

# UNEASY LISTENING

## *Standing in Two Circles*

*The Collected Works of Boyd Rice*

Ed. Brian M. Clark

Washington, D.C.: Creation Books, 2008

*Reviewed by Oliver Pendleton*

*TOQ's main constituency, the cultural-political right and the racially-conscious community, has long teemed with "underground" literature: small-circulation magazines and newsletters, self-published books by self-educated authors, long-winded manifestos of short-lived movements, and the like. This tendency has only grown in recent years, with the rise of the internet and print-on-demand publishing. Since much of this literature is quite valuable, with this issue we are inaugurating an occasional "Samisdat" feature to review the best of it.*

– *The Editor*

Boyd Rice (b. 1956) is a remarkable figure. He is a composer, poet, artist, essayist, photographer, filmmaker, actor, and self-educated scholar of both pop culture and Western esotericism, particularly Grail lore. It is tempting to call Rice a pop culture phenomenon himself, but he has never had much popular appeal. Because of his versatility, one might call him a Renaissance man, but that term is not appropriate either. The Renaissance was a period of Western civilization's rebirth, whereas Boyd Rice is an artist of its decline.

Indeed, although I very much enjoy his music, one must admit that Rice is an artist only by the loosest and most decadent of standards. He has no apparent musical training, and his albums consist primarily of electronic sound and noise collages or mellow, minimalistic lounge music overlaid with Rice's droll, deadpan recitations of poetry or prose. (He can't sing either.) His photographs and other visual art works are also collage-like, some suggesting sexual fetishism, most suggesting nothing at all.

Yet Boyd Rice is a paradox, for despite his decadent milieu, lifestyle,

and artworks, he came to adopt and advocate a number of heretical convictions and healthy values. He read Nietzsche, Spengler, and Jung, as well as less canonical critics of modernity like Gabriele d'Annunzio, Ragnar Redbeard (the pen name of an eloquent nineteenth-century advocate of Social Darwinism), Charles Fort, the Marquis de Sade, and Savitri Devi. He rejected egalitarianism and progressivism and embraced such unpopular causes as Social Darwinism and eugenics. He became frankly racist and sexist (to put it mildly) and took a strong interest in Italian Fascism, Romania's Iron Guard, and German National Socialism.

Rice started performing in black paramilitary uniforms emblazoned with the *wolfsangle* rune and collaborating with artists with similar interests, like Douglas Pearce of Death in June and Albin Julius of Der Blutharsch. He is apparently not, however, anti-Semitic, given his friendships and collaborations with Jews, half-Jews, and purported Jews like Anton LaVey (founder of the Church of Satan), Daniel Miller (of Mute Records), and Adam Parfrey (of Feral House Publishers).

Rice is not alone among decadent artists and thinkers. In truth, there are two kinds of decadence: the decadence of the left and the right. The decadence of the left is that of the sick man who would console himself by obliterating all standards of health. This is the origin of all forms of nihilism: literary and artistic, moral and political. Nietzsche had its number. The decadence of the right is that of the sick man who longs for and idealizes health and beauty. In this category, we find painters like Gustave Moreau, Franz von Stuck, and the Pre-Raphaelites; writers like Rousseau, Nietzsche, Wilde, Lawrence, Pound, and d'Annunzio; composers like Wagner and Richard Strauss; and many adherents of political movements like Fascism and National Socialism.

To describe such artists as decadent is not necessarily a criticism of their characters *per se*. Artists are more sensitive to their surroundings than most. Decadent artists become decadent because they live in decadent times. The decadence of the right is thus allied with a critique of modernity. Because these artists know they are not immune to the corruptions of their times, they idealize healthier, archaic societies—pagan Antiquity or the high Middle Ages—and hope, or even work, for their return.

Rice's move to the right was apparently sincere. He certainly did not do it to become rich and popular. He lost many friends, allies, and opportunities—although new and better ones eventually appeared—and he ended up leaving repressively “tolerant” San Francisco for relative anonymity in Denver. Furthermore, Rice has never embarrassed him-

self with apologies, explanations, or recantations. But the best evidence of his sincerity is the work itself. It is rich in humor and irony – like setting words by Jung, Savitri Devi, Meister Eckhart, Gobineau, and Sade to lounge music – but never at the expense of his convictions.

As an essayist, Boyd Rice is always entertaining and often quite profound. Unfortunately, most of his writings first appeared in small-circulation "underground" magazines and newspapers that are now difficult and expensive to track down. Thus editor Brian M. Clark has done a great service by collecting most of Rice's essays, including some previously unpublished ones, into a single volume. *Standing in Two Circles* does not include Rice's Grail book *The Vessel of God* and related writings,<sup>1</sup> save for two enticing samples, but it contains most of his essays, all of his song lyrics, and many images. If you are a Boyd Rice fan, you probably already have this book. If you are not a fan, read it and you might become one.

*Standing in Two Circles* is organized chronologically, but I prefer to deal with its essays under thematic headings.

Rice's political views can be gathered from his essays "The Warrior Ethic" and "Nature's Eternal Fascism." Rice believes in "natural law" in morality and politics. Unlike Locke, however, when Rice looks to nature, he sees no basis for egalitarian liberal ideas like natural rights. Instead, he sees nature "red in tooth and claw." In nature, no creatures are equal, and all strive to prove it, struggling violently for survival and supremacy. The natural political order, therefore, is unapologetically hierarchical and warlike: aristocracy or fascism, not democracy or socialism. Rice's views of historical fascism can be gleaned from his essays "Dystopia," "Savitri Devi," and "They Stole Mussolini's Brain" (an entertaining diary of a musical tour/pilgrimage to sites associated with Fascism and National Socialism). Rice seems to admire Fascism and National Socialism not just as ideologies in accord with "nature's eternal fascism," but also as aesthetic phenomena.

In "Dystopia," Rice argues that modern egalitarianism and progressivism, try as they might, cannot abolish natural law. Egalitarianism and progressivism both lead to dysgenics: the best become ever-stupider and ever-weaker, and the worst become ever more numerous. Eventually, such a society will liquidate itself and be replaced with a younger, healthier, more primitive and vital hierarchical society.

Rice speculates that egalitarianism and progressivism might simply

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<sup>1</sup> Available online at <http://www.thevesselofgod.com/>

be nature's way of finishing off an old civilization to make room for the new. Here we can see the influence of Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, with its idea of civilizations as organic wholes that go through processes of growth and decline, and Savitri Devi's *The Lightning and the Sun*, with its explication of the Traditional doctrine that history moves in cycles, beginning with a Golden Age and declining into a Dark Age (Kali Yuga). Rice's main criticism of Fascism and National Socialism is that they were futile, since they attempted to restore a Golden Age form of society in the dregs of the Kali Yuga. They came too late, or too early.

Since restoration of the Golden Age is impossible, Rice advises those condemned to live during the Kali Yuga to learn to love it, to "stop and smell the neurosis," to view the nightly news as "a sitcom about the end of the modern world" – and to supply the laugh track (p. 145). The essay "Passive Activism: Yellow Ribbons & Other Red Herrings" shows us how, by lampooning ribbon campaigns, bumperstickers, public service TV commercials, consciousness-raising billboards, and other excruciating expressions of liberal high-mindedness. Indeed, much of the book can be read as a manual for understanding and enjoying life in the Kali Yuga.

Rice's Social Darwinism is rooted in a metaphysical and religious outlook set forth in the surviving fragments of an unfinished book entitled *Physiosophy*. Rice calls the whole "nature." Nature includes not only all things commonly judged good, but their opposites as well: "If 'all' means 'all that there is,' then by necessity this would be inclusive of darkness, animal instincts, the flesh, the material world, lust, evil," etc. (p. 86). Nature encompasses all oppositions not by blurring their differences, but by preserving them in dynamic equilibrium.

Rice is not, however, an atheistic naturalist. Instead, he is a pantheist: he identifies nature with God. Nature is not, however, God as opposed to the "devil," but a whole that encompasses even that opposition. Rice names his god "Abraxas," an ancient Gnostic deity who encompasses all opposites. Rice also uses the symbolism of the *eiwaz* rune, which encompasses and balances the opposition of life and death, and the cross of Lorraine, the two horizontal bars of which are supposed to symbolize the arms of Christ and the arms of the devil. Rice's brief meditation "The Persistence of Memory" speaks of a mysticism of the blood that connects his religious views to his fascination with genealogy: "The quest for the Grail [one's bloodline] is a quest to return to the source. It is a quest to reunite the part with the whole, the descendant with the ancestor, the temporal with the primordial . . ." (p. 157).

Rice's pantheism is, in effect, a form of whole-hearted world-affirmation. By divinizing the whole, Rice divinizes the negative as well as the positive. Divinizing the negative does not make it positive but says "yes" to it nonetheless. Rice calls his non-dualistic pantheism "monism." He draws his inspiration from Western sources like Heraclitus and Ernst Haeckel, but it is consistent with Hindu Tradition as well, which deifies evil as well as good, destruction as well as creation, chaos as well as order.

In happy ages, the positive aspects of the whole are dominant, and the negative are hidden. Spiritual paths therefore emphasize the positive and exclude the negative. This is called the "Right-Hand Path," the right being a Traditional symbol of the positive. In the Kali Yuga, the negative aspects of the whole are dominant, and the positive are hidden. Therefore, in the Kali Yuga, it is appropriate to embrace those things that are forbidden in healthier ages and transmute them into spiritual resources. This is called the "Left-Hand Path," the left being a Traditional symbol of the negative.

Now, one might suspect that the "Left-Hand Path" is just an excuse for people who know better and who could work for a better world to give up and wallow in decadence, but the notion does help reconcile Rice's serious side with an otherwise baffling array of frivolous pop culture interests discussed in his other essays: Mondo films, novelty soaps, Tiki decor, singing actor records, Lawrence Welk's Country Club Village development, Martin Denny and other purveyors of cool lifestyle music, booze culture, "Op Art, Pop Art, Warhol . . . glamour, formalism, futurism, and fun" (p. 185). The final essay, "Toward the Plastic: The New Alchemy," a manifesto co-authored with Giddle Partridge, defends these interests from the dour advocates of back-to-nature authenticity, arguing that nothing is more natural than plastic, for plastic is an expression of "a creative impulse central to the soul of man. . . . the desire to transform reality; to replace the commonplace with the fabulous and to make fun a tangible presence rather than mere abstraction" (p. 185). The alchemical transmutation of lead (or plastic) into gold can be taken as a symbol of the Left-Hand Path.

Two essays are memoirs of Rice's friendships with Anton LaVey and Charles Manson. LaVey's religion of "Satanism" has nothing to do with devil worship, but is instead an atheistic philosophy compounded out of Social Darwinism, Nietzsche, Aleister Crowley, and Ayn Rand. Satanism attempts to re-value all aspects of existence "demonized" by Christianity. But Rice's portrait of LaVey does not discuss shared

ideas, but rather shared tastes and obsessions: Tiny Tim, Ed Gein, cheesy exploitation films, obscure 60s girl groups, practical jokes, etc.

Rice portrays Manson as a paradox. He is a kind of guru or shaman, a man with extraordinary charisma and insight into human nature and history. Unfortunately, Manson's divine madness is compounded with the more mundane variety, which is why he has spent most of his life behind bars. Manson comes off as a bit of an "esoteric Hitlerist": "They killed [Jesus] the first time at Golgotha. Then he came back in Germany in the 1930s and the whole world gathered together to destroy him" (pp. 99-100). He also shares Rice's metaphysical non-dualism, including his fascination with Abraxas.<sup>2</sup>

Rice's race realism is displayed in "Hitler in Zimbabwe," the hilarious proposal for a book about events on the Dark Continent after whites upped stakes and left the natives without adult supervision. Rice's brutish view of sex, as expressed in "Revolt against Penis Envy," is the precise reaction you would expect from a Social Darwinist to hysterical feminist slogans like "All sex is rape." Also unattractive are Rice's stories of drinking binges, practical jokes, sexual precociousness, and stalking. Frankly, some of these stories left me hoping that Rice *merely* has a sick imagination. Nobody is wholly admirable, but Rice's honesty is still unsettling. Should it surprise us, however, given his views? In the end, Rice's willingness to reveal his dark side may just be a practical and personal application of his world-affirming pantheism. As Manson, who gave the book its title, said: "Rice, I'll call you Abraxas, because you stand in two circles at once" (p. 100).

Those wishing to sample Boyd Rice's recordings should begin with *Scorpion Wind*, his most musically and philosophically interesting album, a kind of fascist lounge music.<sup>3</sup> Even old people find it listenable. Another mellow favorite is Boyd Rice and Friends, *Music, Martinis, and Misanthropy* (NER, 1990). As an introduction to NON, I recommend *Might!* (Mute, 1995), texts from Ragnar Redbeard's *Might is Right* set to "noise music." For the "softer" side of NON, try the anthology *Terra Incognita: Ambient Works* (Mute, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> On Manson's non-dualism, see R. C. Zaehner, *Our Savage God* (London: Collins, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Death in June and Boyd Rice, *Scorpion Wind* (NERUS, 2008), originally released by NER in 1996 as *Heaven Sent*, under the artist name Scorpion Wind.