

Jack Micheline, the Last Boho

Contributed by Gerald Nicosia

Jack Micheline: The Last Bohemian Poet by Gerald Nicosia "My life is the poem!" shouts Micheline. "My breathing, walking, talking is the poem! Art goes beyond the page!" I'm listening to an interview taped with Jack Micheline in 1980, just before Jack's 51st birthday. I can still see him and that room--a 4th floor walkup, not easy for always overweight Jack. It was one room of a long railroad apartment belonging to Alix Geluardi, a once rich, now depleted patron of the arts and sometime lover of most of the artists and poets of North Beach. Every room had someone like Jack in it, some unrecognized writer or painter living on minimum wage, charity, or (as in Jack's case) government assistance. The walls were bare except for a few of Jack's paintings tacked up; there was a mattress on the floor, in the corner, crowned with a wad of rumpled, soiled blankets. The windows were open to the milky afternoon fog-diffused Frisco light. All around the room, finished and half-finished paintings lay strewn like rebel soldiers after Pickett's Charge. In the very center of the room sat his one treasure, a box of paints and brushes, and over in another corner was a little Victrola record player. He put on a well-worn record, his favorite of favorites: Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. Suddenly he became entranced, his face a study in rapture. There he was, dressed in clothes that looked like Good Will rejects--baggy, stained khakis, a denim work shirt full of paint blotches, coming undone at his big belly, frayed longjohn underwear showing underneath, a tattered checked vest of some horrible color combination (he favored mustards and browns), his shoes almost soleless--and he began to conduct the music for me as if he were Sir Georg Solti in black tie and tails. His thick hair had been silver for years already, and the tuft of hair sprouting out of his undershirt was silver too--he looked like a sad, aging clown. It's odd to think that I'm now almost the same age as he was then, since at the time he seemed so old, and I was just a young guy of 30, sitting at his feet, both figuratively and literally. When the piece ended, Jack began proclaiming again: "I'm still underground! I'm not easily available. Meet me at a party, and you give me your phone number... I'm still underground! I'm not in the phone book, I'm not communicating with the academy ... if you're against the establishment, why should they do anything for you, but hope you die young! I'm still against the motherfuckers! America sucks, man! Every country sucks! It's base worship of money and power--that's what America is about. Hitler isn't dead. Hitler's here. The dollar bill took on a swastika! You tell me the difference between a swastika and a dollar bill and I'll kiss your ass. It's power ... They both represent power. It's just the way the power's used that's the only difference ... with money you can get records out, you can buy cars, you can get laid, you can buy big houses. Hitler used money, he bought tanks and guns and he killed Jews. Here they do something else. They buy property, they own companies. What's the difference? ... Without money, you're a dog! You can't compete with the system Poets don't want to compete. They just want to be themselves. I don't want to compete with anybody ... A genius don't compete. He keeps doing his thing. He wins by doing it. You win by doing your thing. That's how you win...." As I listen to this brilliant rap, which goes on for many minutes, I hear Jack's feet pacing angrily back and forth across the bare wood floor. Tap anybody's memories of Jack, and they're bound to recall his anger. It had taken over his personality as far back as anybody could remember, and he suffered with it the way you suffer with a chronic, miserable, but not terminal disease. And like a lot of those unpleasant chronic diseases, it kept people away from him--in droves. Jack was born a loner, and he knew it. He accepted the fact--"I have no friends/ I am a poet" is the opening of one of his better poems. Women were accessories, never a main part of his life, and more often than not they were a means of support. "I want a woman with green money in her cunt," he wrote to a friend of mine, Carl Macki, who was starting a literary magazine. I remember the shock I felt when I first met Jack, in June, 1977, at Macki's pre-publication party at the ultra-chic Tremont Hotel in Chicago, where Jack stood out like a sore thumb. He'd just punched a tall young woman groupie in the stomach (perhaps her bare midriff had been hard for him to resist) because he got tired of her and her friend, who was writing down everything he said in a little black notebook. When the groupie complained loudly, Jack told her, "So your gut hurts a little bit? So what? It'll go away." And he walked away from her. In the good Catholic, middleclass, Midwestern world I had grown up in, it was unthinkable for a man to treat a woman that way. I remember coming away from that evening thinking that I did not like this man Jack Micheline very much, even though I had liked very much the poems he'd read that night, especially one entitled "Fuck Suicide." When Jack Micheline died in 1998, I'd known him for over 20 years and spent hundreds of hours in his company, and I loved him probably as much as I've loved any single person on this planet excepting my mother, wife, and kids. Jack took the place of my father, who died when I was too young, and of my older brother, from whom I was estranged for years. Jack was one of the best teachers I ever had, in the realms of both life and art. I want this piece to be more than just the collection of my best moments with Jack; I want it to be about his work. But as anybody who's ever tried to write about Jack has found out, it's almost impossible to separate Jack the man and Jack the poet. So I'm back to my opening sentence. Maybe I choke when I start to write about Jack's work because there was so much of it--it's overwhelming just to think about. Most of the people who call themselves writers talk more than they write, but that was not true of Jack. Every time I'd see him, he'd have at least one new poem, or more likely, a whole notebook full of them. The irony is, he continually vowed to stop writing; each new poem would be tagged "his last." Even on this 1980 tape, he reads me a poem he's just written, entitled "To Danny Propper and the Rest of the Universe." It's an amazingly brilliant piece, as so many of his poems were, with totally original lines that run through you like sharpened steel blades. But to the best of my knowledge, it was never published anywhere; it just got buried in those stacks and stacks of unpublished manuscripts, that accumulated wherever Jack took up residence. What got published was only the tip of the iceberg of his literary production, and yet that tip was almost twenty books' worth. Someone may well come back at me: "A gigantic production is not necessarily the sign of a literary giant"--and that's true, unless within that giant oeuvre there are at least periodic gems and masterpieces. Jack had dozens of them. Everyone surely has different favorites, a different "hits list," but I would have no trouble coming up with Jack's top forty even off the top of my head. It would have to include "The

Ballad of Benny Roads Number 65943," "Streetcall New Orleans," "Jenny Lee," "I Applied for Mental Assistance," "Last House in America," "Kuboya: For Andre Voznesensky," "A Guy Named Ed Balchowsky and a Guy Named Franz Kline," "Rock Song (It's the Dead that Rule This World)," "Aunt Tilly's Rag," "Cockymoon," "Zero is Nothing," "Just Two Eyes Like Poems," and "Imaginary Conversation with Jack Kerouac (Wacky Daky Doo)." And those are just to pick among the poems. There are almost as many great Micheline short stories. The title stories of two books leap to mind: "Purple Submarine" and "Skinny Dynamite," though my all-time favorite Micheline tale is about our mutual friend, the one-armed painter, virtuoso pianist, and Spanish Civil War veteran Eddie Balchowsky, entitled "A Man Obsessed, Who Does Not Sleep, Who Wanders About the Night Mumbling to Himself, Counting Empty Beer Cans." What made Jack a great poet? That's the toughest question I'll be forced to answer. Several times in the course of our friendship, Jack asked me to write his biography, as I had written Jack Kerouac's. I always stalled or evaded him. I felt bad about that at the time, and I feel worse about it now. Part of it was, of course, a practical consideration. It takes years to write a good biography, a really well-researched one, which is the only kind I'd want to write. And it would have been impossible (at that time, and probably even today) to find a publisher who would pay you even a minimum wage to work several years on a book about Jack Micheline, which would, if lucky, sell a couple of thousand copies. Beyond that, I knew that Micheline's gift was nowhere near as prodigious as Kerouac's; that his range of language was far more limited. Some would even have called it childish. Kerouac, after all, had gone to Horace Mann and Columbia; while Micheline had been mainly self-educated, reading books (as he liked to brag) "in a dark alley," where the tough guys he grew up with couldn't see him. That is not to say that Micheline was not an impressively literate writer. He could quote intelligently from Lorca, Mayakovsky, Sherwood Anderson, Langston Hughes, Vachel Lindsay, James T. Farrell, James Baldwin, and Nelson Algren, among other writers whom he loved and learned from. But if I were to do an honest biography of Micheline (again, the only kind I'd write), at some point I would have to get into Jack's shortcomings, the place where his "genius" (as he called it) started to fritter away into bombast, sentiment, and, at his worst, cliché. If Kerouac was a long-range howitzer, capable of blowing holes in the Reichstag of capitalist hypocrisy from several miles away, Jack was a .357 magnum. A block away you might be safe from him; but at close range, he had you dead to rights every time. Jack had the two gifts that in combination always make a great writer: the tongue and the eyes. He told his friend, the poet A.D. Winans, that he couldn't live without music, and to watch him conducting Mussorgsky you'd know it was true. He even told Winans that if he'd been born upper-middleclass, instead of a postman's son in the Bronx, he probably would have gone to college and become a composer. Micheline had a flawless sense of rhythm (which came from years of listening to jazz and blues as well as classical music), and he used the sound of words, much as Kerouac did, to enchant the ear even before the mind logged on to the meaning. To hear him read his work aloud was to be absolutely in his thrall, in the most basic sense. He held you captive. His voice rasped, it roared, it rose and fell and curled around you like a deadly snake. Had he been less a poet, audiences would have walked out after the first few lines, as one would at seeing a bad actor overplaying his part. But the words kept striking you with deadly accuracy; you were literally transfixed, and then the momentum of that full-throttle, diesel-driven voice just steamrolled you into submission. One of my key visions of Jack was the night he read his poetry at a punk club in North Beach called On Broadway, in the very early '80's. A whole contingent of leatherjacketed, spike-collared, ring-nosed punks had shown up with the intention of hooting Jack, this bloated old man in baggy trousers and smelly underwear, off the stage. Halfway through his first poem, I looked back to see a row of punks with their mouths hanging open, like a bunch of kids who'd been caught outdoors without their clothes on. They were naked and vulnerable as the rest of us in front of Jack's onslaught of real-life truth, made even more irresistible by the power of his graceful, street-elegant language. I think that may have been part of the secret of Jack's live readings too--that the gauche, grubby, untucked figure on stage was such an absolute contrast and contradiction to the neat, tricky, magically harmonious lines of his poems. The two didn't seem to go together, and that made you love him and fall under his spell even more. By the end of that evening at On Broadway, the punks were applauding and screaming and yelling for more as loudly as the rest of us. The tongue gave Jack power, but the eyes are what made you keep coming back to him for years, to hear and read more. The eyes are what make me miss him even now, miss the fact that no one else is still around--Corso maybe, but I can't think of a single other person--able to show me the things he could. Jack once credited Balchowsky for "giving him his eyes" when they walked through the alleys of Chicago (the favorite subject of Balchowsky's paintings), and Eddie would point out a crooked porch rail, a clothesline filled with drying underwear, a gate falling off its hinges, or a garbage can painted over with graffiti. But I think Jack must have had some very good eyes to begin with, or he would never have begun to write in the first place. His eyes had a tremendous hunger to devour and record everything he saw, and the world never ceased to amaze him (a trait he shared with Kerouac, and which left them both a little loony most of the time). In a crazy way, Micheline (again like Kerouac) was in love with the world, with every person, animal, plant, place, feeling, and emotion in it. For him, writing had to be a true record of what the eyes saw (both the physical, ocular orbs and that inner vision that is variously labeled spirit, intuition, or insight), or it was worthless. And if it was a lie, it was worse than worthless, because for Jack the biggest sin was to keep others from seeing, to put up a screen, especially a self-serving screen, to blind one's fellow men and women. And a large part of Jack's anger came from his sense that so much of society, so much of the energy and talent that is expended every day, is done for just that end: to keep the truth hidden, to enslave people in a deliberately-created darkness. Jack wanted to be a revolutionary, and he often called himself a revolutionary. There were times in his life when he actually went around throwing buckets of blood at government buildings and such, but most of the time his acts of revolution were in terms of opening people's consciousness, making people who had been asleep for years wake up and truly come to feel the life in their bodies and in their heads. Maybe that was what he was doing the night he punched that young woman in the stomach--a kind of fast, hard Zen stroke that may have taught her more about poetry and life than if she'd spent days taking notes on what he said. That is not to defend Jack's belligerence or, quite often, bad manners. He turned a lot of people off, spilled wine on a lot of furniture

and rugs; and more than a few wives never wanted him in the house again. But the greatest teachers often can be the most difficult people, and Jack did not make it easy to love him. That was not his job. His job was to love us, to sing to us so beautifully and truthfully that we'd feel a little better about being alive, and be able to get through each day a little more easily, with a little more pleasure, a little less pain. And he did that job exceedingly well. That, beyond anything else, is what in my book makes him a great poet. ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ There is so much more I want to say about Jack, so much more of Jack to talk about, but I'll leave most of that to the writers who follow. Let me just conclude with a few flashes from that incredibly rich life that was Harvey Martin Silver Jack Micheline's. The rich life of a man who almost never had more than a few dollars in his pants and, for all I know, never even had a bank account. College professors and politicians may yak about Engels and Marx, but Jack understood property because he never had it, never had any of it, except for his paintings and manuscripts, the clothes on his back, and the dinner in his belly. He rarely even had his own books. I remember that he had to scour the used-book stores in Berkeley one day so that he could come up with a copy of his first book, *River of Red Wine*, to send to a publisher who was interested in reprinting it. Ironically, the book, originally priced at 65 cents, cost him \$25 as a "rare book," and its author could barely afford to pay for it. ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ I have not even tried to deal with Jack the painter. He told me once that he painted because it was "easier to relate" to people as a painter than as a poet, and also easier to make a living. But his paintings, primitive as they are, were more than meal-tickets. They live and dance with the same death-defying life of his poems, the same zestful, crazy energy of Mad Jack the Eternal Trickster, the same overcharged libido that wanted to make love to color and shape as fervently as he loved tits and pussy. Many of them are haunting as well. He gave me two of his portraits of Kerouac, for which I'll always be grateful. One is an absolutely ghostly child-faced vision whose wide eyes stare out of a deep midnight blue sky filled with the names of American cities in luminescent white: Lowell, Biloxi, New Orleans, and so forth. My little daughter thought it was a "monster," and only Micheline could have captured the monstrous immensity of Kerouac's innocence and wonder. The other is a smiling Kerouac with his red heart-crown, "kissing a rummy in broad daylight," as the legend underneath in Micheline's hand tells us. Like Miller and Patchen, Micheline couldn't keep from letting his words spill over into his paintings. ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Finally, with regard to those paintings, let me recall Jack's endless generosity. He would not show up your house without a gift, sometimes a bottle of wine, but more often something more meaningful: a painting or a book. I still have books he found in secondhand bookshops that he gave to me, and they're precious, not because they're necessarily any good at all, but because of the marvelous inscriptions Jack wrote in them. In one called "Sparrowhawk," Jack wrote: "All rare books are hidden away in dark places. This guy has all spirit and no direction. A good soul is not enough but has the eyes -- Jack." Jack had the eyes and the spirit and the direction, and he was a good soul. There isn't much more you can ask of a poet, or of anybody, for that matter. ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Micheline was, as he liked to say of Kerouac Bukowski, "one of the longest shots that ever came in." He was, as he called himself, "the last bohemian poet in America." He was, above all, a giver, a feeder, someone (and they are priceless and rare) who leaves the people around him better and richer and wiser and fuller for his having lived. ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Pax vobiscum, Jack!