

GIGS

PLAY HER PRETTY, LEON -- SEATTLE -- 1980

I had seen Leon Russell once before, at Berkeley Community Theater. He was pretty outrageous, in more ways than one. He looked jittery up there, sitting at a long black grand piano playing whitetrash rock and roll, and about half the way through, sounding just great and knocking the crowd out, he started getting very highly agitated. Like thrashing around, and pounding the keyboard with Okie awful in his eyes and a crack in his voice. A good crack, you know, but you could tell he was not totally among us.

He'd been leaning back, almost falling backwards off the bench (not interrupting some flashy fingerwork, though) and rolling his eyes at, among other things, the ceiling, the rest of his quintet, the crowd in our seats, his kneecaps, and his right knuckles from about two inches away.

His fragmented scan of the audience finally sunk in, apparently, leading him to jump up, vault the bench, run to the edge of the stage, leap off to the house floor, race up four rows, and grab the wrist of a rather cute young woman with dorm co-ed written all over her.

Turning he tore back up to the stage, flopping forward to smack his chin when he ran into it. Recovering, he dragged her over to one side, where a nice set of curved stairs enable him to lope up like a Chuck Jones coyote, dragging the terrified/starstruck girl behind him. He tugged her over to the piano and plunked her down on the bench, then sat on her hand, pinioning her in position while he got back to the keys and seemed to recall what song he'd been singing, coming in right on time. Except now he was singing it to an audience of one.

He went through four numbers in a somewhat crazed and mournful style (exactly what we wanted and expect from an Asylum Choir alumnus) all with his face less than a foot from the lovely but somewhat conflicted face of his favorite sophomore of the moment. Further internal conditions forced him to his feet then, and out to the microphone, where a roadie handed him a low-slung fender, then motioned the dithering girl off the stage. Notably, she chose to flee into the wings, rather than back to her seat. And ol' Leon dropped the roof on us. Helluva a show, and we weren't even up there with our hands under his narrow butt.

So it's not like I didn't have a little background on the man when The Herald sent me to check him out at Seattle's Paramount. It had been ten years or so, and he would be in the company of something called the Newgrass Revival, instead of remnants of the Shelter People, so I wasn't really expecting a reprise of his hand-napping. Actually, there were several things I wasn't expecting.

One was that my date, Anika, would smoke a joint with me. She a rather stylish, high-powered corporate insurance executive and was more into wine (and it turned out she was actually an alcoholic who hid that fact from me for the year and a half we were an item) but she happily hit up for the Leon show. Standing right there in the lobby, where she met me since we were both coming straight from work. Which has a bearing on this.

I had a day job at the time, which paid better than freelance newspaper coverage of things like rock concerts, films, and sporting events. Very close to the Paramount: the King County Jail. Again, affecting the expectations and results. About halfway through my shift I was booking a rather rough young gangster of the blue rag persuasion into the cellblock where we segregated his crowd from the red rag bunch. I hadn't even got the strip search or glamorous parts like peering into his mouth and spread rectum when the significant development came up. I was taking his clothes, one item at a time, and bagging them, preparatory to spraying his naked bod with disinfectant, and immediately felt something in the pocket of his shirt (with Louis Farrakhan's face on the back). A big fat doober, can you believe it? He'd been waiting for me to find it. The handcuffs having prevented him from ditching it earlier. I pulled it out and showed him and he just stared into my face, waiting. I tucked it into my own shirt pocket and gave a muted sigh of relief. What you might see as "abusing my position to rip a black guy off for an illegal substance", he saw as "avoiding getting possession tacked onto his assault with deadly weapon and resisting beefs". Oddities of American justice meaning that he could have done more time for the joint than for knocking two cops down before they jacked him up with their revolvers and battered him silly.

So, the paper paid for my concert tickets, the girl had found her way to the concert on her own, and I had free dope. Not a bad evening so far. It was the dope that exceeded my expectations.

Anika and I smoked about half of it before it came to our attention that it was, in fact, shit of the absolutely dynamite pedigree and we were blasted out of our minds. She was less used to that than I was and getting a little nervous about how good she felt. And how unable to exercise much control over where she was going or what she was doing. I was in a little better shape, so I got her to our seats in the front row of the balcony. And we watched Leon and the New Grass guys come out and play for us. I'm assuming it was a damned good show.

I say assuming because for the first time in the night I wasn't really completely witnessing something I was later going to have to report to the readership. Oh, I had some impressions. But not what you'd exactly call having seen the show and come to an opinion on it. Anika sat there kind of twittering while the sound washed over her. Then we managed to find our way back stage for the second half of my Night Of Nothing To Report.

Anika was standing at the edge of the spotlight (kind of symbolically, but you'd have to know her better to get it) goggling around at the bustle of musicians, instruments, gear and other artifacts she was totally unaccustomed to processing. The bass player complimented her on her suit and she blinked at him a second before giving him a shaky smile and offering to shake hands. It was like watching a two year old dealing with company. While meanwhile trying to make sense out of talking with Leon Russell.

Even if I hadn't been baked out of my mind, I would have been taken aback. He sat hunched forward on a folding chair, his eyes wide and unblinking, staring at me with steely intensity as I dreamed up questions for him. He answered them all with two savage nods and monosyllabic grunts. The tour, yep. The new and, yep. Seattle, yep. Shelter, yep. A giant spider made of cherry custard is lumbering up behind you swingin' a glass scythe, yep. I just gave up.

And fell back on my signal contribution to the art of interviewing celebs: tried, true and highly recommended to anybody else who has to do it. My final question to one and all. Actually a variation on it, customized to the situation, probably the single greatest interview question I ever asked: "So, Mr. Russell, if there is anything you want the alleged readership of my publication that you've never heard of and don't care about to hear, just for God's sake tell me and I'll get out of your hair because I'm too high for this crap."

Whereupon the unexpected broke out and took over completely.

"Yeah!" Leon Russell yelled, livid with animation. "I got something to say!"

I leaned forward, microphone ready. Please do continue.

He started an agitated, driven pacing back and forth in front of me, yelling. "The Pope has as much to do with Jesus as..." he paused, searching his evidently scattered brain for the proper analogy. "As the president of the carpenters' union has to do with... you know... making a building!"

Oddly enough I didn't immediately conjure a response to that. I must have glanced around for help or reassurance because Sam Bush, passing by wiping off his mandolin, remarked to me in a confidential tone, "I know I didn't vote for him."

I looked back at the manic Okie and said, "I'd love to hear more about that."

And he'd love to tell me. It seems (or at least seemed to him) that a day or so before 340 people had frozen to death in Japan waiting to speak to the Pope. This fact (if that's what it was) unsettled Russell and he ranted about at full volume for about four minutes of as my cassette tape rolled by. I can't remember a word of it (but might have the cassette around somewhere) because every word of it was totally, completely bughouse.

In addition to a concert I couldn't remember, I now had an interview I couldn't use or even repeat... and about two hours to file a report on the two non-events.

I scooped up Anika from where she was leaning against a heavy velvet curtain staring at Russell as if trying to decide if he was messiah or menace, tucked my pocket recorder away, and, frankly, bolted. From that point it was all downhill. Herd Anika across the street to the Coffee Corral, where Buddy had my sleek portable Olivetti behind the counter waiting for me to come in and grab it. Sit in a booth while she decompressed with coffee, not saying a word, and I tried to figure out just what the hell to say about the concert. No easy task. Even for a bullshitter of my powers (of which at that particular time in my life I was at the peak) and pour out something resembling a review of the concert I didn't remember and the interview that was better forgotten. I managed. Typical concert review. No basis in reality, of course, but a pretty good depiction of what could have happened in a logical universe.

Out of sheer perversity, I kept asking Anika for details of the gig, and enjoying listening to her stumble through them. She had been most impressed, apparently, by the New Grass bass player. And Russell's voice, which she saw as a sort of prairie lament punctuated by emphatic comments on the clergy. With the story typed out, I walked it two blocks down to the Greyhound station to put it on the last night bus to Everett. Just in time for it to get received, typeset, printed, and returned to Seattle newsstands only four hours later. Really remarkable, when you think of it. A modern, pre-computer, miracle that makes dreaming up a story with a wrecked mind seem a small feat by comparison.

Driving Anika up First Hill to her apartment, I mentioned the other time I'd seen the man perform. She stared at me for awhile, not speaking or reacting. Then she said, "Did you keep the rest of that joint?" Turns out I had.