

From Reinhard Mayer

In the last issue of the New York Review of Books Elizabeth Hardwick indulges herself, in the grand and informative and moving way that is her wont, in memoria. She conjured images of experience that were formative in her life as an American and that are in retrospect painful in the extreme. Her article describes several encounters with Billie Holiday, and is an attempt to pay homage to an artist in whose style she finds both instruction and self-destruction.

I want to bring to the attention of the community a passage of Elizabeth Hardwick's essay in the hope that a thing well said may also have the power to suggest that it is truly said, said in honesty.

Elizabeth Hardwick describes her first-hand experience with Jazz bands in Kentucky while she was growing up. It struck me on reading this article, that unless I've become suddenly tone-deaf, her description of Kentucky's 'Joyland Park' is coincident with Bill Dixon's anxiety about this summer at Bennington. Aesthetics and style are - and this has been the mistake of our discussions - more problematical, than we have taken them to be. The following paragraphs impress me as being an exact statement of what Bill Dixon finds to be humanely offensive about the envisioned summer program in terms of the information we have been given about its content thus far.

"In my youth, at home in Kentucky, there was a dance place just outside of town called Joyland Park. In the summer the great bands arrived, Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Chick Webb, sometimes for a Friday and Saturday or merely for one night. When I speak of the great bands it must not be taken to mean that we thought of them as such. No, they were part of the summer nights and the hot dog stands, the fetid swimming pool heavy with chlorine, the screaming roller coaster, the old rain-splintered picnic tables, the broken iron swings. And the bands were also part of Southern drunkenness, couples drinking coke and whisky, vomiting, being unfaithful, lovelorn, frantic. The black musicians, with their cumbersome instruments, their tuxedos, were simply there to beat out time for the stumbling, cuddling fox-trotting of the period. The band busses, parked in the field, the caravans in which they suffered the litter of cigarettes and bottles, the hot, streaking highways, all night, or resting for a few hours in the black quarters: the Via Dolorosa of show business. They arrived at last, nowhere, to audiences large or small, often with us depending upon the calendar of the Park, the other occasions from which the crowd would spill over into the dance hall. Ellington's band. And what were we doing, standing close, murmuring the lyrics?"

My hope is, as we've been coerced into accepting the Summers' Project by the threatened resignation of several members of the Board of Trustees - and the prognostication of a possible bankruptcy which that action would bring with it for Bennington College - that we now direct our attention as a faculty once again to the Summer's Program. We are protective of Bennington's survival, as we have asserted repeatedly in issues pertaining to its future, not only as an idea, but also experientially. We are protective of the quality of the experience at Bennington, which was unthreatened by the Futures Committee's Report and continues to be threatened by the Summers' Project, through the kind of autonomy it has in its being legally constituted as a separate entity. The information that Bennington Summers, with all its independence and separateness, can also produce a financial burden to the operations of the college has caused some considerable consternation in the faculty. Let us be bald in our acknowledgement of the issue: It is integration.

Black Music has advanced some considerable distance in its sense of selfworth beyond the Jazz of Joyland Park of Elizabeth Hardwick's Kentucky youth. If our acceptance of the Bennington Summers Corporation is to have any meaning then we must direct our energies towards preserving the idea of an "enclave": a place surrounded by foreign territory. The idea of joining programs in the visual arts with jazz musicians in the fields is a kind of intellectual colonialism that may still be fostered with nostalgic warmth in New York City, but also an idea that we are in no way obligated to support in Bennington.

Specifically, it still needs to be made clear how (in the face of concerns and criticisms raised by the faculty) the integrity of the musicians in the program as artists and equals of the white painters and sculptors will be preserved. More simply: what is the program?

We do not want the musicians coming to Bennington this summer to "arrive" at last, nowhere, to audiences large or small, often...depending on the Calendar of the Park (Tanglewood, Saratoga, Marlboro) the other occasions from which the crowd would spill over into the dance hall." We do want to take Merrill Hambleton's and Omar Lermann's assurances that they welcome our participation, literally, instead of speculating on the motives for these statements. We do want the Trustees and the Bennington Summers Corporation to take our concerns about the planning of the summer program as important considerations, and not as a "standing close, murmuring (of) the lyrics."