

Ear-Bangin' (!!)

at the _____ Rescue _____
 _____ M_I_S_S _____ ION

By Ormon Day

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The author admits to being influenced by Kerouac in this eye-opening on the road adventure, but we see a bit of Ken Kesey as well—how else do you explain the madness? Christian charity is a double edge sword where souls are too often exchanged for a pittance. In less than a thousand words we get a wake up brass knuckle whammy about what ‘catering to the poor’ is really like after all your dignity has stripped away. Much of the strength of this piece comes from the author’s Neo-Beat prose and its dirty honesty.*

Ear-Bangin' at the Rescue Mission

Ponderin' what Jack Kerouac wrote in “On the Road” about L.A. bein' the loneliest, most brutal American city, a jungle, know what I have to do. I'm twenty-one in '67, jobless, dejected, college grad writin' a second novel after the first got rejected. To be a literary lion, have to try on a different kind of life.

Leave our tract home in the 'burbs, get a lift to L.A., wander among skid row winos, two crumpled bucks tucked in my pocket. Work a day labor job movin' furniture, survey the lay of the urine-soaked land, sleep and eat among hundreds of desperate rescue mission denizens. Admission to the dinin' hall has its price: an angry ear-bangin' sermon from a rumped, perspirin' man of the cloth, paintin' a merciless eternity for the sordid and unsaved.

At a service, look 'round the chapel, the only guy with his head up, the rest droopin' in shame or snoozin'. A few sheddin' tears when the preacher speaks of widowed mothers waitin' by rain-streaked windows for their prodigal sons. Narratin' a gory Crucifixion, feels like he's

strafin' us with a nail gun.

Go back home, Mom sits me down with a fork and napkin.

Return in a year and a half, hopin' to find buddies to show me how to swing myself onto boxcars, inspired by Jack: "There was nowhere to go but everywhere, so just keep on rollin' under the stars."

Earn a little money pickin' elbow-sized carrots (tasteless fodder for pigs), would've sold my plasma but pale at the sight of needles. Durin' a joyless service before slurpin' split-bean soup, ease the pain of an ear-bangin' by gazin' at a sweet-lookin' soprano in the visitin' choir, drawin' her caricature on a paper scrap, holding it up toward her. Afterwards she tells me she's prayin' for my soul.

Frigid at night goin' eastward on a freight, warm myself walkin' in circles, thinkin' of her brown hair and her guidin' light.

Decade later reportin' for a paper, write about bein' down and out in Santa Ana, bunkin' and eatin' in a rescue mission, a day labor job beside a talkative guy who tells me he's tormented by lovers kissin' and teasin'. Wouldn't trust him alone with my sisters.

Snackin' on salty beer nuts and cracklings, duet with an unshaven stranger to jukebox rock songs in a smoky tavern, him tappin' a foamy glass against the bar, me drummin' a metal ashtray, him haunted by an ex-wife who left him homeless. Earnin' my grub at a storefront mission, a preacher harangues us to seek salvation by comin' forward to the altar, so we'll be Glory-bound if we croak that very night lyin' in a gutter overflowin' with cheap booze and cigarette butts.

Assemble a beggars-can-be-choosy guide to free skid row dinin' spots, four tin cups for a mission servin' a savory fish patty, steamin' baked potato, chocolate ice cream, one cup for a mission with cold noodles, withered fowl, lifeless macaroni salad, spongy cranberry sauce. Both the best and worst have somethin' in common: a bowel-clangin', nausea-churnin', nightmare-elicitin' ear-bangin'.

Imagine Kerouac preachin' at a mission. No Pentecostal choir. William Burroughs on electric guitar, Neal Cassady on bongos, wild-haired Allen Ginsberg pumpin', fingerin' a harmonium. Slumpin' men stir when Jack says, "I like my whiskey wild!"

They shake their shaggy, greasy heads with disbelief.

"Have nuthin' to offer anybody except my own confusion." Words from his books.

"Jesus was a strange hobo who walked on water."

Men sit up, Ginsberg om-m-ms.

"A homeless man has reason to cry, everything in the world is pointed against him. Every night I still ask the Lord, 'Why?' Haven't heard a decent answer yet."

Whisperings.

"I'm right there, swimmin' the river of hardships, but I know how to swim."

Guys are nudgin' sleepin', snorin' neighbors.

"Everything belongs to me because I am poor."

Cassady raps his bongos.

"I like too many things, get confused and hung-up runnin' from one fallin' star to another till I drop."

Cassady thumps the skins to a sudden stop.

“Everything fell apart in me. How are things with you?”

Burroughs plunks lonely low notes.

“Everything’ll be all right, desolation is desolation everywhere and desolation is all we got and desolation ain’t so bad.”

Ginsberg riffs on his harmonium.

“Because I am Beat, I believe in Beatitude and that God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son to it. I have fallen in love with you, God. Life is holy, every moment is precious. Be in love with your life every minute of it. Tonight the stars’ll be out. Don’t you know God is Pooh Bear?”

Men are risin’, helpin’ others up.

“God who is everything possesses the eye of awakenin’, like dreamin’ a long dream of an impossible task.”

Some men sway on stiff knees to the rhythm of the soft music.

“Believe in the holy contour of life. Shut up, live, travel, adventure, bless, don’t be sorry.”

Rememberin’ holy rollin’ churches from Delta and Appalachian boyhoods, a few dance in the spirit, raisin’ hands Heavenward, mumblin’ hallucinated incoherence.

“Wash your dirty dishes like you are washin’ the infant Jesus. Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind. Ah the mad hearts of all of us!” The harmonium hummin’, Jack closes his blue eyes, steeples his fingers, bows to his congregation of dharma bums.

Chapel doors slide open, men with blessed ears flash smiles of broken mottled teeth, inhalin’ and exhalin’ the nostalgic aroma of buttered loaves and fried fishes, sacramental wine.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *In my early twenties, without money to finance my wanderlust, I sought adventures that only cost a few bucks. One of them was a descent into L.A.'s Skid Row, where I hoped to find buddies who would show me how to hop freight trains eastward. Eating and sleeping in rescue missions run by Christian organizations, I was struck by the cruelty of the browbeating sermons I heard in exchange for split-bean soup, stale bread and a creaky dormitory bunkbed. Reflecting on my experiences from my mid-seventies, I found myself wondering what words Jack Kerouac would've delivered to an audience of men down on their luck, so I culled through his words to create his sermon. I wanted to show readers what Christian love looks like.*

AUTHOR BIO: My life has been pretty much shaped by wanderlust. I've thumbed on six continents, spent two months canoeing the Mississippi from St. Paul to New Orleans, visited with cocaine-smoking *gringo* inmates in a Bolivian prison, witnessed a sky burial in Tibet (two corpses, a multitude of vultures), and hopped freights out of L.A. My prose and poetry have been published by such journals as *Creative Nonfiction*, *Third Coast*, *Potomac Review*, *Portland Review* and *Los Angeles Review*.