

Mickey Newbury: A White American Voice

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This is the third writing of mine in what's looking as if it might become a series of sorts. Over the years, people from the past, historical figures, have jumped out to me and I've attended to them, they were persistently on my mind for a significant amount of time, say three-four days to a week. I've come to notice that with a few exceptions they've been Americans and white (both of which I am); there has been a national and racial angle to this activity.

I first wrote about this phenomenon in a writing in late 2022 called "Nine White American Voices."¹ A month or so later, I followed that up with "A Tenth White American Voice."² In the second one, I put things in context.

Late last year, I wrote a post that provides the backdrop for what's here: "The American Political System and White Discourse."³ The thrust of it was the suggestion that a possible underpinning for American white racial advocacy is this country's political and cultural heritage, with the emphasis on "possible." I'm not contending that this frame of reference should be *the* way American white advocates look at racial concerns; rather, that it is *a* way. It happens to be my outlook, but it needn't be anyone else's. Personally, I've found white advocacy to be too strident, alpha-male-dominated, European-referenced, collectivist, authoritarian, and fringy-right-wing. I've gone so far as to argue for gay and lesbian involvement in the movement ("The White Racial Movement and Gays").⁴

In a recent post called "Nine American White Voices,"⁵ I listed nine people I believe deserve consideration in this country's racial dialogue and debate: philosopher, essayist, and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson; novelist and short story writer Ernest Hemingway; Civil War

combatant William T. Anderson; film director Sam Peckinpah; poet Emily Dickinson; artist and art educator Robert Henri; U.S.

Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin⁶; comic book illustrator Steve Ditko; and country singer Hank Williams. The post was paragraph-or-so length references to the nine—quotes, descriptions, accounts, lyrics in Williams’ case.

What I didn’t note in that post and should have, and I’m doing it here, is that I didn’t just pick the nine names out of a hat, as it were. At some point in the last decade, these nine individuals jumped out at me. I gave them time and attention. They had an impact on my thinking and, really, my total being—and that includes Hank Williams’ lyrics to “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.” I decided that each of them was a white American voice: I couldn’t envision their expressions coming from a black, Hispanic, Asian, or Jewish person, or from a European. All nine were inside me, part of the physically-felt internal referent I drew upon when I produced the 59 [now 72] articles I have written for this publication over the last few years. To understand me and what I have written is to take into account, or at least sense, that someone like comics illustrator Steve Ditko has had a major impact on me and someone like Anthony Ludovici hasn’t.

Here, I’ll cite a tenth white American voice: Samuel Francis Smith. In 1831 while a student at the Andover Theological Seminary in Andover, Massachusetts, he wrote the lyrics to “America” (“My Country ‘Tis of Thee”) to the melody of “God Save the Queen.” Doing so, he contrasted the British monarchy with the young American republic. I remember singing the song in elementary school, and I took its words to heart. I still take them to heart, including, and I’m not religious, the references to God.

My country ’tis of thee
Sweet land of liberty
Of thee I sing
Land where my fathers died
Land of the pilgrim’s pride
From every mountainside
Let freedom ring

My native country, thee
Land of the noble free
Thy name I love

I love thy rocks and rills
Thy woods and templed hills
My heart with rapture fills
Like that above

Let music swell the breeze
And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song
Let mortal tongues awake
Let all that breathe partake
Let rocks their silence break
The sound prolong

Our Father God to Thee
Author of liberty
To Thee I sing
My country 'tis of Thee
Sweet land of liberty
For all eternity
Let freedom ring

All to say, I identify with and care about all white people, but I am first and foremost a white American who loves my country and what it stands for.

I'll add to that quote that I've felt a personal connection with and gratitude toward all these individuals: in some important way, they've helped me make sense of my life, made me feel better about myself, given me direction.

Mickey Newbury (1940-2002) was an American singer/songwriter. This week, I watched YouTube's of him singing, read articles about him and a biography of him by Joe Zeimer, *Mickey Newbury: Crystal and Stone*⁷, and found myself thinking about him and what he brings up for me a lot, every day. This writing, then, is about Mickey Newbury in the same way the first two "American voices" writings were about the people mentioned in them.



Mickey Newbury was born in Houston, Texas, lived his peak productive years in Nashville, Tennessee, and died in Springfield, Oregon, where he had moved with his wife (her home territory) and son. I suppose most people know little if anything about him. I didn't even know he existed until a few years ago when by chance I came across that he wrote--or better, compiled—the song “American Trilogy,” which was best known as a big moment in Elvis' concert performances.

I learned this week that Mickey was indeed a major figure in American music. His albums weren't big sellers, but they were critically acclaimed as artful, true, and poetic. Listening to YouTubes this week, I was taken by his beautiful, ethereal tenor voice. He was phenomenally successful as a songwriter, with over 1,500 versions of his songs recorded by the likes of Johnny Cash, Kenny Rogers, Willie Nelson, John Denver, and Joan Baez. In 1980, he was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, the youngest person ever to receive that honor at that time. His influence was marked: Merle Haggard, George Jones, and Waylon Jennings made records that sounded much like Mickey's. He was very highly respected: Kris Kristofferson said "I learned more about songwriting from him than any other writer. He was my hero and still is."

Reading the Zeimer biography this week, personal connections with Mickey hit me.

We were born a week apart in 1940. We grew up in the same time period: the Cold War, Korea, Eisenhower, the civil rights movement, the Beatles. Pulmonary fibrosis, a lung disease, took him almost a quarter of a century ago and I'm still here hanging on. It could have been me with the breathing tube I saw in pictures of Mickey near the end. It's all the luck of the draw. The challenge for all of us, no matter what is going on, is to appreciate the incredible gift of life while we still have it.

We look very much alike; in the two videos I'll end this writing with, both from when Mickey was around 30, the physical similarity between the two of us at that age is striking. I think about how we looked affected our lives.

We're from similar ethnic and racial backgrounds. At around 20, Mickey was in the Air Force stationed in England and became proud of his English heritage. My mother was an English immigrant and my father, who grew up in Georgia, was of Welsh background. It took me a lot longer than Mickey, well into my 50s, but I have become conscious and proud of my ethnic, and racial, identity. Neither of us were encouraged to be proud of ourselves and our own in that way (people of our kind still aren't), but we both managed to get there anyway.

We both had low-income upbringings. Mickey's father drove a truck, rebuilt water heaters, and did plumbing work; my father was a barber. But we both made it anyway. The American dream is for real no matter who you are if you play by one rule: show up and work really hard at something you can do well.

We both took in from our worlds that college wasn't for the likes of us and joined the armed services right out of high school; with me, it was the army. It was in the army that I learned a job at the Ford plant wasn't my only future. I remember an older, college-educated draftee, I was 17, telling me "You could be a dentist." Me? I wish I could thank him for saying that. He's probably dead.

We both went to cowboy movies growing up, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, and watched Roy's TV show. We took seriously Roy's "rider's rules," his standards for how to conduct your life he's send printed on a card if you wrote him, which I did. Among the rules, be courteous and polite, obey your parents, study hard in school, protect the weak and help them, be kind to animals and protect them, and respect our flag and our country.⁸ As I read them again this week after all these years, it hit me how much I still hold to Roy's ideals.

We both had/have very bad backs and decided to avoid the drugs prescribed to ease the pain out a concern that they would cloud our minds. Both of us placed great value in our minds and using it to do our very best in whatever we most believed in accomplishing. My encounter with Mickey this week inspired me to keep that going and even better in whatever time I have left.

Attending to Mickey Newbury and what it brought up was a suitable activity for me—for its associations, memories, insights, and conclusions, and for the good feelings it gave me. What President Trump is doing about Israel and Iran and Putin and Zelenskyy in Ukraine and what Tucker Carlson and the others doing the talking at the moment think about it matters, it really does. But the truth of it, Mickey Newbury took precedence for me this week over the Trump drama and I'm fine with that. I invite you to find your own Mickey Newbury, if you know what I mean. It will matter, it really will.

I'll end this with the lyrics of a couple of Mickey's songs that stand out for me, each followed by a video of him singing them. The first is "She Even Woke Me Up" and the second is "American Trilogy." "American Trilogy" is made up of three American Civil War-era songs.

She Even Woke Me Up

Well, morning's come and Lord, my mind is aching
The sunshine standing quietly at my door

Just like the dawn my heart is silently breaking
And with my tears it goes tumbling to the floor

Once again the old town will be talking
Yes Lord, I've seen the pity that's in their eyes
'Cause they could never understand
It's her sorrow, it's not a man
No matter what they say, I know she tried

Baby's packed her soft things and she's left me
I just know she didn't mean to make me cry
It's not her heart, Lord, it's her mind
She didn't mean to be unkind
Why she even woke me up to say goodbye

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM2PKcLSaYA>

American Trilogy

Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton
Old things they are not forgotten
Look away, look away, look away Dixieland

Oh, I wish I was in Dixie, away, away
In Dixieland I take my stand to live and die in Dixie
'Cause Dixieland, that's where I was born
Early Lord one frosty morning
Look away, look away, look away Dixieland

Glory, glory hallelujah
Glory, glory hallelujah
Glory, glory hallelujah
His truth is marching on

So hush little baby
Don't you cry
You know your daddy's bound to die
But all my trials, Lord, will soon be over

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7p82Joum7Q>

Endnotes

1. Robert S, Griffin, “Nine White American Voices,” *The Occidental Observer*, posted January 24, 2022.
2. Robert S. Griffin, “A Tenth White American Voice,” *The Occidental Observer*, posted January 14, 2023.
3. Robert S, Griffin, “The American Political System and White Racial Discourse,” *The Occidental Observer*, posted December 13, 2022.
4. Robert S. Griffin, *The White Racial Movement and Gays*, The Occidental Observer, posted June 26, 2018.
5. “Nine American Voices,” op. cit.
6. Since then, I wrote at length about Rankin: “A Commentary on the Life of Jeannette Rankin,” *The Occidental Observer*, posted on June 22, 2024. It was also was posted in *The Unz Review* that same day,
7. Second edition, AuthorHouse, 2015.
8. <https://www.cowboyway.com/RoyRogers.htm>

