

CUBAN POETRY
by Coleman

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Coleman
2950 State Highway 39
Mineral Point, WI 53565
608 341-8467
coleman@spokesinthewheel.com

An old man nurses a warm beer in a Milwaukee neighborhood bar.

On the television, Brian Williams (NBC) reports 'breaking news' from Havana that steps have been initiated to normalize relations between the US and Cuba. The soundbite fades ...

Anybody remember Paul Goodman? No? *Growing Up Absurd*? No. of course not. Nobody knows anything anymore. It's all You Tube and Twitter and bullshit.

Goodman. Paul Goodman was a writer. A real writer. An intellectual, back when intellectual wasn't a dirty word. He wrote one of the great books of the day. People called him a sociologist, but he denied it. He said sociology was too lifeless. He was an intellectual. An activist. A radical.

I didn't know him. Met him a couple times, but can't say that I knew him. That would be dishonest. Got to know his son a bit before he died in that car crash. That was terrible.

Loved his books. Book. Still, one day I got roped into doing him a favor. Doing Paul Goodman a favor. Or trying to.

It was July, 1968. You don't have to be around as long as I have to know that a lot of things happened in '68. Assassinations. Riots. War. Free love. Dope. Make love, not war. Janis Joplin. Jerry Rubin. It was great. A good time to be alive. You missed it. I was there.

So I had this friend, Burt, ... no ... wait ... It wasn't ... No, Burt wasn't my friend. He was Ron's friend. Ron was my friend, and Ron's friend Burt, Burt knew Goodman, was

a good friend of Goodman, and Goodman asked Burt for a favor, and Burt asked Ron and Ron asked me, and that's how I happened to do a favor for Paul Goodman.

I was glad to do it because I had just torn up my draft card and I was waiting for my indictment to come down and I'd never been out of the country. Not once. This was a chance for me to see something of the world, just a piece of it, before I got slapped in the slammer, which I eventually was.

See, Goodman ... Goodman had been asked by the *New York Review of Books* to write an essay about contemporary Cuban poetry. Apparently there was good stuff coming out of Cuba – good poetry - and it was getting a lot of notice elsewhere, like in France and ... elsewhere, but no one here even knew about it.

Problem was, Goodman was supposed to write this article but he couldn't get his hands on any Cuban poetry because it was illegal. It was Cuban. And everything Cuban was illegal in the United States. Cuban cigars – everyone knows about that. You still can't get a decent cigar in this country. But not just cigars. Sugar. No Cuban sugar. Has to come from somewhere else. Dominican Republic or somewhere.

And poetry. Yeah. Poetry. Cuban poetry was illegal in the United States of America. Was for fifty years. Looks like Obama's changing that. But right up to now, couldn't have it, or you're breaking the law. I don't know what the hell they were thinking. You read that stuff, your head will explode or something. You'll turn into a communist.

Anyway, Goodman needed to get his hands on some contraband Cuban poems or he couldn't write his story.

Goodman told Burt there was a bookseller in Montreal who had Cuban poetry. Gave Burt the address and a wad of cash and asked him to go to Montreal for him, for Goodman. Goodman wasn't going himself, to pick up the poetry. Had something else to do, I guess. Asked Burt to go for him. And Burt asked Ron and Ron asked me and Suzanne and that's how it all happened.

Free road trip. Sounded like fun. Burt asked Ron and Ron asked me. Ron also asked Suzanne. Suzanne wasn't his girlfriend. Ron was gay. Me too. So was Burt. Not Suzanne. Not that I knew of. Goodman was gay too. Had a wife and a boyfriend. Suzanne was just a friend. A fellow traveler. We all piled in Burt's car and headed off for Montreal. Burt, Suzanne, Ron and me.

We drove north from Ithaca high as kites, and we were still buzzed when we crossed the border. We didn't have any dope on us. We weren't that stupid. Though nobody checked us for dope or anything else as we passed into Canada. They just asked us where we were going and why and we said Montreal to buy some poetry, which the Canadians must have thought made some kind of sense. Being Canadian.

We pulled into Montreal in the evening. The sun was still up, so we drove by the site of Expo, the last great World's Fair. It had closed that spring, but the pavilions were still there, though they were empty and there weren't any people around. Still, some mind-blowing structures.

Goodman had booked us into a cheap but nice little hotel downtown. We checked in, dropped our bags in the room, and headed out to explore. Walked our butts off. Drank

some cheap wine on a sidewalk. Ate crepes or something. Who knows? It was a long time ago. Something French, I'm sure.

Next morning, went to the bookstore. Guy was ready for us, had a couple of boxes all packed up, ready to go. We put them in the trunk and headed toward home.

Maybe somewhere, on some day back in 1968 there was a car loaded with college kids entering the US from Canada that didn't get pulled over and searched, but I doubt it. If you were a student in 1968 you were a suspect. By definition. Even if you weren't a student, even if you just looked like a student, you couldn't be trusted. That's the way it was.

So we got pulled out of line, our car waved to the side, and we had to step out of the car while they searched it. They went through the glove compartment, looked under the seats, under the floor mats, ran their hands down between the seat cushions to see if anything was stuffed there. Had us empty our pockets. They asked to see our luggage.

We opened the trunk.

"What's in the boxes?"

"Poetry," we answered, and we knew. We were screwed.

Two hours later they offered to let us go, but only if we signed this form agreeing to the destruction of the poetry. We didn't even have to consult with each other. This isn't Nazi Germany, we said. This is America. We're not talking about drugs or guns, were talking about poetry, goddammit. We're not going to sign your form. We're not going to be a part of your book-burning.

Another hour passed. They released us. Said we'd be hearing from the Treasury Department. Which we did. Couple weeks later Burt got a letter from Washington. Said the books had been destroyed, and that we each owed a five dollar fine for trying to bring them into the US.

A five dollar fine. I'll tell you what.

Somewhere, deep in the bowels of some justice building in Washington, DC, is a ledger with an unpaid balance of \$5. I'll go to my grave owing that \$5. I'm happy to say that's the only debt I have. And it's one I'll never pay.

Asked me to sign a form to burn a damn book. Of poetry. What kind of world is that?