

“Q & A with Naphtali ‘Tuli’ Kupferberg”

M.P.-Why Stalinism? He was a Russian nationalist and Trotsky international; how did you defend that?

T.K. - When you're thirteen you don't really defend too much. It's just that the Communist Party was the most active group around and they would have first shot, so to speak, at a young person who became politically concerned...

M.P.- How do you feel about those days when causes were so clear and simple?

T.K. - Oh, if they would only come back! (laughs) Maybe simplicity was part of being young, but Fascism, Hitler helped crystalize us. I think there's a lot to that theory that Western Capitalism built Hitler up, particularly. France and England, to devour the Soviet Union. My God; he didn't do exactly what they wanted! Maybe the telephone receiver wasn't too clear.

It's peculiar because American ideology was part of this simplicity, such as Manifest Destiny, Progress. The easy way out was simplicity. Whenever you found a Socialism you didn't like you'd say, this is not Socialism. In the end, the ideology was not developed enough to explain or foresee things. Therefore we had these incredible mistakes, if you can call what cost millions of people their lives a mistake happened.

Marx predicted a lot of things wrong, made a lot of mistakes, and had a lot of success; he predicted the revolution would happen in a developed country like England and it never did. Revolution in Russia because it was undeveloped stood outside the theory. In retrospect one can say that both Marxism and Anarchist theory had serious defects. The Anarchists say their theory has never been tried; that's one of the faults. If it never took power anywhere, it's a defect.

M.P.- Aren't these etudes in artifice that stand apart from nature?

T.K. - Nature is a word I never use; I think everything is natural, even artificial things; it's a different kind of nature. Not everything that's natural is wonderful as anyone who eats the leaves of the hemlock will easily find out.

I don't associate with any group; maybe no group will associate with me. I think the 60s was a search for community because American society has none; it has small groups organized to exploit small groups-and then larger groups. At first anarchism has to be an attitude; it starts with disrespect for institutions. If you have a general

disrespect, you might slight something worthwhile.

M.P.- How did you meet Ed Sanders?

T.K. - I guess I met him at the Metro, a coffee house on Second Avenue; we had readings in the free art forms of the period. You were there.

M.P.- Yeah. If people didn't like the poetry there was some rather violent criticism of it.

T.K. - I think that's all right.

M.P.- Also there was utter freedom to say whatever you wanted; that was revolutionary.

T.K. - Well, Paul Goodman always said you could always say whatever you wanted as long as it didn't have any effect.

Only In America. The owner was not exactly a poetical type. It was a commercial thing for him; he was sort of a Birchite actually. The poets brought him a lot of business so he was quite happy with that. It had a reputation of a place where people read and met their friends in those kinds of circles.

M.P.- There was you, Ed Sanders, Allen Katzman, Allen Ginsberg; you never knew what was going to happen. One girl read tragic limericks. Ed Sanders ran it, right?

T.K. - No, it passed through several hands because it got too disgusting for one person to do all that organizing and balance these inflated egos against one another. One of the games was getting the perfect place on the schedule. You didn't want to read too early, but you didn't want to read too late. You had to find the place where the audience was at the perfect pitch of receptivity.

M.P.- Those were eight hour sessions. When was that?

T.K. - o, it would be a little past the middle, generally. In my novel which has the same unmentionable title as a magazine I helped edit, I discuss it; if anyone can convince a publisher to do it, they can ponder over it.

M.P.- There was one poet, who seemed to have bought a costume out of an old IWW shop, who'd bring a poem of 30,000 pages, read excerpts, and always have a different girlfriend. He was very serious.

T.K. - There were thousands of people like that; you'll have to be more specific.

M.P.- He looked like a Warner Brothers fantasy of a dangerous Red; no smiles.

T.K. - I got inoculated against bad sentimental poetry there. I didn't get pickled, just sweet and sour. I once was going to do an anthology called The World's Worst Poems. It was very hard to do, because no matter how hard I tried, there would always be something good in one of them, or if the poem were totally bad, it became something

else: a perfectly funny thing, actually.

M.P.- It's a virtuoso trick to be banal all the time.

T.K. - The trouble with a cliché is that you don't hear it at all. Newspapers are a means of non-communication; you have to read between the lines. I make a lot of poems out of them but sometimes you want to rip out the paper and recite it as the joke of the month.

M.P.- Could you talk about the politics in your mag with the unmentionable name?

T.K. - Not all of it was. It was *A Magazine of the Arts*. You're allowed to say Arts, I think. Ed Sanders was the editor. He was sort of a lyrical wild man; he just sort of spoke those words quite naturally. It's really in the American tradition.

Ed is from Missouri; there really is a lot of Mark Twain in him. He gathered the liveliest things he could find around the East Village at that time and put them all together. He didn't worry about language and he got a pretty lively magazine.

M.P.- How do you feel about Al Goldstein's mag, to not use another word?

T.K. - The sexism seems to be so obvious and stupid that I don't consider it to be very harmful. I like the humor of it, the lightness it brings to sex. I think if you talk to Al he'll deny that he's sexist.

M.P.- Yeah, I talked to Al. He says that. He says it's Flaubertian satire.

T.K. - I don't know whether it started out that way. If you carry anything to an extreme it becomes ridiculous. I've had this experience with satire: you have to know what you're doing, but if you're willing to take the risk, you've got to make yourself very clear.

M.P.- Did you like working for the *East Village Other*?

T.K. -- I was a free-lance as opposed to a slave-lance journalist. It had some possibilities; it did some good things.

M.P.- How did The Fugs start?

T.K. - It was Ed's idea. We had been going to the Dom, which was an ethnic bar around the corner from the Metro; you remember it-we were listening to the Beatles, and the Stones on the jukebox. Ed saw a logical connection to putting that music and that energy into poetry.

I thought it was a great idea; I picked the name. We had been performing; those readings were sort of performances. There's always been a link between music and poetry, as Ed knew being a classical scholar, so we just connected them. A lot of it really worked.

M.P.- How did you like touring?

T.K. - It was a mixed bag. It was nice to go somewhere you wanted to go, but it wasn't good to leave some place you wanted to stay. Motel rooms are not the most wonderful place. But it was exciting to meet the folks out there. At first it's all very exciting and you accept it uncritically, but then you begin to wonder what exactly is being adulated and why, and is it overdone, overblown, is it wrong, is the whole idea of the Artist or anybody as hero valid? In the media it's almost impossible to escape that role.

The form demanded that I have a broader sense of humor. Since none of us were musicians we had to do more than music. Since Ed wouldn't let me sing, I became more an actor.

There were some good reasons why I shouldn't have sung. But we were working in the pattern of the folk balladeer, the minnesinger, which I'm still doing; the traditions became confusing because the music got in the way of the poetry. It was at times too loud for the music, and no point to us, though we had good musicians.

M.P.- Do you think the 60s idea of an honest life was a dream?

T.K. - It's not the first time this dream has been around. I can remember the dream of the 30s that died in the 50s. Another was alive in the 60s and died in the 70s, and it's older than that. Nothing is wasted; no voice is wholly lost.

M.P.- Do you feel that your historical role is over as Trotsky's was in Mexico?

T.K. - Did Trotsky really feel that? Why did he keep on writing then? If one particular role is over, it's up to you and your sense of self to look for another role which is not necessarily a contradiction of the old one but will continue the things you want to do.

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