

PRELUDE TO FINALE

I didn't even know about it until a year afterwards: then I read it in a rock magazine. Maybe that helps explain it. Or maybe that's what makes it intolerable, like I have to tell somebody or scream. So I'm telling you, okay?

I met Jesse Bernstein at Dogtown Poetry Theater. It was a fertile period for "Left Coast" poetry, and guys like Jesse, Charlie Burkes, Joseph Duemer, and myself were doing live readings every Sunday in a freezing old loft overlooking Puget Sound. It was a fertile period for me, too--I'd sit up writing all night just to have new stuff to impress whatever scurvy collection of poets, wannabes, groupies, with-its, and heat-seeking winos happened to be "Dogging it" each week. I was aflame with it, wired on a headlong creative frenzy. We all were. We were chiseling out a place for poetry alongside the incipient Seattle rock scene, jamming words the way our smuggler colleagues like Lynda Barry and Matt Groening were romping in the graphics arena over at the "Sun" and "Rocket". Sliding crotch-side-down on the sheer cutting edge of verbosity with nobody else much giving a shit.

Maybe one reason Dogtown was such a flaming and seminal success during its brief year of life was that all the major players placed their poetry in a wider context. Hans Skott-Mayre was dabbling in poems as a sideline to performance art; playing us spliced recordings of barflies in

the Athena Cafe while he passed around shrink-wrapped bundles of butts and detritus he'd picked up from their tables. Joe was taking the whole thing on the road, doing poetry shows on KRAB and cable TV. Britt Robson was just starting out as a national rock reviewer, but even then he was working poetic language, techniques, and focus into his work. Charlie was off into poetic/psycho/drama. I was fantasizing arena poetry shows while pushing local music at the "Herald" and "Rocket"...and starting to publish EIDOLON. Jesse would sit down and play piano to his works as often as not and pulled off the biggest score of all when he broke into the University's art-of-the-state fest and kidnapped all the paintings, holding the whole show hostage until the festival co-ordinators agreed to hastily insert open-mike poetry readings into the program. Lots of people were talking "outlaw art" back then, but Jesse was actually breaking the law not only for his art, but also for everyone else's. The guy knew how to steal a show.

It says a lot about Jesse's instincts that none of the painters whose works he heisted complained about it. They joined in pressuring the festival and acclaimed him a hero of the devolution when the festival honchos acceded to his "artmail" ransom in exchange for the keys to the downtown storage lockers where he'd stashed the show. Like us poets, they recognized Jesse as a natural.

When I say "natural", I mean more than the innate gifts of grace and ease that you'd see in a baseball natural because poetry is a different kind of

pooch altogether. I also mean this: the rest of us, even the best of us, were writing poetry because we wanted to be poets but Jesse was writing poetry because it was the closest he could come to communicating with anyone else. He grasped for words like a man going down in a dark sea, had to forge his own instruments to play us his inner anthems. He created his own language which--let nobody shuck you with all this "visual imagery" crap--is what poetry is really, truly all about.

He had as blazing a talent and tortured a soul as anyone else (I think one reason I never took John Lennon seriously with all his "genius is pain" posturing was because I knew Jesse at the time) but he didn't drag them around and pimp them out like lesser poets in love with their own mute nasal agony. Word got around about the childhood, the little vacations at the giggle farm in Camarillo, the failed suicides, the lives that shattered around him. When he said, "I've got some meat here and I'm gonna throw it in some traffic," he was beyond the dreary resume, he was trying to pull it together, to become one of us.

That perspective, that lack of trying to be anything other than what he was, gave him the sense of humor that kept him alive and in one piece. He'd get up and read an intro about the poet reading in public, blatantly easing us up to that terrifying thing few performers ever discuss--a glimpse of how the people out there see us. Then it would come..."Oh, no! Not another skinny Jew with glasses."

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I published Jesse in the first issue of EIDOLON, in every issue. He had the things most poets would kill for; books in print, mentions by intellectuals and newspaper dweebs. He didn't pay much attention to the attention; he wanted a recording contract. To Jesse, it was all prologue. He didn't start the expressionistic riot that was Dogtown's climax and going-out-of-business wail, but he damn sure finished it. Charlie Burkes had written a three part "play" about dissonance in relationships; a male voice and female voice alternating in reading verses to each other, the third voice being Joe Brazil (the white one), who was about as wildass freejazz atonal tenor sax Maniac as you could dig up anywhere. Trust a Charlie to find a Joe.

It started off okay, and for about five minutes was what such a thing would have been in a normal venue; the interplay of voices, poems and music providing an "interesting", shall I say "stimulating", interlude for the cultural mindset. But Joe Brazil lost it along the line and started circling up to some unholy quasi-modal liftoff. As the music got louder and more hebephrenic, Charlie and his female accomplice (was it the now-semi-legendary Candace Street? I forget) were straining to be heard, getting agitated, ad-libbing. The audience was rapt--leaning in, eyes and nostrils widening.

As Joe cut in his Tranewreck afterburner, Charlie visibly gave up all illusion of control, snatched a chair from the audience, jumped up on it and started screaming his lines at Candace (if that's who it was who

threw off her sweater, jumped up on the upright piano, and started yowling right back). Their faces were only a foot apart and they were bellowing at each other gale force over the top of Joe as he fought for escape velocity, fists clenched around the wadded scripts they had long forgotten as they vectored off into a somewhat more comprehensive discussion of dissonant relationships. Joe pulled it all out, scarfing with the alien at a guttering, gutshot volume pinnacle. We, the audience, were as galvanized as you'd expect, holding it all to be self-evident.

Jesse took it as long as he could, then went rather decisively off his own wobbly rocker. He yelled something as he jumped up, but I don't think it was words. He lunged over to the piano and speared down on it with both hands, manic pitchforks brutally clutching at daemoniac dischords completely in the tenor of the general goings-on. Charlie gave him a glance, but never lost stride; Candace (or whoever) ignored him completely, even though he was visibly swaying the piano she was kneeling on and his face was right up against her butt.

There were a couple of minutes of that tableau, the "readers" leaning into each other like a high wind, Joe Brazil bent over backwards supported by his feet and his head with his sax bopping and lunging like a shrieking brass erection, Jesse hunched like a gnome and rabbit-punching the piano until it pissed blood. It's a tribute to the quality of people at Dogtown that nobody else tried to join in. Either the loa is on you or it isn't: we'd gone too far to the Dogs to make believe in the presence of

those who have no other choice.

Jesse gave the weirdest bellow I'd ever heard out of him (and he was fairly forthcoming with bizarro bleats), threw up the piano's front hood (spanking the hollering woman a good one), let it fall down on his head, stuck his hands inside it, and started finger-fucking the strings.

Something about that full-contact Harpochord music got everybody even more rogue and we were feeling some sort of creepy crescendo in the works. Joe was turning purple, Charlie was starting to froth at the mouth, Whoever was pale and shuddering, Jesse's hands were bleeding. There was nowhere to go, and no place to stop.

Then Jesse jerked erect, the lid sliding off his head and slamming shut like a junkyard gate. It was like a conductor jerking his baton. The other three perpetrators screeched to a halt, tense and jittering. Jesse, blank-eyed and haggard looking, his glasses dangling from one ear, ran over to the windows that lined one wall--windows so swept by gray Seattle rain that you couldn't even see the sodden docks below--and slammed both hands through the glass. A double uppercut from the hips, fingers stretched straight out into the impact. The note of shattering glass was the resolution that whatever just happened had been searching for, the big panes falling to the street the inevitable final coda, the bright gout of blood from Jesse's forearms and forehead the point of it all, after all. The man could slash his wrists with a modicum of style, that's all. The whole damn fracas had just been Jesse's overture.

That little episode made Dogtown's fame, but also finished it off just for lack of an encore. The truly Dog-gone were too righteous to try topping that psychic ejaculation, but it was pretty obvious that particular little karass would never fly that high again. Dogtown melted down and Red Sky was born from the puddle, Don Wilsun marching in with his different drums and Bly/Ginsburg chants. Satiation is the goal of arousal, ennui the goal of excitement; everything but the orgasm is nothing but foreplay.

I don't really keep up with the Seattle music scene, but it seems to keep up with me. I can't get away from the Christmas cards from Heart, forgotten colleagues sending me copies of the "Rocket", Robert Ferrigno and Craig Tomashoff popping up as writers in LA. Nostalgiagrams Northwest. So I heard about Jesse getting an album out. And on the SubPop label, no less, the one that started all this garagegrunge hoopla. What a gas. He got that recording contract. Up there with Nirvana and Mudpuppy and Toe Jam. Right on, Jess; UBtop40. A torch of wildest dreaming to the thousands of us open-mikers. He did the impossible, just like he'd done all his life. Then I'm sitting on a trolley and pick up some scrabby rock rag to kill time and I read, parenthetically in a belated review of his album, that he had finally pulled off the big trick. Stole the whole show this time; finally managing to become something he wasn't. I don't know how he killed himself and I don't want to. It couldn't possibly be as appropriate or cool as the times he didn't make it. All a

long, strange prelude to tease us into listening to him as he banged on our windows to get in and be one of us, trying to teach us his native tongue, resigned to us calling it "art". Resigned in advance to the fate found by famous poets. What do I mean by that? Try this: if he hadn't cut that album I'd never have known he was dead.