be "psychedelic clowns" gets a mention, but the closest thing to skepticism is provided by Danny Fields, the wonderful music biz insider, who dryly rhapsodizes about the band's tight trousers and "Viking power": "John Sinclair was taking a shit with the bathroom door open, barking orders—the whole scene was just so BUTCH."

Detroit was a hotbed of great rock writing—Lester Bangs, for god's sake—but "A True Testimonial" offers no critical perspective on the band or its music. Bangs, for example, famously poo-hooped the MC5's first album *Kick Out The Jams*. He wasn't falling for the hype, he said, for the "thick overlay of teenage-revolution and total-energy-thing which conceals these scrapyard vistas of cliches and ugly noise." Equally famously, he changed his mind when he saw the 5 live. To see, apparently, was to believe, and the live footage shows you why: A performance of "Looking At You" at an open-air festival captures the MC5 groove—psychedelically sinuous but shuddering with crude R&B power—better than anything they recorded in a studio.

Now at last we can see those legendary dance steps, Wayne Kramer sliding on toe-points, Fred Smith windmilling his guitar, Rob Tyner wobbling the dark nimbus of his Afro.

It's really all you could ask for. ■

JAMES PARKER writes on film for *In These Times*.



BY DON THRASHER

Punk the Vote

President Bush had better watch his back. A growing number of punk rockers are gunning for him and there's nothing the Secret Service, the CIA or any other government entity can do to protect him because it's all

legit. Members of about 200 American punk bands such as NOFX, Anti-Flag and Pennywise have joined forces with record labels including Fat Wreck Chords, Alternative Tentacles and Epitaph to combat Dubya through the most powerful tool at their disposal: the ballot box. NOFX bassist and singer Fat Mike was growing increasingly discouraged by Bush's view of a civilized, modern America and in late 2003 mobilized friends, acquaintances and like-minded strangers to launch www.punkvoter.com.

Only 29 percent of the 8.4 million U.S. voters age 18 to

24 cast a ballot for president in the 2000 election. Fat Mike and the other members of the grassroots voter education coalition such as former Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic, Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day and former MC5 guitarist Wayne Kramer hope to register half a million young voters in an attempt to unseat Bush.

The Punk Voter campaign has its Web site set on dethroning the president, but the members don't suffer from such tunnel vision that they are blind to other issues. The organization recently took on Urban Outfitters and its T-shirt emblazoned with the message "Voting is

for Old People." Now, Punk Voter is focusing on Rod Paige, Bush's anti-teacher Secretary of Education who labeled the National Education Association and its 2.7 million members "a bunch of terrorists." Fat Mike also has invited liberal groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and abortion rights group NARAL Pro-Choice America to set up booths outside NOFX concerts and to deliver messages from the stage.

In addition to the Web site, Punk Voter members have taken their message to the people with a string of voter registration concerts on the

West Coast and by spreading its messages through e-mails, the Internet, and articles in punk 'zines and the mainstream press. NOFX—whose latest album, *War on Errorism*, lambasted the president's policies—hosted an anti-Bush rally at the annual South by Southwest Music Festival in Austin, Texas in March. The event featured outspoken comedian and actor David Cross, punk rockers Dillinger Four, former Dead Kennedys singer Jello Biafra and others.

Of course, not just left-leaning punks are getting politically active. Bush has vocal support from many 18-to-24-year olds, including members of pro-Republican organizations Conservative Punks (www.conservativepunks.com) and Protest Warriors (www.protestwarrior.com). With opinion of Bush so divided, the United States could see a rise in voting among younger people for the first time since 1972 when participation was at 43 percent.

"I'm down with Punkvoter.com because I think it's important that more people register to vote, get involved and show up on Election Day," Jello Biafra wrote in a recent Punk Voter commentary. The head of Alternative Tentacles Records and a longtime political activist, Biafra has released a series of spoken word albums over the past two decades verbally skewering the conservative agenda, special-interest groups and crooked politicians.

"Being patriotic doesn't mean blindly following a criminal president into illegal and dangerous wars," Biafra added. "It means doing our part to take our country back from the corrupt corporate puppets who get into office because we sit on our ass and let them." ■

DON THRASHER, a former drummer of *Guided by Voices*, writes on music for *In These Times*.

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(continued from page 32) less-than-honorable work done by “impersonal forces” that are both nowhere and everywhere. These forces now rule the world. Trow writes, “Clever men ally themselves with these forces, while idealistic men struggle to move certain valued things out of their way.”

Moving valued things out of the way of voracious impersonal forces is a very good way of describing the preservation work of organizations like the Nature Conservancy. But it makes their save-an-acre projects in the rainforest seem desperate. It's like a family whose house is in the way of a wild-fire and they must decide whether to save Fido or grandpa's heirloom rocking chair. Either way, the house is doomed.

Even worse is that this force that will take your place has no interest in it as a place and has no place of its own. It is drifting, hungry, anonymous, but sadly familiar. It's what 7-11 did to that charming, dilapidated Victorian house on the corner. It's what ADM does to family farms. It's what Clear Channel does to local radio broadcasting. It's like a virus. It has nowhere to be that is its own. It has nothing to do but replicate itself. It will colonize you.

The place of virtue, for Trow, is in none of these places. It is in what Trow himself practices—the virtue of being both “here” and “everywhere.” People acting in a particular place with “clarity and sense” generate local virtues, running “like a small channel throughout history,” that ultimately become the spirit of a people.

Trow's attention to the relationship between honorable conduct and spirit points to a religiosity that, if practiced, would be tonic in these days of fundamentalist wrath. Cut off from a traditional channel of “clarity and sense,” we can only be a people without spirit. Cut off from the “here,” we lack spiritual nourishment. From this vantage, Pat Robertson constitutes the anti-Christ of “informal forces” broadcasting from nowhere and everywhere.

Trow's work is valuable because he shows us how to dwell within a tradition of honorable work practiced locally. He performs this virtue for us, and it is through his sense of style, conceptual inventiveness and acuity as a reader that he becomes both heroic and, strangely, lost.

Trow's virtues are lost on us because we are so much a part of the present moment ourselves. Marooned in a “nowhere” that is anything but utopic, we live in identical subdivisions and wander like phan-

toms in our rationalized “transportation systems,” denied the comfort of place and the warmth of other people. We believe our world is the business of experts and none of ours. Worst of all, we *accept* this world of unknowable origins as our world. Politicians refer to it as our “American lifestyle.” They think it's worth fighting for, and many of us seem to agree.

From Trow's point of view, this appeal to “lifestyle” is a sad confession that our lives are empty of meaning and dignity. Yet Trow cannot be heard amidst the noise made by our various wars against poorly understood things like “terror,” or “drugs,” or “evil doers.” But even if there were less of this noise and we could hear him, we wouldn't understand Trow because we have internalized the logic of impersonal forces ourselves. Impersonal forces are not only “out there” acting on us. They also are “inside” of us. We recognize this internalization in all the little “of courses” of our lives. Of course we need something called a job, money, cars, TVs, computers, gourmet gadgets and the rest of it. Of course we hope the economy prospers. It's all about the economy, stupid. But we cannot listen to all of these “of courses,” and at the same

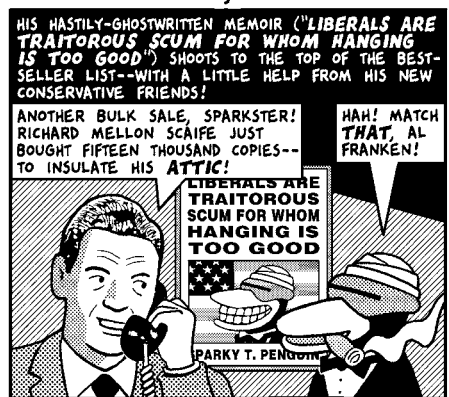
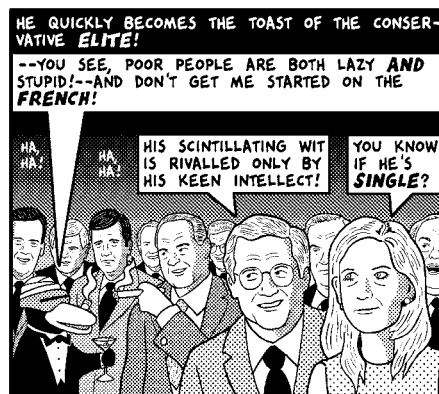
time be able to hear Trow. In this context (which Trow would call “no context”), his virtues can only be something “interesting” we heard on NPR. Now just another media commodity, Trow's ideas are quite dead and irrelevant.

Poet Robinson Jeffers was one of those “honorable men” Trow eulogizes. Hungry down in Big Sur with his red-tail hawks, Jeffers wrote in “Ave Caesar”: “We are easy to manage, a gregarious people/ Full of sentiment, clever at machines, and we love our luxuries.”

How strange to think that the final Caesar is a mere manager. It is a faceless managerial class that administers the Ruling Order of Impersonal Forces. It is Harvard legal advisors saying that their “conscience is clear” as they put a forest legacy up for sale to the highest bidder, turning a blank and pitiless gaze on the virtues of place and human capacity. For Trow, a poet like Jeffers can only be another last Mohican, a member of a vanishing tribe whose individual worth vastly exceeds that of those who will replace him. The irony here is that when this last poet goes he takes his sense of place with him, leaving us in a sad nowhere. ■

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW





Nowhere Men

BY CURTIS WHITE

George W. S. Trow is a sort of tragic hero. His essays offer us clues to how we might correct our national life. But his wisdom is likely to be lost on us, even on those who would agree with him. Like Cassandra, he can tell us things that

are true and that would save us if we could understand them, but his working premise seems to be: You will not understand what I am going to say. In fact, why we

The Harvard Black Rock Forest

By George W.S. Trow
University of Iowa Press
109 pages, \$14.95

won't understand is a large part of the truth Trow has to tell us.

In *The Harvard Black Rock Forest*, originally a 1984 *New Yorker* essay, Trow examines the history of New York's Black Rock Forest, a 3,800-acre site overlooking the Hudson River. In the early 20th Century, this devastated forest was bought by New York banker James Stillman. His son, Ernest Stillman, reclaimed the area as a demonstration forest in 1928 and bequeathed it to Harvard in 1940. Stillman left an endowment more than sufficient to maintain the forest intact in perpetuity, yet by the early '70s Harvard's directors were considering selling the land to developers. This is a familiar enough tale of betrayal of trust. But Trow, while he cares deeply about the fate of the particular (this particular for-

est and this particular instance of misplaced trust), is equally interested in what these particulars have to say about larger changes in our national character.

To describe these changes, Trow creates three kinds of "being-in-place," as a means of demonstrating how virtue comes to exist. For Trow, virtue cannot exist outside of place. Who we are depends on how we behave in a particular place. Thus, people can be:

Mostly here: When "here," people are affected by and responsive to specific local conditions. The ethos of human settlements, this is people doing what they have to do to survive. It is "what works."

Here and there: Trow defines this as the "manner of the museum." The location of a museum usually has a relation to its collection, but the tendency is to remove the substance of the collection from any sense of place. The ultimate destination of this logic is London Bridge in Arizona.

Everywhere and nowhere: The modern ethos par excellence. A strip mall is nowhere and everywhere. It has nothing to do with a particular place, and yet it is inescapably present in every American town.

Trow critiques our movement away from the virtue of "honorable men" doing the "work of men" in a particular place to the

(continued on page 31)

CURTIS WHITE is a novelist and social critic. His most recent books are *Requiem* and *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves*.