

## Let Us Now Praise Dangerous Poets Memories of Time Spent With Appalachian Poet-Activist Don West

by Jeff Biggers

I have spent the last few years obsessed with the life of an Iobscurer Appalachian poet-activist. Not entirely obscure: In 1946, Don West became a literary phenomenon, managing to sell nearly 100,000 copies of a collection of quatrain ballads and labor poems, *Clods of Southern Earth*. Truth is, during the several years I have spent researching West's life and collecting his papers, correspondence, and manuscripts from the remote corners of the world—most of West's personal papers had been lost in a series of fires—I have been in turmoil about how to deal with his secretive past and its meaning to me.

Not that I didn't know all the details. I first met West in the summer of 1983. I was 20, a dropout from the University of California. I had just gone through a wild nine-month tour of duty in Berkeley's corridors, spending more time in jail and at leftist political meetings than in classrooms. I failed to finish my last quarter. Returning from a stint in jail for a demonstration in central California, I was involved in a tragic car accident, which resulted in the death of a young woman. I was at the wheel. Still in a daze, I eventually took a Greyhound across the country, and then started hitching and hiking through the Appalachian Mountains. I was angry, resentful, and adrift. Don West saved my life that summer.

Here are his bona fides: Raised by a sharecropper from the north Georgia mountains, West put himself through Lincoln Memorial and Vanderbilt Universities at the same time the Southern Agrarian literary movement took the stage in the late 1920s. But West was no youthful antebellum sycophant; he earned a master's in divinity, traveled around Europe to examine folk schools, and returned to the South to launch his own revolution in the mountains. Raised by radical Republicans in a part of Appalachia that had supported the Union, West rejected the hillbilly stereotypes for his proper place in the mountain South's vanguard for independence, freedom, and enlightenment. In 1932 he cofounded the Highlander Folk School, which became the training ground for the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks took a seat at the school training session only weeks before she refused to give up her seat on the history-changing Montgomery bus. As one of the lonely activists in the generation before that glorious bus boycott, he went underground and defended a radical black (Communist) leader in Atlanta in the mid-1930s. Wanted dead or alive by the Atlanta authorities, he fled the state and became a union organizer for millworkers and miners in the Carolinas and Kentucky and was often beaten and jailed, only to quietly return to work his farm in Georgia. Not too quietly: In a top secret FBI file, West was added to a proposed list of dangerous Americans who should be interned during World War II. In fact, one memo referred to the poet as the most dangerous man in the South.

After turning a small Georgia school district into an acclaimed model, he returned to the national scene with his *Clods of Southern Earth*. In 1946, New York publishers Boni and Gaer (Boni had published Ernest Hemingway's first stories) announced the release of West's record-breaking volume of poetry. Here is where his secret life began to haunt him.

During all of these years, riding an Indian Chief motorcycle, West had left a legacy of poems in his wake, as author John Egerton has written, like a phantom revolutionary—poems that unveiled the miseries of mill hands, miners, and sharecroppers, and the hopes of justice and racial unity in the South. His pioneering work reclaimed Appalachia as a uniquely progressive region and purveyor of the good life. For a while, he became the proverbial people's poet, his work passed out at rallies and memorized by miners who had never read a book in their lives.

As an angry young man back in the early 1930s, he declared in verse, "I am a Communist," to glorify his dramatic causes. This was the bottom line for West in 1933, and perhaps for fellow travelers like Langston Hughes: Only the wild-eyed Reds could take on the unremitting terrorism of the racist South and the relentless northern capitalists ravaging Appalachia's minerals and workforce. At the scene of the bloody Harlan County mining wars in the 1930s, where the ballad "Which Side Are You On?" was born, Don West came of age and took sides.

Hounded and red-baited by newspaper after newspaper in the late 1940s and 1950s, West drifted into oblivion, losing job after job, called time and again into the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings that popped up in the South with the regularity of catfish fries. In one of the most unusual persecutions in American literary history, West's poetry was often used against him at hearings and in newspaper editorials. Destitute, he even took to peddling vegetables from his garden on the streets of Atlanta. The Klu Klux Klan added a final touch, burning down his farm and his collection of books, manuscripts, and family heirlooms. He finally left the South in exile.

When I stumbled onto Don West in the 1980s, he had returned to Appalachia as one of the elder statesmen in their folk revival. He had become the link between the Old Left and New Left activists in the 1960s, and had founded a new folk school and farm, the Appalachian South Folklife Center, which became a hub of activity for young Appalachians in search of their history and progressive culture. His poetry returned to print and sold thousands. His role as one of the original Appalachian historians became more poignant with a series of pamphlets he produced in the tradition of his hero, Tom Paine.

With less than 10 bucks in my pocket, I worked on West's farm that summer. I attended classes he set up for school dropouts and mountain youth in an employment program. We stared in awe at West's poetry readings and his lessons on the heroic role of mountaineers at Kings Mountain during the American Revolution. "Remember," he would shout, "we had the first abolitionist newspaper, not the northerners," and then pausing, he would always end, "and we didn't burn any witches in these hollows."

But rumors of communism had infiltrated our discussions. As we dug ditches one afternoon, I will never forget one boy dropping his shovel and announcing: "I frankly don't give a damn if

he was a Communist or not. Don West's poems make me proud to be an American mountaineer. And I'll fight anyone who disagrees." We all went back to digging.

In the evenings, I loitered near West's front porch, where I would join him for long walks along the back roads. He listened to my youthful rants, my half-baked ideas, my endless questions. The old man always laughed. He was ramrod tall, reminding me of my grandfather, a John Henry-like coal miner in the hills of southern Illinois who had been struck down by black lung disease. I had always considered my grandfather a casualty of commerce, part of the beaten-up hill folk.

Reaching into his overalls, Don fished out a book of his poems. He said, "Boy, you should get back to your home in southern Illinois. Find out who your grandpa was, how he got there." He paused, smiled at me. "Read my poems and decide for yourself. Just read poetry, a lot of poetry."

I went back to my cabin and devoured Don West's poems that summer, his rhymes about callused hands and gaunt mothers and living on gravy, his didactic musings about injustice and mining camps, his exhortation of wondrous mountain life and history. Somehow, it placed my wandering thoughts back on track that summer, and provided a meter of structure to my life. It led me back to my family, my roots, to school and to a career as a writer and book critic. I can honestly say it was my first book of poetry. It led inevitably to rebel poets and bon vivants like Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda, Rabindranath Tagore, Robert Burns, and Lorine Niedecker. More importantly, I began to understand poetry as a means of reclaiming our cultural heritage, even as an act of resistance, leading to the legions of contemporary poets, like Denise Levertov, Grace Paley, and Martín Espada, who have altered the way I envision the world now.

Some might think this hard to imagine, considering the work I admire and review these days. Some of West's poetry now raises the hair on the back of my neck with its clichés and slogans, much in the way some of Neruda's (and Hughes') genius was derailed into hackneyed mottos for ideological wags. But I am old enough to realize that this artistic Achilles heel, shaped by the angry 1930s and the proletarian poets and their world unhinged, doesn't liquidate the rest of West's groundbreaking work or the value of its contribution to miners, millworkers, sharecroppers, and others in a horrific period in the South. West's poetry mattered.

Here's the coda: Years later, after Don had died, his books had gone out of print, and his memory had vanished into the mountain fog, I sat across from Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz in a bar in Flagstaff, Arizona, sipping vodka. Milosz had endured the wrath of Polish communism, eventually choosing to defect to the West. His poetry had also been considered dangerous and subversive, though among the censors and purveyors of the official working class behind the Iron Curtain. In those days, I treasured Milosz' poetry and considered him the greatest living poet and had invited him to a literary festival I had organized in rural Arizona. His work, of course, was in another literary academy than that of Don West. That night, as we discussed poetry and the banter of roadside dogs, I never once thought to mention the Appalachian poet and his simple ballads.

Days later, though, I discovered that Milosz had written in his Nobel address about poetry's ultimate inability to anticipate the catastrophes of our fractured times. At the same time, invoking his own obscure poetry heroes, he urged us to "publicly confess our attachment to certain names," if only to celebrate literature and its possibilities for life, instead of attacking it; to not forget our sources of inspiration in harrowing times.

"Poetry saved my life," I had told Milosz. Only now do I realize that I should have added, "thanks to Don West." ■

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