



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

ROBESON AND ROBINSON

Sorting through a pile of photographs, I discovered one of my elementary school report cards. My eyes focused on three lines: “Uses Time Wisely,” “Penmanship” and “Department.” Letter grades were entered in ink so yours truly might not alter the grade before parental viewing and signing of the card. Each below-par grade was underlined in a nasty shade of red-orange, the underlining, grease marking pencil, just in case a “U” for “Unsatisfactory” did not pop for the desired effect. From a skills standpoint, I became adept at doctoring “F”s and “D”s to “A”s and “B”s, (talk about using time wisely!), but that damn grease pencil foiled many an attempt at grade inflation. I must have been proud to carry *this* beauty home; the school bell tolling at exactly 3:15, laconic music playing from the speaker in the classroom with an announcement to return the grade reports tomorrow, then slowly walking the last mile home.

“Your writing is illegible,” my folks scolded, so I reminded them I was going to be a doctor. That usually made my case. They continued, “And you *don’t use time wisely.*” Then, looking at each another, my mother asked, “Do you know what that means?” I certainly didn’t. Still don’t. I wisely spent a lot of time in the classroom coat closet or “cloak room,” dunce caps having been abolished for disruptive students. Any time I was hungry, I acted up, as there was always a Twinkie or tuna fish sandwich in a classmate’s lunchbox stored on the shelf. That seemed a wise use of time. Today, the word processor takes care of my poor penmanship. See?

With this grade report on my mind, I was lured into the parking lot of that very school this past summer. I noticed a large sign on the school grounds announcing a significant anniversary for the building, which was erected over 50 years ago. I was in the third grade when the school was new, and have driven by this building thousands of times, never returning since graduation, until now. I introduced myself to the office manager, who notified the principal that an “old” student was a guest. How old, I began to feel, as I looked at the really young principal. I entered her office ... a familiar room indeed. “Does the school look the same to you?” she asked, then we strolled down the hallway. There was less clearance above my head. I responded, “Yes,” as I looked at the very same desks and narrow hallway. “I

think so, may I stand in the coat closet?” She laughed a knowing laugh as she (no taller than I was then) closed the door behind me. The smell of wet woollens, stale Twinkies and rancid tuna sandwiches lingered.

The best discovery was back in the office; over five decades later, the original mid-1950s sound system was still in service. It was a huge aluminum and steel, vacuum-tube console comprised of dials, meters, buttons and switches reminiscent of the flight deck of the *Starship Enterprise*. And *there* was the same turntable and tone arm, still churning out music the old-fashioned way, over the in-wall and in-class speakers. Some of the vintage sound recordings were in the bin next to the console. Back then, music was played from the office throughout the school, during holidays and recess, or when the dismissal bell rang. (I so missed recess, I decided to major in the subject.)

I recalled a particular recording and voice, one that was a favorite cantata of the principal and Roger all those many years ago ... “Ballad for Americans,” by Earl Robinson and John LaTouche, featuring Paul Robeson, an original WPA creation from 1939, played by the principal at *all* patriotic occasions. Years later, I would hear and sing Robinson’s “Joe Hill,” and listen to him perform one night, I believe with Faith Petric. But, in these formative years, the magnificent singing voice of Paul Robeson reverberated throughout the building. Nothing sounded like that recording. Nobody sounded like Paul Robeson. That stirring performance became etched in my heart, a few inches from the “U”s from my report cards. The cantata is one of the earliest pieces of music I recall hearing ... and I could sing it start to finish. So, back at the school office ... I pointed to the metallic grill of the speaker over the clock,

then to the phonograph, and in my deepest Robeson-like voice sang, “*In ’76 the sky was red ... thunder rumbling overhead, Bad King George couldn’t sleep in his bed, and on that stormy morn, Ol’ Uncle Sam was born.*” The principal smiled again, nodded, and had the office manager extract from the record bin the very same, four-sided 78-rpm Victor sound recording. She placed side one up on the turntable and lowered the tone arm to the start of the recording. Paul Robeson’s voice resonated in the empty hallways, classrooms, cafeteria and the office ... just like it did way back then, when I first encountered Earl Robinson and Paul Robeson. “*And now you know who I am.*” Who says I didn’t “U”s time wisely?



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