

AN INTERVIEW IN TWO PARTS BY **RICHARD OXMAN**



# **JOE BAGEANT** **SPEAKS OUT**

ON LIFE, POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY AND THE MAD WORLD OF GEORGE W. BUSH

**ColdType**

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## PART ONE

Every American seems to think the sun rises and sets on his or her ass. Americans cannot seem to get over themselves. Consequently, empathy for mankind's planetary misery is in short supply – more of an intellectual concept than a reality to soft, moody, self-absorbed American lefties. They all come from the 25% of Americans who get a college degree. They have no fucking idea what it is like for the other 60-70% of Americans who have to survive in our brutal corporatized state without the benefit of genuine education, insight or even honest news programming to see what is going on around them. These workers are being cultivated as a human crop by global business. A crop of toilers, consumers, and when need be, mechanized killers to be sent abroad.

– *Joe Bageant*

# JOE BAGEANT SPEAKS OUT

**[AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE READER: The Multi-Issue Alternative Magazine, EnergyGrid ([www.energygrid.com](http://www.energygrid.com)), conducted an excellent interview with Joe Bageant recently; I recommend that you check it out after plowing through what's below. Who is JB? Well, if you ask me, I think you're better off not knowing at this juncture...if you don't know yet...reading through what he has to say here...and then diving into what he's put out there for one and all to date (much of it accessible as per footnote #1 below). Trust me on this, if you will, just like Joe did, not knowin' me from Adam and the Ants. By the way, a reader introduced us, making this possible. Hi, Chuckie!]**

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**ROX:** In talking to you recently, you mentioned in passing that you were very popular with the Generation X crowd in England. What's your guess on why that is?

**JB:** At first I was surprised. Then later it was explained to me by one of the exers that they were identifying with the American beatnik aspect and the anti-authority nature of my work. Also, like them, I see much virtue in getting loaded and rowdy.

**ROX:** Your "The Covert Kingdom: Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Texas" —which many of my friends consider the best online take of the Bush crowd in 2004 — paints a picture of the left being lost in space vis-a-vis realities on the American Ground these days. What must "progressives" wake up to . . . to have a chance at moving in solidarity nationwide against The Extreme Right Roar? (TERRoar!)

**JB:** Hoooboy! That's a biggun. See, I don't believe the U.S. really has a political left. It just has personalities who consider themselves leftists and make an identity gig of it. If we really had a left, then I could walk out this door to a leftist party headquarters and take political action. It's not like I can call up the local chapter of the Rifondazione Comunista, as in Italy. It's not like I can stop by the newsstand and buy a copy of Liberazione. Americans kid themselves about having choices. Hell, they won't even dare call themselves leftists. They've backed off into calling themselves "progressives." That is totally gutless. What is the alternative to "progress?" The Stone Age?

The U.S. has a cottage culture industry called the left. And it has a body of middle class professionals and semi-professionals who cannot bring themselves to associate with Republicans, so they call themselves "liberals." But liberals are too comfortable. So they deny reality. They are not going to do anything so long as they are comfortably insulated in the middle class. They are not going to wade into that hate filled ditch of political action, real political action that requires sacrifice, to battle for America's soul – not as long as they are still living on a good street, sending their kids to Montessori and getting their slice of the American quiche.

What I'm saying is that until we get a real left in this country, one capable of creating change

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through radical action, one willing to risk everything for what they believe, we should not be talking about what our pseudo-left should be doing. Our pseudo-left is doing exactly what it should be doing: posturing, bickering amid itself and boring the hell out of the rest of America.

I just realized that I didn't come close to answering your question: What must "progressives" wake up to . . . to have a chance at moving in solidarity nationwide against The Extreme Right?

American progressives need to wake up to the fact that they are just as big a part of the world's problems as the Republicans, so long as they insist on living the American lifestyle. As long as they continue to thoughtlessly consume the world as if it were their birthright. All talk and no walk. Buying organic toilet paper and voting for evasive Democratic hacks just isn't going to cut it guys.

**ROX:** Being Left of Left means never having to say you're sorry, Joe. Seriously, though, all of that is valuable, "keeper words" one and all, as they say. In your essay "Dining with Rhinos" you mention something about wanting to get away from the herd, "shopping hard for a house in Andalucia, or St. Kitts, or Normandy, places where there are still secular humanists political parties of the type the rhinos see as the heart of evil." In terms of our ecocidal momentum, is it possible to depart, without feeling "irresponsible" on some level? Can one even get away at all? And, if one is concerned with planting seeds that may not bear fruit until after one's lifetime, aren't the immediate pleasures of relocation problematic?

**JB:** One man never beat a mob on the mob's own turf. But one man can sure as hell get outside the turf and lob hand grenades at the mob. Can one even get away at all? Of course not. But I don't have to suffer the daily insults of America's military capitalist mindwarp ALL the time for christsake! I think I can leave the country for months at a time – get away to think and write and screw and feel free. And to hear some other voices and opinions from the outside world. It is impossible to do so inside this capitalist military state, where information is so controlled and the citizenry's behavior and attitudes are so heavily modified by media, consumer advertising, etc.

Also, the older I get the more I appreciate simplicity, like buying vegetables in the market and spending all day preparing them. Playing my little parlor guitar. Napping with my dogs in the afternoon. Frankly, I'd like to slip away to a more contemplative life, but if you are born in this country you gotta buy back your fucking life before you are allowed to change it. The state owns us from birth. Ensnarers us in its economic system as productive and consumer units. As far as planting seeds that may not bear fruit in our lifetimes, well, that's a global proposition, isn't it? You can do that from anywhere because it is about how you conduct your daily life. I think it is as much about what you refuse to do as what you do. Of course I am very much full of shit and tend to do as little as possible whenever possible. So screwing off and leaving the world alone, not using much of it up, appeals to me. That and internationalist solidarity of mankind. But even

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to accomplish that, we need to slow down, shut the fuck up and think about the world and our places in it. THEN we can commence to raise hell against the systems that enslave us.

**ROX:** I don't remember where I read about your final moments with your dad, on his deathbed, but it was touching – the business of what was appropriate, not appropriate to bring up in that setting. What is your guess – what would he have said in response to what you just laid out? Forgive me, please, if I'm being insensitive here.

**JB:** No, you're not being insensitive. I wouldn't have put the subject out there if I were unwilling to discuss it. I'm sure his response would be total incomprehension. Fundamentalist faith such as his, and that of my family and some 100 million other Americans, is a religious throwback. Religious fundamentalism is sort of a blind default setting in mankind's programming. It is not about any kind of comprehension. Hell, my dad only went to about the eighth grade, so I never expected to sit around and discuss existentialism or Marxism with the guy. But growing up in that religious environment gave me enough language and insight to discuss right and wrong and moral things with him. His faith was quite a bit deeper than the stuff of the Bush election ballyhoo. I don't think he ever bothered with such things as the abortion issue. He was more interested in his daily connection with his creator. Talking to God in the back room of the house trailer where he died. He had a whole little scene back there with his meditations, which he wrote in the margins of his Bible, and his country music records, my grandpap's old pocket knives, his wartime memories. It was an entire world, physical and metaphysical, in that tiny room of his, a place where he could listen to old time fiddle tunes and talk to God, too. Pretty good deal, huh!

**ROX:** You can say that again – on national TV, if you will! What impact would you say the personal nooks and crannies we all have to go through has on left solidarity? What do our various "quirks" (for want of a better expression right now) mean . . . what "should they mean" to us...vis-a-vis talk/thoughts about solidarity? I consider this stuff of paramount importance . . . for one, since it's not addressed at all; and that's a separate subject from another interesting angle . . . the black/dark view that's shared among many old leftists. Right now I'm thinking that . . . maybe . . . I don't really want you to answer those questions; perhaps we'll save them as a teaser of sorts for a Part II. But I'm very interested in the many people you've had relationships with . . . people who have intrigued me – to say the least – over the years. People like Timothy Leary, Stephen Gaskin, Allen Ginsberg, Trungpa Rinpoche, William Burroughs, John Lilly and Marshall McLuhan . . . and the "unknowns" you've mentioned like Marc Campbell of Taos, New Mexico and Jack Collum of Boulder, Colorado. I noticed that you didn't bring up Ward Churchill (someone I know you know very well) in the EnergyGrid Magazine interview. I'm particularly interested in what your view on what Marxism and corporatism have to do with Native Americans . . . since I greatly respect Ward's position . . . and I understand you differ

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slightly there.

**JB:** I guess what I was trying to say in that last reply is that we cannot do it all with our minds. The left is too intellectual. Our hearts should be rivers. Empathy is far more important than intellect, to me at least. As far as the "impact of personal nooks and crannies on the left's solidarity," I'm not quite sure what you mean, other than the fact that the U.S. left is severely handicapped by our overblown American notion of individuality and personal uniqueness. Every American seems to think the sun rises and sets on his or her ass. Americans cannot seem to get over themselves. Consequently, empathy for mankind's planetary misery is in short supply – more of an intellectual concept than a reality to soft, moody, self-absorbed American lefties. They all come from the 25% of Americans who get a college degree. They have no fucking idea what it is like for the other 60-70% of Americans who have to survive in our brutal corporatized state without the benefit of genuine education, insight or even honest news programming to see what is going on around them. These workers are being cultivated as a human crop by global business. A crop of toilers, consumers, and when need be, mechanized killers to be sent abroad.

The one thing the thinking left and urban liberals will not do is trod the soil of the Goth – subject themselves to my people here in places like my hometown, Winchester, Virginia. Subject themselves to the unwashed working class America, that church-going, hunting and fishing, Bud Lite drinking, never-been-to-Europe-and-don't-wanna-go, provincial America. The people who cannot, and do not even care to, locate Iraq or France on a map – assuming there is even an atlas in their homes.

Few educated lefties will ever find themselves sucking down canned beer at the local dirt track or listening to the preacher explain the infallibility of the Bible on every known topic from biology to the designated hitter rule, never attend awards night at a Christian school or get drunk to Teddy and the Starlight Ramblers playing C&W at the Eagles Club. Well Ho! Ho! Ho! Welcome to my world!

As for Marxism and Native Americans, I leave that to The Ward. He's right and everybody knows he's right. But just as he is Native American and speaks from that standpoint, I am European and speak from mine. And Marxism is the default political affiliation of intellectuals the world round, not just Europeans. Being conceived in the glory days of the industrial revolution, naturally it is overly concerned with production and failed to take into account environmental degradation, etc. But we can compensate for what Marx could not have foreseen. I don't go for all that eye-glazing Marxist intellectual crap, and positively cannot stand Marxist gatherings in the U.S., but common sense and a lifetime of experience tell me that Marxism makes sense. I used to live on an Indian reservation at Plummer, Idaho, and hung out with an ancient Wobbly named George Bowmer, a crippled up old logger who repaired chainsaws. He never even finished high school, grew up in a remote logging camp in the Selkirk Range skidding logs with mules and fighting for the union when he was 12. He showed me what internationalism is and how it can reach around the world in solidarity simply because man is man, truth

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is truth and class struggle is ever necessary. He understood that he had brothers in labor in places like Argentina and Chile, though he would never have been able to locate those places on a map.

**ROX:** In your Dining with Rhinos piece you focus on Berenger and his "buddies," of course, but there's another Berenger in another Ionesco play, Exit the King, which your dad's deathbed is now reminding me of. In that dying is seen as "illumination" through the shedding of old "clothes," now-unnecessary possessions and postures. What balls and chains do leftists have to leave and the roadside? What dodges and tics do they have to give up for us to advance? To move on "to the other side," say, as opposed to going where outfits like MoveOn would have progressives go.

**JB:** Well, the most sincere fundamentalist Christians certainly see death as you described it: "illumination" through the shedding of old "clothes," as in the old hymn, "I'll have a new body, oh lord, I'll have a new life!"

As to what the left has to do to advance . . . hell, I don't know. Like I said, I don't even believe we have a real left. Just folks who wish we did, including me. I am not an intellectual or a social strategist, just a laboring son of the blue collar American South who somehow ended up being a writer instead of a truck driver. As far as moving on "to the other side," I dunno what that means to you. But to me it means crossing over and joining the rest of humanity we claim to care so much about. Sacrifice, which for Americans means putting money where the mouth runs. Sell your house and give the money to the needy of Bombay. I know you must be laughing at that one. But I mean it. This spring I will be buying a place in the Caribbean or Europe, but I will not own it. I plan to legally deed it over to some deserving poor family on the condition that I can stay there when I visit, or live there in exile if necessary. In the Caribbean it would be an Indian or black native family. In Spain I think it would be a Roma family. I never want to own another house again, much less two of them. I'd like to go out of this world completely broke, having used little and leaving nothing to my heirs. I don't believe in inherited wealth. You can imagine that this sort of thing is not too popular with my wife and family . . . but that's what I mean about trying to walk the walk. It necessarily makes one's life harder. To me, that's what "moving to the other side means." It means evolving one's mind and soul to a more liminal place, focusing one's eyes beyond the grave. Being a Marxist does not preclude a spiritual life, a recognition of a larger cosmic order of things. Ultimately being a leftist is about liberation of all kinds, don't you think?

**ROX:** I really love you, what you're saying, Joe. Truly. And, yes, I certainly do think being a leftist means liberation of all kinds. I asked ten fans of yours who are in contact with me regularly to submit questions . . . with the idea that I'd pick one or two to throw out during this interview. I picked one at random from someone who adored your



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Sleepwalking to Babylon piece . . . thinking it's watershed material . . . but who brought things back to your Ionesco/Rhinos article. Here are his words, which I'd like you to respond to briefly: "Joe Bageant I like because he reflects the voice of the common peoples with all their prejudices from TV and ads but I did not like the rhino stuff because rhinos are very smart animals with little darting eyes, not at all stupid but very territorial (they protect excellently their young, females even more fiercely). Ionesco was wrong."

**JB:** You are right in that no animal deserves to be compared to Americans these days. But don't dismiss a wonderful piece of satirical art because it doesn't accurately portray every aspect of the animal kingdom.

**ROX:** In the interests of moving expeditiously, and in acknowledgement of the short attention span of readers and limited heartbeats available for most, I'm going to be presumptuous and assume that we can make this a 12-part series of sessions for the next time capsule buried . . . or at least turn it into a two-part ding-a-ling for online addicts . . . by asking you to close with three questions, directed AT/TO the reading public. To wit, three interrogatives that you'd like them to contemplate.

**JB:** You lost me, old buddy. I don't know what the heck you are talking about!

Regarding "To wit, three interrogatives that you'd like them to contemplate," I have no idea. However, here is what I consider the most important philosophical question anyone can ever ask themselves: "What is the question to which my life is the answer?"

**ROX:** I remember you saying something recently about appreciating being turned onto Ricardo Dominguez and the Electronic Disturbance Theatre – hackers of a sort – and I'd like to get your hit on something he said in an interview with Ben Shepard and Stephen Duncombe in 2000 (which can be found in Duncombe's Cultural Resistance Reader): "And having been enamored of Genet, I felt that being a book thief, since that's what I knew, well that's the way I would live. And I started stealing very expensive Verso books and Lyotard's wallbook on Duchamp, \$350, and I would sell them at Mercer Books." He's talkin' about how – early on – he managed to survive. And since I know you like Genet . . . I'd like to hear what you think of people "doing what they have to" to get by. Particularly since you made a huge distinction between the average, "cultured" lefty and the masses they supposedly want to help . . . but who they are light years from understanding. Get through that, and I've got one more inconsequential cutie I'd like to lay on you. This'll be the swansong until Part II, okay?

**JB:** Well, I was quite impressed with the concept of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre. Much

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of this stuff is new to an old guy like me, who has been simply out here alone in his own corner of the left field for so long. As for the book stealing by a college educated middle class person, it sounds a bit suspect to me. But who am I to judge? There were years in the 1960s-70s when I dealt drugs to help support my wife and child (not to mention sustain a good stash of my own.) I've been a thief on occasion, and found I have neither the talent nor the nerves for it. On the other hand, I've been in the company of criminal angels . . . thieving junkie jazz players and their hooker wives in New Orleans (Ed and Kathy and Karen, if you are out there and still alive, contact me) and the like who showed me why and how the heavens turn on eternity's star strewn axis. I know there is angelic criminality, just as the face of eternity is set in human misery and its heart is divine deviance. But I do not think it is something you can just go out and do because you think it is cool or makes a political point. It is not the kind of thing that can be contrived. You need to be born under a bridge in Rio or Bombay, or cast upon the American wastelands of Columbine High School for it to come naturally.

## PART TWO

One of the slickest things that ever happened was how capitalism convinced all those working slobs they were middle class. As in, "Your car is being repoed, you don't have any health insurance, your kids don't know shit because their schools are shit, you are overweight and one payday away from being homeless – WELCOME TO THE GREAT GUILDED AMERICA MIDDLE CLASS! (You dumb nose-picking fools!) News media used to call them the "traditional working class," and the political left used to be right down there on the picket lines getting their noses broken alongside the working mooks. Now the working class lives with its mindscape wired into NFL bread and circuses and soft little eunuchs on the political left grope one another on the internet in interviews like this one.

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[Writer's Note: I conducted interviews with Franz Kafka and Joe Strummer on separate occasions recently . . . in preparation for my first interview with Joe Bageant. We're roughly the same vintage, me just pre- and him just post-Nagasaki. Same diff between Kafka and Strummer, with just a wider range. But one thing we all have in common is – from grave complaint to mild musing – our collective tsk tsk tsk vis-a-vis America's momentum/abominations. The fascinating rascal-sage, G.I. Gurdjieff, in *All and Everything*, provides some words which are a good introduction to the continuation of my interview with the marvelous Bageant:

"The sole means now for the saving of the beings of the planet Earth would be to implant again into their presences a new organ...of such properties that every one of these unfortunates during the process of existence should constantly sense and be cognizant of the inevitability of his own death as well as the death of everyone upon whom his eyes or attention rests. . . . Only such a sensation and such a cognizance can now destroy the egoism completely crystallized in them."]

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ROX: I understand you spent New Year's Eve at a classic East Coast literati party, at the Willa Cather abode. Happy so-called New Year, by the way, Joe. Well, my first question for Part II has to do with her nostalgia respecting lost or unfulfilled love. To wit, Cather suggests in *A Lost Lady* and *My Antonia* that there's an illusion of happiness that we think we've seen, which we never find. Are there any illusions of love that lost leftists harbor, puppy love waves they're riding, that we should bring them home from the sea on?

**Joe Bageant:** Actually, it was New Year's Day, one of those beautifully haunting bright winter East Coast days with the cold sun slicing through the high windows of that huge old house . . . imagining Willa Cather walking those great clattering hallways – marvelous! As for the rest of it, I dunno. Leftists come in as much variety as any other stripe of humanity. I don't think we can generalize like that. And I certainly would never assume that we could ever "bring anyone home from the sea" about anything. To me it's like the Buddhist "big-boat/little boat" thing. We may go together, we may go alone, but the important thing is to make the journey. To go beyond silly mortal strife and striving toward the realization of both self and others. If you live in your head in this sterile corporatized state, you will just come up with mechanistic theories about how to help mankind. You will waste time coming up with non-solutions based too much on reaction to the corporate state.

To hell with playing defensive ball. We need to go on the attack. Break the law like the Republicans did to steal the elections. Revolt. Burn some stuff down. Then they will crush us like bugs because we will have broken the law. But at least sleeping Americans and the world can see the face of the beast, the brutal repression. No matter how you split this puppy, oppressive

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regimes never give anything up without a fight. And it is a very old fight, one that dates back to the European investors in Columbus, Cortez and Captain John Smith, whose jobs were to kill indigenous people and take away their land and goods. It goes back to the emerging global money based economy of the 15th Century, which is coming to ultimate fruition now, with the attempted enslavement of the entire world by a powerful few, now that there are no new continents, lands and peoples to discover and exploit. Isabella and King George are now Halliburton and Exxon.

Regarding "puppy love waves" and "illusions of lost love" held by the left, I wish to hell there were that much sentimental capability these days. I wish we were all that human. There is a connective tissue of the human community that has been completely obliterated in the U.S. and much of the supposedly advanced Western world. Lest you think "connective tissue of the human community" is just another grandiose liberal phrase, think about all those cities in Asia that have no street names or street addresses, yet the mail gets accurately delivered every day to hundreds of thousands because there is a web of humanity functioning, breathing and making the city work as a living thing. Now how the fuck does that mail get from the post office to all those people without addresses and street names? Because people know people who know people and everybody knows the people in their neighborhood. Or at least someone knows all of them. They are not plugged in at the brainstem to media that drives them to consume, make war, believe state ideology and live in fear of those they do not know.

The state is a myth perpetuated to make people believe it is in their interest to support the wars of the rich and the powerful interests of commerce. All that exists are human beings and their environment. Everything else is a manufactured belief system, propaganda of one sort or another, to marshal human energies in one direction or another. The best we can hope for is to marshal them conservatively for the planet and expansively toward the self-realization of all men.

Maybe we are under illusions. The entire notion of a real left in this country is an illusion. But hell, the whole world is an illusion. As Edwin Arnold said in "Light of Asia":

*Sink not the string of thought into the fathomless  
For this is the world of illusion  
He who asks, errs  
And he who answers errs [more]*

I'll take my own illusion, thank you. It took a lot of dope, heartbreak and fast living to create it, so I am going to go down with it.

**ROX:** Oh . . . I think this is gonna be a goood interview. On that note of illusion, what about the Hickey Factor? As in Hickey of *The Iceman Cometh* . . . when we're simply

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getting into a "talk" with a neighbor . . . or stranger at a pub . . . and tryin' to bring someone around. What about the everyday resistance one encounters . . . short of a barricades situation? Whereby you don't want to lose them 'cause of a shock to the system, but you want to engage. What do you advise there?

**JB:** Please don't paint my ridiculous political and philosophical flatulence as "advice." I have no advice for anyone. Just a big mouth and a lot of opinions. As for "bringing someone around," in this bitter age of hardened political battle lines, I don't think that is about to happen. At least not very often. The business of productive political dialogue between opposing views is mostly capitalist state-generated illusionary horseshit. That doesn't happen any more. Yet the illusion is maintained that it is still part of the process. The lines are drawn, the neo-conservatives are slipping on their brass knuckles and hoods, while the left is playing dialectic games at Starbucks and weeping like a bunch of mock turtles about the elections. It was all over long before the elections.

We have to ask ourselves how in the hell can the classes in America live in such parallel universes? The rich liberals and neoconservatives, the West coast lefties and the massive unacknowledged working class in this country? How can we remain so oblivious and unconnected from our fellow Americans? Answer: Americans, rich or poor, now live in a culture entirely perceived through, simulacra-media images and illusions. We live inside a self-referential media hologram of a nation that has not existed for quite some time now. Our national reality is held together by images, the originals of which have been lost or never existed. The well-off with their upscale consumer aesthetic, live inside gated Disneyesque communities with gleaming uninhabited front porches representing some bucolic notion of the Great American home and family. The working class, true to its sports culture aesthetic, is a spectator to politics . . . politics which are so entirely imagistic as to be holograms of a process that has not existed for decades in America, if ever. Social realism is a television commercial for America, a simulacran republic of eagles, church spires, heroic firemen and "freedom of choice" between holograms. America's citizens have been reduced to balkanized consumer units by the corporate state's culture producing machinery. We are all transfixed on and within the hologram and cannot see one another in the living breathing flesh.

**ROX:** Those have to be among my favorite Bageant lines. Including the Buddhist "big-boat/little boat" thing, and the business of "We may go together, we may go alone, but the important thing is to make the journey." It clarifies a lot, too. Yet I know readers will cling to old Starbucks paradigms. I've often thought that new models for action won't emerge until those disgusted with The System embrace what Rimbaud was getting across in . . . to go back to the sea . . . in *The Drunken Boat*: "Bathed in your weary waves, I can no longer ride In the wake of cargo ships of cotton, Nor cross the pride of flags and

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flames, Nor swim beneath the killing stares of prison ships.”

**JB:** Let’s talk about the myth of the middle class. What gets me is the power of illusion, when it comes to the class divide in this country. The entertainment media, which is to say the most important one – television – leads us to believe that most Americans are in the middle class and that the middle class is some kind of majority in American society. Which of course is bullshit. Most of America is working class. A broad look around us confirms that the middle class by television’s definition can’t be more than 20-25%.

The working class would necessarily be defined as those who work for wages rather than salaries, have a boss and do not choose when we work or how we do our work. As opposed to the salaried middle class, professional middle class, or the professional managerial class, entrepreneurs. By that definition 70% of us are working class.

One of the slickest things that ever happened was how capitalism convinced all those working slobs they were middle class. As in, “Your car is being fucking repoed, you don’t have any health insurance, your kids don’t know shit because their schools are shit, you are overweight and one payday away from being homeless – WELCOME TO THE GREAT GUILDED AMERICA MIDDLES CLASS! (You dumb nose-picking fools!) News media used to call them the “traditional working class,” and the political left used to be right down there on the picket lines getting their noses broken alongside the working mooks. Now the working class lives with its mindscape wired into NFL bread and circuses and the soft little eunuchs on the political left grope one another on the internet in interviews like this one. It ain’t pretty. But what the hell can ya do?

**ROX:** I would like to address the business of “what can you do?” in light of what many on the left suggest . . .that one only needs the 25% (middle class contingent) to force change. And my concern there is also coupled with suggestions from some quarters that guns can make a difference here if push comes to shove. However, you may have put all that to bed already . . . and as a courtesy . . . to be respectful . . . and bowing to the possibility that my Alzheimers may be kicking in . . . I’ll ask you to decide whether or not you’d prefer to pick up a ball you threw in my court a short while back instead. To wit, you said something beautiful – while reminiscing about the sixties – about how consciousness was the only thing that mattered.

**JB:** Well, all you guys are far more intellectual about these things than I am. Not knocking it, just acknowledging it. To address the points in the order you presented them:

1. This last election proved the fallacy of going after the middle class vote to force change. We also hear that if the left had registered more working class non-voters Bush would not have won. But from what I see out here in ordinary America, if more working class folks had voted,

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Kerry would just have gotten his ass kicked much harder. It is a precious myth of the left and liberals that there are millions of lefties and "progressives" out here waiting to be registered. What I see are a bunch of mindless ass scratchers who would have voted for Bush if they had the motivation to get up off the couch and register. Liberals are afraid to call stupid stupid, but I'm not. I was raised white trash and these are my people and I must say that they have been reduced to the dumbest goddamned mob of sports loving, beer sucking nitwits imaginable. They would have voted for Bush. Hell, Bush only got 19% of the fundamentalists. Right? Imagine if they had all voted!

2. About guns making a difference when push comes to shove: Yer goddamned right, buster! I mean, let's use our fucking heads here. Just how far are we willing to let these repressive bastards beat on us? At some point violence DOES enter the picture, doesn't it? I have absolutely no problem with committing a violent act against despotism under the right circumstances (as in, can I get away with it!)

3. Consciousness? Well godamighty son! Ain't that all we have? Praise the lord and pass the peyote buttons! Ain't no big deal.

**ROX:** Well, now that we've put THAT baby to bed, I'd like to get back to eunuchs groping one another in interviews like this . . . What think you about the Publish or Perish Syndrome . . . whereby writers/activists must decide whether or not to go for survival bucks with established publications or put the word out to as man . . . as quickly as possible . . . with virtually no recognition . . . no \$\$\$ exchanged in Virtual Land? Is there any way for a self-respecting activist to carve out a career with the pen these days? I know you've got loads of experience on this count . . . and miles of bumpy roads you've gone down on this.

**JB:** Oh hell! You've punched a hole in the dike with that one! It is goddamned near impossible to make a living saying anything meaningful in print in this country. Oh there are a few good mags left, *Harper's*, *Mother Jones*, *Free Inquiry*, etc. But these days anything written and published is a "commercial product" aimed at certain demographic consumer groups as perceived by a goddamned bunch of pud-pounding bean counters in management whose literary experience is limited to a fifth grade book report on *Mice and Men* and one chapter of *Toqueville* in college.

I have been in and out of the magazine business for 30 years and I've never seen things worse. It's come down to sports, pussy and personalities. I have published hundreds and hundreds of magazine articles in my time, but have published nothing but paint-by-number garbage since the mid-1980s. That is all you can sell. So now I say screw the money. Give me the web. Any time I want to speak the truth as I know it, I do it on the web.

Any activist who thinks he can make a decent living with the pen these days had better be



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pretty goddamned good. I haven't seen anyone do it right since the advent of Ralph Nader decades ago. I find it interesting that Nader could publish his scathing indictments of corporations in all the major magazines back then. Now all you have is *Mother Jones* and one or two others. When you look at the magazines of the 1960s with the excitement of what they were calling "the new journalism," and the sheer fun of the novel ideas . . . well, it makes today's magazines look like damned newspaper inserts written by ditzzy advertising hacks (because they are.)

It's too bad people started getting degrees in journalism, too bad the universities managed to set up hack writer factories to serve the corporate state. I liked it better when writers and reporters were tough guys knocking back shots and hammering out the truth as they saw it. I saw the end of that era and I'm here to tell you that today's reporters and writers are mostly a bunch of gutless pussies by comparison.

Like I said, give me the web. There may not be any money in it, but by god that's where the big dogs run these days. That's where the real balls and ideas are, and that's where ALL the young talent is today, if you can wade through the tripe to find them.

**ROX:** In the January 3rd issue of *The Nation*, William Deresiewicz points out that Faulkner, Joyce, Miller, Nabokov and Burroughs all had watershed works in English . . . published first in France. I know you mentioned the possibility of going overseas for personal reasons. Is there still good reason for writers/activists to venture abroad . . . so that they don't have to have 15 years worth of lag time (in getting "recognized") like Faulkner?

**JB:** Yes, *Mother Jones* is getting limper these days. It's the American publishing environment. It eventually dilutes or co-opts all resistance. As far as "lag time in getting recognized" as a writer in the U.S., I say fuck'em all. To hell with the celebrity obsession and being recognized in this country. That's how this system nails your ass. I'd rather just do good work. Interestingly though, the French do seem to respond well to what I have to say. Which is not much, so god bless the friggin' French! I really want to have some kind of scene abroad. Something creative, full of ideas and dynamic people exercising their creative energies. I haven't seen that in years.

**ROX:** I've got a Big Thing blooming at present in Paris . . . vis-a-vis Underground Theatre et plus; I'll keep you and others posted. However, your reference to peyote took me back to Burroughs, and the hallucinatory carnival that he delineates. The incessant traffic that he injects into *Naked Lunch* . . . the maelstrom of activity and stimuli there . . . has really taken over our lives today. Its become quite clear that everyone is overwhelmed by air, disease, others' words, images . . . culture itself, and I'm wondering whether you can say anything to readers to instill hope vis-a-vis the "connective tissue" your alluded to earlier .

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. . . so that there's some sense of being able to move in solidarity . . . internationally. No one seems to have time for bonding. Are we doomed to do our dance alone? In Jackson Browne's *For a Dancer* (written out of his wife's suicide), he says, "No matter how close to yours another's steps have grown . . . In the end there is one dance you'll do alone." I see people on the left . . . leaving one another . . . out of step with one another . . . alone . . . long before their individual ends. This is not at variance with what you've said here, oui?

**JB:** I think one of the big aspects of our modern alienation is that as a social animal we can no longer answer a very basic human question: "Who are my people?"

As an old line, ancestor-obsessed Virginian, I have always been much more aware of who my people are than most modern Americans, aware of the chain of blood and history, raised in close traditional family and friendship ties. There were 250 years of connective social tissue that linked everyone in this town and county in one way or another. I saw the end of the agricultural era and its values here. We were intensely dependent upon one another . . . on each other's help in getting things done, kids babysitted, vcrcs fixed, rides to work. People did not own so much, it was still that post-war era when if a person had a TV, a car, a fridge and a couple of decent changes of clothing, he was an average middle class American. People lived near each other practically all their lives and for generations on end. It was a neighborhood, a culture and a society with fairly natural underpinning. Connective social tissue.

And I am convinced that America has now completely destroyed the connective social tissue that is inherent in man in his natural social state. Our differences between one another are merely what we consume. A yuppie liberal is as defined by what he consumes as the gun-toting redneck with his truck. And living here among the reddest of necks, I can tell you that these days rural and small-town people are no warmer, nicer or better connected with their neighbors and relatives and families than the most career obsessed urbanite.

Big spook America done gobbled de hearts out of all her chillun. We're talking night of the living dead, only the dead don't know they are dead because they cannot remember ever being alive. Even older people's memories have been cleansed. I remind my elderly mother of the way life was then, and she can barely find the memory. When she does, she cries. Some younger people suspect it should be a lot warmer and more fun around this joint called the U S of A, but they have never seen proof it ever was so. Only the bullshit propaganda of the movies. It's a cold-assed place and getting colder, spookier and more ominous by the day. But Americans seem to be accepting it. We few who feel otherwise are seen as odd, as aliens. Unpatriotic. Eventually we will be classified as dangerous.

**ROX:** And so, you've answered one of the questions that at least one of your fans – writing to me to ask you – has been losing sleep over . . . the possible potential of linking

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up with the likes of Bloods, Crips . . . or anybody . . . to do anything in solidarity. The neighborhood/connective tissue talk brings up so much of Ward Churchill's words about what plagues the indigenous and what, perhaps, they have to offer. Permit me to conclude with pointing out that some Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale has said Beckett provided a Purgatorio to Kafka's Inferno, making up two-thirds of a 20th century Dante . . . suggesting that that's all that's now available to us, that Paradiso can't be posted, published or prevail. When Moliere's *Alceste* (from the *Misanthrope*) rejects his society, his only rock-bottom sustenance . . . and takes off toward solitude...risking insanity . . . we have reason to believe he'll . . . be back on...traditional terms. Going about change like the RCP, Code Pink, MoveOn and the various million-person marches is what I'd call traditional. But . . . today . . . far removed from the realm that so many of us have been so influenced by . . . so much traditional possibility dead . . . is all that remains the madness of art? Its personal payoff?

**JB:** You lost me.

**ROX:** Fair enough, Joe, this . . . "losing you" what with all the blah blah. Put another way . . . now that I've put out a lot of intellectual play/contortions for readers to digest at their leisure . . . do you see any light at the end of the tunnel? Or, better yet, to use Faulkner's *Light in August* as a point of departure . . . when Lena Grove . . . one of his characters in that novel anticipates giving birth . . . the idea is that she'll be "light in August" when the baby comes. Do you see any baby being born in the near future? Do you see any hope whatsoever? Any relief in sight? Can we conclude our Game of Eunuchs here . . . with any sweetness?

**JB:** Geesh, you're strange!

Well, Tim Leary used to tell me that the key to moving on with one's evolution is the same as the key to a good acid trip: not to cling to anything you see. Let it all go. He believed you cannot stop the forward roll of evolutionary events and that the earth is destined to become a used-up dead cesspool at some point. Consequently, he was into space migration during the later years of his life. I think down inside everyone understands the finite limits of the ecosystem now. Even the dumbest, meanest Republican have a less-than-confident look on his face now when he tells you global warming is a myth. Nearly everything from the Christian "Left Behind" book series to movies and ecological predictions have an apocalyptic tone these days. But there is a mentality among some people, particularly the rich – which is to say most Americans compared to the rest of the world – that says, "Grab all you can. Build armed and gated communities, deploy the armies to loot resources, and let the rest of the world starve in the dark if need be. Kill 'em if they come over here."

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Do I see any hope? Do you? We're all in the same boat. We're all looking at the same seas before us, the same probable outcome for humanity. The difference is in how we deal with what we see. To my mind, it is best to see it like that little starving Buddha with the ash in its eye sockets and the candle in its chest – which is to say with eyes as cold as ashes and a compassionate fiery heart.

**ROX:** Gotta follow up on that strange stuff some time. To conclude with the O'Neill work I invoked earlier, however, when Hickey shows up for his semi-annual bender, he's a changed man. He has sworn off liquor, yet instead of crusading temperance he is on a higher mission – to convince the booze-soaked burnouts that guilt-cleansing "truth" is the only deliverance from "the lie of the pipedream." On the other side of the bar is aging anarchist Larry, who counters that it's raw truth that beats men down, their happiness hanging on a desperate need for illusions/fantasy. You don't have to touch any of that, but I sure as hell would like to know what percentage of American citizens, including the left, you think are "soaked-burnouts" on something. I come across cartons of clinical cases myself, daily. I'll say my goodbyes now . . . leavin' you to say au revoir to one and all for the both of us . . . after you respond. It's been great, Joe. I've learned a lot from you before and during the interview process and I look forward to getting more from you in the future, driving you crazier. Drive carefully . . . people are strange when you're a estranged behind the wheel . . .but do violate some rules.

**JB:** Well . . . I just get lost trying to find what you are getting at. Got a simple one-line question?

**ROX:** No problems; it's easy to understand how I can make things difficult. Here's one for the road: To what extent do you think that the personal baggage that leftists carry around precludes there being anything significant . . . by way of national movement in solidarity . . . being carried out?

**JB:** Heck, why pick on the poor old lefties about that one? We all have personal baggage, deep unresolved problems. The goal is to understand them and turn them toward something constructive. For example, I know that being raised poor made me obsessed with class and money and inequity. And I know that being raised up under the police court judge Christian Jehovah made me fearful and moralizing. And I know that a constant sense of alienation made me become a writer in a desire to communicate. To me, it's not about the load you are born to carry, but how you carry it in this short life. Yeah, I know that sounds sophomoric. But it's sho' nuff true

**ROX:** Hey, call me Freshman, freshmaniacal! Got one last personal ditty to run by you.

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Can't help but ask if any of the mail you received when Part I was [previously] published said anything about me. I've been getting huge amounts of the good and the odd. This is just so's I can leave here and go look in the mirror at my own baggage with a little perspective.

**JB:** I only got two emails. Neither commented on you or me, just that they were glad to see the interview. Remember, my email address wasn't on the article.

So what did you get that was "good" and "odd?"

**ROX:** Well, I won't go into the good . . . 'cause I'm hopin' that's obvious for one and all. But I will note, in closing, that some have questioned my sanity. "Are you crazy?," asked one.

**JB:** Questioned your sanity? Big deal. I much prefer the company of mad men.

*The Mad Ox Disease, Richard Oxman, can be reached at [dueleft@yahoo.com](mailto:dueleft@yahoo.com). He is currently trying to put together a Grand Affair in Paris OR Hoboken, NJ...whereby interested individuals worldwide would come together for "Meetings with the Mad" . . . for a weekend or so . . . with opportunities to mix madly on an interpersonal level with the likes of Non-mainstream Monkeys. Mad music, plays and play, too. His bio is available at <http://news.modernwriters.org>.*

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