

## INPRINT

## CRITICISM

## A.J. Liebling's freedom with the press

The Press  
By A.J. Liebling  
Pantheon, 355 pp., \$6.95

By Michael Miner

A. J. Liebling's press criticism has its basic points, and dominates the pack like Secretariat in the Belmont Stakes: publishers are rich men who view their papers as disposable assets useful in the meantime in bailing the world as it pleases rich men to understand it. "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one," is Liebling's most famous line, which, it turns out, appears in parentheses (with Liebling, God is often in the parentheses). He was *The New Yorker's* principal press critic from 1945 until his death in 1963.

Liebling never forgave the Pulitzer heirs for shutting down the *New York World* in 1931, throwing out of work 2,867 employees, one of them the young Liebling. On the evidence of *The Press*, a recently reissued collection of his criticism, this catastrophe traumatized Liebling: it shaped everything he would later write about the press. "The end of the *World* marked the beginning of realism in the relation of American newspaper employees to their employers," he would write. "The employers had been realistic for a long time." He said the heirs took \$25 million in profits out of the *World*, put nothing back, and abruptly sold the *World* to Roy Howard for \$5 million more. The *World* disappeared into Howard's *Evening Telegram*.

Liebling's cold farewell to William Randolph Hearst, who died in 1951, is one of the highlights of this collection. Hearst was an incompetent newspaperman, Liebling argued persuasively, but he had inherited \$30 million in mining stocks and he spent it on talent and hoopla. "When [Hearst] reached the point, in the '20s, where the store-bought empire had to support itself from its own earnings, his long retreat began." Hearst's lasting contribution to American journalism was that "he made it so expensive to compete that no mere working newspaperman has been able to found an important paper in this century."

#### The press he loved to hate.

Press reformers remember Liebling as something of a god. He had a long run at *The New Yorker* and wrote with great integrity and felicity, and with a fetching dualism: he clearly loved the press as much as he regretted it, and he really was quite easy to please—simple good reporting would do it. His dark suspicions of publishers did not reduce the affection for him in the ranks. When (*MORE*), the late New York journalism review, scheduled a convention for the little folk in 1972, simultaneous with a meeting of the American Association of Newspaper Publishers at the Waldorf-Astoria, the convention was named in Liebling's memory.

I.F. Stone got a man of the year award at that first Liebling convocation, and so I was amused, reading *The Press*, to come across Liebling impaling Stone on the same harpoon that skew-



Liebling committed the rudeness of paying attention to the press, and the result could be hilarious.

ered a frequent target, the right-wing pundit Westbrook Pegler. Liebling had caught them both committing the sin, flagrant among deep-feeling pundits, of doom-saying. (Stone: "The little piano player in the White House is improvising his country's Gotterdammerung." Pegler: "The awful truth seems to be that the republic is dead." All this means is that neither man liked Truman, and Liebling commented, "I like to think of Peg and Izzy,

in accord at last, huddled together on the forward thwart of the first lifeboat leaving the ship.") Liebling knew nonsense when he read it, and he read it every day. This brings us to one of his favorite targets (after publishers), which he isolated by dividing into three groups—the journalistic working class. In ascending order of self-satisfaction he found: "1. The reporter, who writes what he sees. 2. The interpretive reporter, who writes

what he sees and what he construes to be its meaning. 3. The expert, who writes what he construes to be the meaning of what he hasn't seen."

Liebling enormously admired reporters who report, reporting being, like homework to children, that thing newspapers will do almost anything to avoid (it's often expensive, for one reason). Still, something found out and explained can matter in the short run, maybe even in the long. Liebling had no particular problem with the often useful interpreter, and was one himself. His strengths and his limits as a critic lay in his unwillingness to go much beyond what he found inside the papers he read. He was a student of the press' history, but he did not pretend to the same clarity about its future. He would have felt like the sort of fraud he ridiculed.

Liebling's great skill was to make the press hilarious just by turning its pages and, as it were, reading aloud. He did it the rudeness of paying attention.

#### Old and new.

There is a genially archaic tint to *The Press*. Reflecting its times, the journalism that Liebling cites is much more unbridled, raw, and unselfconscious than either the press or the country today.

Liebling was only 59 when he died. Had he gone on writing another dozen years, he would have observed the Vietnam war, the Pentagon Papers and Watergate—events that altered journalism and the nation's soul.

Continued on page 23

## FICTION

## Original sins in '60s South

Original Sins  
By Lisa Alther  
Knopf, 391 pp., \$13.95

By Jane Marcus

Mark Twain would claim Lisa Alther as a kindred spirit in this bitterly humorous evocation of American politics and people. And Faulkner at his funniest would sense a sister sufferer from the South. *Original Sins* is a better title for her first book, with its unforgettable scenes, including the classic of a couple trying to copulate while chained to the ceiling. *Kinflicks* just fits the cinematic sense of home movies that shapes the new book.

Woody Allen ought to be forced to pay the huge debt he owes American women by making a movie out of this book. If a reviewer can be pardoned for casting, I can see Woody Allen now as Raymond Tatro, the hillbilly intellectual who goes to

New York, becomes a civil rights worker, abandons blacks for the cause of white workers, tries to organize a union in the Newland, Tenn., mill and goes back to the land, growing vegetables in the hollow while his cousins concentrate on TV, modern plumbing and cars. Emily Prince, the Southern Princess who marries a rich radical and ends up as a lesbian mother, is a perfect role for Meryl Streep. And Diane Keaton is a natural for Maria, the gorgeous, tough, intelligent New York Jewish lesbian radical. (Alther has repented her original sin in *Kinflicks* with its stereotypical lesbian, by creating a whole new version of Djuna Barnes' *Ladies' Almanack*, in which the lesbians are all ex-heterosexuals, beautiful, bored or angry with men.) And there is a good part for Dolly Parton as Betty Boobs, the high school whore with a heart of gold, who marries Jed Tatro's best friend and works in the mill. Raymond's brother Jed is a

Good Old Boy with a vengeance, a dumb football hero with STUD on his license plates. He marries the boss' daughter, Sally Prince, an uptight little Southern lady, who manipulates her homemaking image into a TV show. Jed goes off to a motel with Betty, and they are mowed down by a truck as they leave. This brings the characters together at the funeral with their assorted children.

The Tatro boys, the Prince girls and Donny, the black son of Kathryn, the Prince's maid, were born into a Southern rural idyll. They long for the pastoral peace of childhood before race and class and sex divided them. Kathryn refuses to be raped by a white man, belts him with a bottle, and runs off to New York, which is what separates the Five to begin with. The five stories converge and separate and converge again in a

## Alther's novel may be more revealing of the era than an FoIA file.

very salty soap opera.

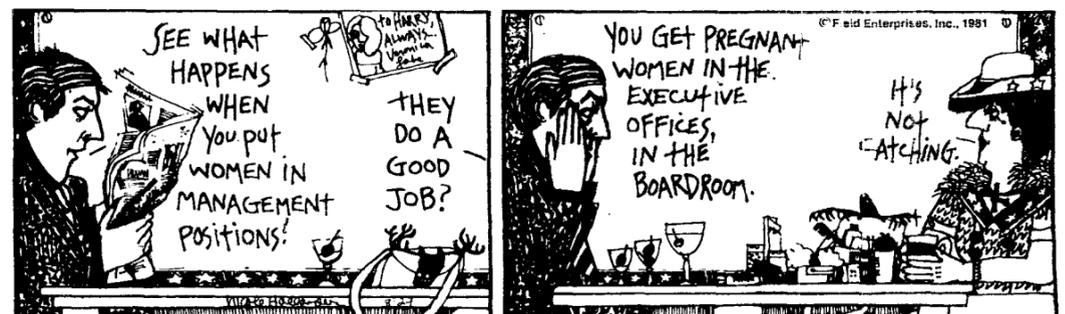
The stories of Jed Tatro and Emily Prince and their causes, from civil rights through the antiwar movement, to rural poverty programs, union organizing to the women's movement and lesbian vanguardism, are the core of the novel. Anyone who was caught up in them will alternately wince and howl at Alther's wicked recreation of meetings and arguments.

Sometimes it takes a work of fiction to make us see our own history more clearly. Our moral indignation rouses us to collective action on specific issues that outrage our consciences. We organize, demonstrate and retire until the next issue cries out for new committees. *Original Sins* resembles nothing more than those Victorian novels about causes, with one important exception. Lisa Alther has a sense of humor worthy of the Wife of Bath, though her pilgrims are not going to Canterbury, but to an intellectual and political Big Apple, candy-coated with progressive ideas and rotten at the core. Think of all our tax money the FBI wasted taping antiwar and civil rights meetings, when the whole epoch can be repeated by a novelist in 600 pages. ■

Jane Marcus teaches English at the University of Texas at Austin.

## SYLVIA

by Nicole Hollander



# ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

## THE WEAVERS

# Reunion gives us strength

**The Weavers Together Again**  
Loom Productions, Suite 2017,  
250 W. 57th St., New York, NY  
10107 (by mail only), \$9.95

By Ron Radosh

Here, finally, is the record of the historic 25th Anniversary concert at Carnegie Hall (*In These Times*, Nov. 26, 1980) and a beautiful job it is. The recording catches the spirit and excitement of the event and is produced with state-of-the-art technology so that we have a clear and crisp sound, so unlike the discs of the '50s and early '60s we've had to depend on till now.

Old timers will note that the Weavers begin and end with a touch of nostalgia—"Darling Corey" and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas"—exactly the numbers used at the famous 1955 Christmas Eve concert at Carnegie Hall. But this record offers more than nostalgia—it is a living testament to the vitality and strength of the Weavers' music and unique sound. Old favorites are sung with fresh verve and perfect blending of voices, as in Merle Travis' "Dark as a Dungeon," or on the soft strains of Pete Seeger's lead on "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine."

But the Weavers also take new directions sometimes not too successfully. Perhaps the strongest and most haunting piece of music on the album is a new work—their arrangement of Holly Near's "Hay Una Mujer," a lament for a "disappeared" Chilean woman. Ronnie Gilbert sings lead on this, revealing the power and dignity she can bring to a song. As if they sought to convey the unity of struggles of the past and present, the Weav-

ers followed this in the concert (and on the record) with "Venga Jaleo," one of the moving ballads sung by the International Brigades, who volunteered to fight Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War. Pete Seeger has been singing this since he recorded it back in the '30s, but this time his banjo playing takes on a mandolin-like quality, evoking the flavor and feeling of Spain and the battles of yesteryear.

Fred Hellerman offers a soft and lilting lullaby to his newborn son, "Tomorrow Lies in the Cradle," which enables us to see

again what a fine musician and craftsman he is. Lee Hays shines in his introductory comments to the classic carol about Paul and Silas, "All Night Long." But the Weavers fail on Holly Near's "Something About the Women." While the song in one sense reflects the concern of Ronnie Gilbert for feminist issues, and which gives her own performance a biting edge and strength missing in earlier years, the song's complex musical structures are not quite fitting for her voice, and the song comes off as preachy. That song, as well as Hellerman's ersatz country-western "When I'm Down for the Count," might just as well have been replaced.

The record ends with Pete Seeger outdoing himself on the African chant "Wimoweh," and with Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene," which the Weavers made the charts with in the '50s. And finally, the record is graced by Larry Josephson's



Pete Seeger today; inset, the Weavers then.

lovely liner notes. "An audience composed largely of skeptics, atheists, agnostics, and humanists of the old and new left," he writes, "came close to a religious experience in Carnegie Hall that night." Maybe a bit of an exaggeration, but not much. Now, we can all share that ex-

perience, and thank the Weavers for showing us they can take risks, and still be singing with and for us after all these years. ■ **Ron Radosh**, a professor of American history at Queens Community College, writes frequently on American folk music and culture.

## FRED SMALL

# Work songs for hard times

By Richard Udell

If you were at the MUSE "No Nukes" rally at Battery Park in 1979, the 1979 convention of District 8 Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, this year's labor-sponsored "March on Harrisburg," El Salvador-inspired "March on the Pentagon" or the DSOC convention you probably heard the music of Fred Small, a 28-year-old singer-songwriter from Cambridge, Mass.

His repertoire includes songs on nuclear power, workers' rights and safety, sexism, racism and the New Right. But until recently you could only hear him at a rally or in one of a half-dozen New England coffee houses. His newly-released "No More Vietnam" on the single *For El Salvador* and a debut al-



Fred Small gets audiences on their feet.

bum scheduled for fall promise that Small will be reaching new audiences.

Small is an anomaly in con-

temporary music. A Phi Beta Kappa Yale graduate with a law degree from the University of Michigan, Small composed his first song during finals of his first semester at law school.

"My writing arose from my sense of a vacuum," he explained. "I grew up with the topical song explosion of the mid-'60s and knew first-hand the power and persuasiveness of songs that dealt with vital issues." In the mid-'70s, though, the songs of people like Phil Ochs and Tom Paxton were no longer getting airplay. Small's lyrics closely resemble those of Ochs in humor and criticism, though not in sarcasm.

What began as a pastime became a career last September when Small left his post as an environmental attorney with the Conservation Law Foundation of New England to devote himself to music.

Both his love of music and his concern for the issues he sings about come through loud and clear. His philosophy is much like that of Woody Guthrie. Songwriting is, for him, an organizing technique. "Music can carry people through hard times. That's why we have work songs—because it makes work easier." At rallies and conventions he specializes in songleading. For him sing-alongs are "the cultural

analogue to participatory democracy."

"Music is an incredibly effective means of communication, less threatening than a speech or an editorial," he said. Few of his songs are preachy. Several have a rallying effect. His tune "Stand Up" never fails to unite an audience in song, let alone get them on their feet. The refrain goes, "Stand up, stand up/ tell 'em you're here/ Shout it loud for the whole world to hear/ they're long overdue for a kick in the rear/ stand up and tell 'em you're here."

Small's best songs, and the ones he admires most of other performers, tell a story. In the tradition of Pete Seeger, Small uses stories as a way to get people interested in an issue. Seeger has said, "A rhymed editorial is worse than useless. Phooey. Underline this: *An editorial in rhyme does not make a song.*" Small agrees.

"Don't sing 'Capitalism is unjust!'" he said. "Sing instead the story of a worker fired for trying to organize a union, a town exploited and abandoned by a runaway plant or a community that sets up its own health care clinic." In his song about El Salvador Small tells of women raped and tortured, the struggle of the poor and the savagery of the U.S.-backed junta.

Another of his songs, to appear on the forthcoming album, first appeared in different form in the pages of *In These Times*. "Letter for May Alice Jeffers" was adapted from a letter to the editor describing this elderly black woman's life in a 1978 issue. His precision fingerpicking and facility with meter promise to make this song a classic. ■

**Richard Udell** is an organizer for the Critical Mass Energy Project, the Nader anti-nuclear group in Washington, D.C. "For El Salvador" is available from Boston Mobilization for Survival, 13 Sellers St., Cambridge, Mass. 02139 for \$2.00 plus 85¢ postage. The album will be out in September.



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