A Stained Soul Cringes at Small Details in the Mirror of Embarrassment



Woke up this morning, poured a cuppa, and opened the facebook machine. Right there at the top, a photo of the Fox Theater marquee touting the 70th birthday celebration for Colonel Bruce Hampton, Ret. Made me happy to know that so many amazing people -musicians and fans – had filled the Fabulous Fox to honor this half-mad, totally kind genius.

And then I scrolled down a few posts and read the grim news. During the epic finale of this four-hour show Bruce pushed 14 year-old guitar whiz Brandon Niederauer into the spotlight. The boy was shredding. The Colonel walked over and bowed to his latest protege. Then he fell forward, draped across a stage monitor. Classic Bruce antic. The solo continued, the band wailing. The solo ended. Everyone expected Bruce to jump up.

He never got up again.

The music stopped, the ambulance took away the guest of honor. A few hours later, Colonel Bruce Hampton flew away. I've been in a kind of shock all morning.

He was a friend of mine.

Nothing about that is unusual or special, though it does mark me as one lucky son of a gun. Aside from his deep genius and

complete dedication to his craft, Bruce was one of the kindest and most generous cats you will ever meet. He was everybody's friend.

We were friends enough to chat at parties, to enthuse together in the lobby of the Variety Playhouse after a Sun Ra concert. Back in the 80s, my gang of pals went every Monday night to see the Late Bronze Age at the ~~Star Community Bar~~ (might have been the Little Five Points Pub. Memory issues.). It's possible that I've seen the Colonel more than any other musician, easily in triple digits.

He played on Mondays because he always had the best players in his band, and because they were so good they were busy with real money gigs the rest of the week. But Mondays were reserved for the Colonel. In addition to his regular band, all the best musicians in town came out, many of them anxious to step in for a song or three.

My favorite regular guest was Deborah Workman, oboist with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Arriving late from ASO work, she would walk meekly on the stage in her formal wear. The band brought the volume way down to let her tone shine through. The first few times, she was timid, nervous about improvising. Eventually, she found her groove and blew like a double-reeded tornado.

Later, the Late Bronze Age gave way to the Aquarium Rescue Unit. You could pretty much count on hearing them at least once a week. And you got to hear young players, "unknowns" like Oteil Burbridge, Jimmy Herring, Jeff Sipe, Rev Jeff Mozier, Matt Mundy. Bruce always had an eye and ear for young talent.

He had the reputation: if Bruce asked you to play, you would crawl over broken glass to do it. Not only would Bruce get you to play your best, play things you never thought of before, he would tell you which book to read, which musician to listen

to, which movies to watch. And somehow, whatever he told you to read/listen/watch was exactly the right thing to blow your mind wide open to get you to yet another level. Bruce moved musicians to find an authentic voice.

Don’t believe me? Ask Derek Trucks.

Later on there was The Quark Alliance, Project Z, the Fiji Mariners, the Madrid Express, the Arkansas Travellers. But it was always the Colonel.

Years earlier – before my time – there was the Hampton Grease Band. Their double album, *Music to Eat*, on the ~~Capricorn~~ Columbia label, was the worst selling major label double album release of all time, at least until Lou Reed came along with *Metal Machine Music*. Time passes. It’s recognized as a classic now.

All this to say that, at least as long as I have been a music obsessive, Colonel Bruce has always been there.

Many years back, after not seeing him for a good dozen years, I received what I thought was a spoofed request from Bruce to connect through LinkedIn. But I answered anyway, and it was really him. He had been in poor health for a while, off the scene for a bit, and he was reaching out to all kinds of people as he started re-connecting.

I was frankly kind of touched that he recalled me at all. But we had a great exchange, and I promised to come see him next time he came through Tallahassee. Something always came up and I never got out to Bradfordville Blues Club when he was there. But fortune smiles! He was on the schedule for both the BBC and Cascades Park this summer. I was looking forward to hearing him and catching up.

It ain’t gonna happen. The guy who has always been there ain’t there no more.

I sit here listening to old Hampton recordings, remembering how his music, his expansive imagination and insatiable curiosity, his incredible presence and generosity…how all these things figured into who I have become. The influence is greater than I had realized.

I'm sad to know I'll not catch up with Bruce this summer. I'm sad that his artistic voice is silenced. I'm just sad, dammit.

But at the same time, what a way to go. I halfway believe he planned it. The last song he ever played: *Turn on Your Lovelight*. You know, the one that goes "without a warning / you stole my heart".

Colonel Bruce was a badass. The man gave his all to his craft for near on 50 years. Like most musicians, he never made a ton of money. He lived for those moments where everything comes alive, and he climbed in and out of crappy vans for decades to find the stage where the magic might, just might, arrive.

He was a pro, make no mistake. But he was much more than that. He was a committed visionary who knew what he was doing. And why. He was a sincere absurdist, a grounded Dadaist, a dyed in the wool bluesman and a lover of space jazz. He was funny as hell and serious as can be.

A couple of decades back, at a party at Terry William's front porch, we talked about a book on the free jazz scene. He laughed when I mentioned the title. I'd love to hear that laugh again.

The name of the book?

As ~~Important~~ Serious as Your Life

The Colonel lived it that way all the way.

Full commitment. No compromises.

Farewell, my friend. I am so much better having known you.

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There is a fairly recent documentary about the Colonel. I'll be watching it tonight.