

Honky Tonk Hero

by Billy Joe Shaver, assisted by Brad Reagan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

“Billy Joe Shaver may be the best songwriter alive today” (Willie Nelson). “Our generation’s Jimmie Rodgers” (Randall Jamail). “Probably the last great cowboy poet” (*No Depression*). “He’s as real a writer as Hemingway” (Kris Kristofferson). “If Carl Sandburg had come from Waco, his name would be Billy Joe Shaver” (Kinky Friedman). “Billy Joe is not all there” (Tom T. Hall). Yes, Billy Joe Shaver has earned the respect of songwriters and critics alike. It is sweet recognition indeed for a life that has had more than its share of highs and lows, and *Honky Tonk Hero* provides an opportunity to gain additional insight into the man who has written such classics as “Old Five and Dimers Like Me” and “I’m Just an Old Chunk of Coal.”

The story goes something like this: Shaver’s father abandoned him before birth, and his mother later left him behind to be raised, hardscrabble style, by his grandmother. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade and was tossed out of the U.S. Navy by the time he was twenty. Other jobs, such as truck driver, cowpuncher, sawmill worker (when he lost parts of three fingers in an accident), car salesman, and roofer (when he fell two stories to the ground and crushed two vertebrae in his back) proved to be just as transitory. Married three times to the same woman and divorced twice, Shaver lived the fast life of booze and drugs in the 1960s and 1970s while moving back and forth between Texas and Nashville, writing, pitching, and eventually recording his songs. After a “born-again” experience in the late 1970s, he cleaned up his act only to have tragedy strike again in recent years. Within a period of a year, both his mother and wife Brenda succumbed to cancer, and his only son, Eddy, died of a heroin overdose under what remain mysterious circumstances. Still later, Shaver suffered a heart attack on stage and underwent quadruple bypass surgery, but he never stopped writing songs.

If the story is largely a familiar one, it is because Shaver has repeated it in numerous interviews. This time around, though, he has the opportunity to tell things com-

pletely in his own words, natural and unvarnished, right down to the cussing. The cast of characters is impressive to say the least: Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, Townes Van Zandt, Willie Nelson, Harlan Howard, Bobby Bare, Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, Joe Jamail, Darrell Royal, Guy Clark, Kinky Friedman, Dickey Betts, Johnny Cash, and Robert Duvall. Still, there are some odd omissions, incidents Shaver has touched on before. For example, there is no mention of the first time Billy Joe met Willie Nelson (in Waco or was it Houston?); or the humorous, bittersweet anecdote of Billy Joe trying to keep his wife Brenda, who was dying of cancer, alive as long as possible by telling her Townes Van Zandt would be waiting in heaven. Brenda, you see, hated Townes with a passion.

Honky Tonk Hero blends the spiritual and the earthly, and Shaver proudly wears his religion on his sleeve: “Forgiveness is divine and I forgive anyone who ever wronged me.” Growing up in Corsicana, Shaver enjoyed going to church. He liked “talking to God,” too, and the conversation has continued over the years. As for his priorities now, he is unequivocally clear, “I read the Bible every day. It’s how I stay close to Jesus and you know what I say? If you don’t love Jesus, go to hell.”

Shaver pulls no punches when it comes to his friends either. On Waylon Jennings, “Waylon didn’t pay attention to anybody but himself.” On Bobby Bare, “I learned a lot from Bobby. Mostly what not to do.” On Johnny and June Carter Cash, “They were the kind of people that swept things like that under the rug, even though just about everyone in the family carried some sort of addiction.” On Kinky Friedman, “it’s never a good idea to listen to Kinky, actually.”

The presence of his wife Brenda permeates the pages. Theirs was a forty year love affair; yet, Shaver offers a surprising confession, “Did Brenda love me? I think she did.” In addition to Brenda, two other women had a significant impact on Shaver. From his grandmother, Birdie Lee Collins Watson, he learned that life is best met head on with honesty, hard work, and

no complaining. Ms. Mabel Legg, a high school English teacher who recognized Billy Joe’s talent in the seventh grade, also offered advice he never forgot: “As long as you are honest with what you write, you will always have something special to say.”

And this is one of the pleasures of *Honky Tonk Hero*. While the narrative occupies a mere seventy-two pages, the remaining one hundred-sixteen pages reprint the complete lyrics to the recorded songs Shaver has written (up to 2004). Throughout, Ms. Legg’s advice comes through loud and clear. Over the course of fifteen albums (the last two not included here) and one hundred-plus songs, Billy Joe also proves that life *is* poetry. And he rightfully affirms, “To me the song is poetry. That’s all it is. It’s the way I describe the world around me ... I believe my songs will live long after I’m gone.”

Another special feature of *Honky Tonk Hero* is the inclusion of a cache of photographs, a family photo album if you will, which provide faces for his father Buddy, mother Tincie, grandmother Birdie Lee, and Brenda, along with poses struck with compadres such as Willie, Waylon, Robert Duvall, and Kinky Friedman. Especially poignant are the shots of Billy Joe and Eddy taken over the years, reaffirming their relationship as father and son, as well as friends and musical companions.

The photographs on the dust jacket are worth mentioning, too. The front cover dust jacket shot comes courtesy of the lens of legendary photographer Jim Marshall and dates to 1973 when it originally graced the cover of Shaver’s first album, *Old Five and Dimers Like Me*. Marshall’s Leica captured the relaxed, hell-bent naturalism of the outlaw poet from Texas. The back cover dust jacket photo, taken by Laura Wilson more than thirty years later, finds Shaver striking a similar pose, and if there is a bit more jowl in the cheek and gray in the hair, Shaver’s smile and swagger, not to mention the belt buckle, are still the same.

Showtime at the Apollo: The Story of Harlem's World Famous Theater

by Ted Fox, (Rhinebeck, New York: Mill Road Enterprises, 2003)

Today, New York City's sidewalks are undulating seas of earphones, wires and iPods. People still love music as much as ever, but more often than not they receive it directly from machine to brain. Not so long ago music rode from stage to crowd on waves of spotlight glare and breath in a city whose musical geography was marked out by performance landmarks: The Savoy Ballroom, CBGB's, The Fillmore East, and Birdland. And, if music is the destination rather than a mere travel companion, *no* destination is more storied than the Apollo Theatre. Ted Fox's *Showtime at the Apollo*—re-issued for the theatre's 70th anniversary—provides a decade-by-decade insider's history of the Harlem theatre that defined African-American performance for much of the twentieth century.

Take a Wednesday night in 1956, for example, and drop in on Amateur Night at the Apollo. A notoriously demanding crowd always assembles on Amateur Night. The terrified contestant who hits a flat note or fails to come across with honesty faces the wrath of "Pop" Johnson, handkerchief over his head and whistle in his mouth, perched in the right stage side box, "Porto Rico" and his deadly cap pistol, or Geech, the comedian who roams the aisles crying out for his girlfriend Hester. It's a tough crowd, but this Amateur Night, a brash young singer—recently arrived from Georgia with no dancing shoes, no costume, and a straw suitcase—takes the stage. James Brown absolutely slays them, blazes off to his destiny as "Soul Brother Number One," and a career intimately tied to the Apollo, where in 1962 he would record his epic *Live at the Apollo Theater*. James Brown was not an isolated case. Other Amateur Night winners over the years included Sarah Vaughan, Pearl Bailey, Frankie Lymon, Wilson Pickett, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Dionne Warwick, Ronnie Spector, and Gladys Knight, and these were just the *amateurs*.

In the 1920s, Harlem was hugely popular among whites out for an evening of exoticism, out for a taste of jazz, booze, and dancing girls at theatres that show-

cased black talent while often closed to the black residents of the neighborhood. On 125th Street, Hurtig and Seamon's Music Hall was one of the many burlesque theatres in the area, and one of the many that hit hard times when Mayor Fiorello La Guardia cracked down on burlesque in 1933. In 1934, Hurtig and Seamon's reopened as The Apollo Theatre, under the control of Austrian immigrant Leo Brecher and a former schoolteacher from the Lower East Side, Frank Schiffman. Schiffman's son Bobby later joined the team as well, having practically grown up at the theatre. The Apollo soon became the act to beat, "a sort of uptown Met dedicated to furious jazz, coffee-colored chorus girls and grinning...comedians," according to the 1937 *New York World-Telegram*. In Harlem, Fox tells us, Schiffman "was God—a five-foot-nine inch, white, Jewish, balding, bespectacled deity." Depending on who you listen to, Frank Schiffman either ruthlessly exploited black artists and black patrons alike, building the Apollo into a monopoly while enforcing a blacklist against performers who would dare to play a competing venue. Or, Schiffman was the only theatre manager in town to hire African Americans, helped to desegregate 125th Street businesses, provided a constant source of revenue for black artists, and gave entertainment to Harlem residents at prices they could afford. Fox leaves the reader to judge, while showing us Schiffman's greatest talent—his knack for relentlessly building the Apollo up as a brand name. At the height of its cultural power (and a tough time for business) in the late 1960s and 1970s, Schiffman could draw top acts for less money than they would make at bigger halls, simply because "The Apollo" was, well, "The Apollo."

None of Frank Schiffman's success would have been possible, of course, without the musical talent, and this is where the book shines. *Showtime at the Apollo* gives the reader a backstage view of black music's evolution in America,—big band jazz, bebop, soul, R&B, gospel, funk—from the 1930s to the 1970s, growing and changing with the tastes of the nation's

most influential urban African-American community. The method of the book is anecdotal; Fox collects the stories, organizes them by decade, and steps out of the way. Classic tales, such as the James Brown Amateur Night performance, are matched by lesser-known gems. Billie Holiday stuns the room into mesmerized silence performing the racially-charged "Strange Fruit" over Schiffman's objections. The audience walks out one night when Nina Simone tells them that she will sing "Porgy" when she is good and ready. Charlie Parker sends a note through the stage door begging cash from the band to pay his bar tab to some gangsters next door. Buddy Holly, one of the many white performers to play the Apollo over the years, takes the stage and is told by a woman in the front row that, "It'd better sound like the record!" He brings the house down with an acrobatic version of "Bo Diddley." Marvin Gaye, petrified of the Apollo crowd, flies to New York, loses his nerve, and flies back to Detroit. The Apollo served as a famous stage for black comedy as well, giving Sammy Davis, Jr., his first big break. Flip Wilson served as the emcee for years, while the notoriously "blue" Redd Foxx shocked one generation, and a young Richard Pryor the next.

By the 1970s the city was in trouble, Harlem was falling apart, and the Apollo, as it always had, went with the neighborhood. Riots had happened before, in the 1940s and 1960s, but the people always returned. Now the violence of the streets spilled into the Apollo. In 1975, a man was shot and killed in the balcony in the middle of a Smokey Robinson show. Performers had their dressing rooms cleared out while onstage, and drug deals were common in the theatre's darkened spaces. Meanwhile, the business of black music had changed, too. By the 1970s, black performers who had once been nourished by Harlem's loyal fans now no longer needed them to sell out stadiums. The Apollo, with about 1,600 seats, seemed a relic of a bygone age. Black music was now America's music. Fox argues that black music always had been

America's music. Big band jazz is the invention of Dizzy Gillespie or Duke Ellington, but Paul Whiteman gets the credit as the greatest bandleader. Screamin' Jay Hawkins invents the wild theatrics of rock and roll, while Elvis sells millions of records.

The primary weakness of *Showtime at the Apollo* is perhaps unavoidable. It is so good at giving us a 360-degree tour of life in one theatre, that when America's racial climate begins to change in the 1960s, we are left to view it with curiosity, from a distance, and without comprehension. Did the Apollo—the leading black theatre in America—help to cause the Civil

Rights movement? Fox concludes that the “general acceptance of black culture into American popular culture was the beginning of something brand new, but it was also the beginning of the end for the Apollo Theatre...it is the final irony that the ultimate casualty of this revolution was the Apollo itself.” We are left wanting to know much more about exactly how this all happened, but we will have to settle for a description of one final performance—George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic in 1980, with pot smoke thick in the air, and the teenage crowd chanting along with P-Funk “one nation, united, under a groove.”

Actually, though, there is a coda to the demise of the Apollo. Today, you can go up to 125th Street and see an occasional show—the Apollo was saved by private investors and government development funds in the 1980s. You can watch the amateurs of today strut their stuff if your local television station picks up *Showtime at the Apollo*. Now a cultural landmark, you can visit the Apollo gift shop, take a tour of the theatre, and imagine the night that James Brown showed up with his straw suitcase. Then, listen to *Live at the Apollo* on your iPod as you take the subway home.

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