

Charles Plymell: Outlaw Poet

by Gerard Malanga

Charles Plymell—Charley to his friends—has been at this, “the poetry game” he calls it, for quite some time. Fifty years, in fact. The first two things one might notice about Charley are the quietude that surrounds him—he takes in every word and nuance of anything anyone has to say—and his irascible sense of humor; he doesn’t suffer fools lightly. But what better way to hear it than from the outlaw himself:

I lived in Kansas and California from 1935 to around 1980. I wrote and published some in Wichita and was involved in what is loosely known as the Wichita Vortex group that included fellow Kansans Michael McClure, Dennis Hopper, Bruce Connors, S. Clay Wilson, Robert Branaman, and many others. I might’ve been the youngest member in the group. In 1962 I lived in San Francisco on Asbury off Haight Street at the beginning of the Psychedelic period and with Richard Brautigan sat in cafes and The Head Shop and watched the whole scene bloom. By 1963, I moved to 1403 Gough Street, where Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady shared my flat. My first book, *Apocalypse Rose*, with an introduction by Allen, was printed and published by Dave Haselwood, also from Wichita, who published seminal poets at the Auerhaun Press.

This is a good start, but let me fill in some blanks here. Charley is mentioned by Ginsberg in the Martin Scorsese documentary *No Direction Home* as the person who played him Dylan’s music for the first time. Later with Robert Crumb and S. Clay Wilson, he printed the first *Zap Comix*. His book *The Last of the Moccasins* (City Lights) was an early collage novel, and his collage art was first shown at the famous Batman Gallery. Also at this time he published *Now Magazine*, which included artwork by Dennis Hopper, George Herms, Bobby Driscoll, Wallace Berman, and Bruce Connors, all of whom he spent time with in L.A. in the Semina art scene.

Then he jumped around a bit. In 1969, Charley suddenly left his job on the San Francisco docks, having been recruited by the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars for their MA program. In the summer of 1970, he and his wife Pam moved to Cherry Valley in the Catskills, where Allen Ginsberg had his farm. Pam came from a long line of literati that included her mother, the collagist Mary Beach (a relative of Sylvia Beach), and Mary’s husband, Claude Pelieu, prominent in the Paris avant-garde and a distinguished translator of everything hav-

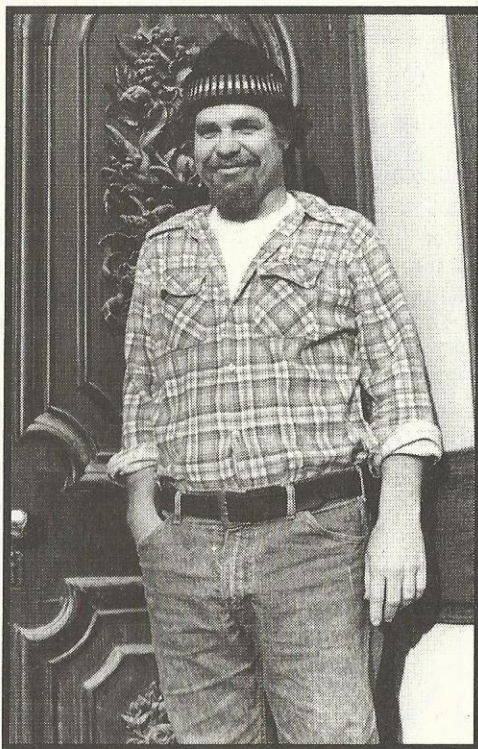


photo by Gerard Malanga

ing to do with the Beats. They followed Pam and Charley to Cherry Valley a few years later.

Shortly after they settled in, Charley and Pam founded Cherry Valley Editions and the magazine *Coldspring Journal*, publishing many poets and writers who came to visit with them at their home, including Ginsberg, Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, and Ray Bremser. Retired now from publishing but never retired, Charley and Pam still live in Cherry Valley, working on their memoirs and cataloguing Mary Beach and Claude Pelieu’s enormous files of artworks.

Charley’s latest book, *Eat Not Thy Mind* (Glass Eye Books/Ecstatic Peace Library) is a modest display in size only (twenty-nine poems packed into thirty-four pages); it’s filled with big cautionary tales of doom and destruction and memories of planet Earth the way it used to be in more innocent times, with waves of glowing wheat stretching as far as the crow flies in those dreams of Kansas. Right from the get-go, in “The Theory of Wounded Dust,” Charles

Plymell unleashes a spree of rhythmic vibrations that betters even Ginsberg’s early thrusts. I read this cozy little book from cover to cover aloud to Ravel’s soothing “Gaspard de la Nuit” like in some scopitone flurry, as if looking out a car window with Charley at the steering wheel.

“Bend down America and kiss the asphalt, you voted for it” is just one sheering line that shoots from the hip. Another tells us “successes too long / continued is assuredly a prologue to disaster,” and so greed pops up here and there in *Wall Street Journal* lingo, so those suit-and-tie guys can understand fully while out on their lunch hour in the glaring light.

Charley’s a car man, and has been very much on the road since before Kerouac was driven ‘round (he didn’t drive). But even on the road he is solidly on his feet:

Creation lets us duplicate ourselves
through the eons of blood and science
synchronized neon and dashboard lights
in pirouettes of electric life.
(from “Look Around You”)

Nowadays highways are byways
and not one going my way
(from “Get Used to Saying Goodbye”)

His rusted spirit rides in a pick-up truck
Jupiter unplugged
Electro-body Precambrian the backseat full of Bud.
(from "The Stills Flick Separately")

Hitch a ride from the gray area
Take a bend in the road going south
Out of South Bend somewhere imagined
To the Delta dirt where the cotton is pure
And the polka dot shirt flies in the wind
(from "Ivy")

I remember Kansas where everything dead and gone
became a faded dashboard with the soft green light
and scrap metal beheld the children of a ruined world.
(from "Wounded Dust")

Charley knows. He comes from a long tradition of yarn-spinners and rail-riders. He's looked in all directions endless times to those fields where he traipsed as a kid, where "Flowers for the wildlife wreath grow no more" and "the wind in the grass waves away the years" and "it's lonely in the shadows when they cross the open road." With Charley behind the steering wheel of poetry, we get a chance to see and hear the mind of America along with him. ♦