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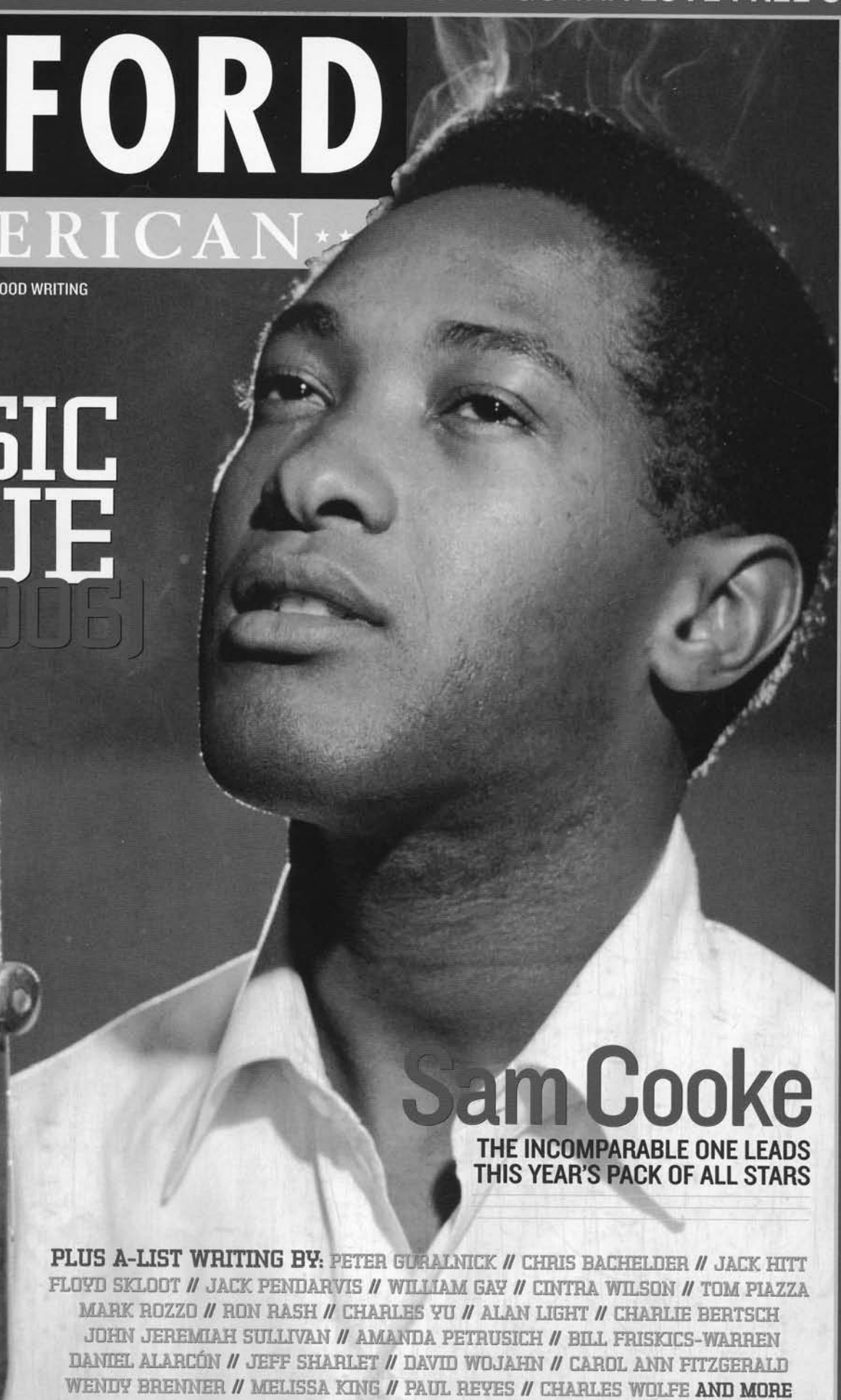
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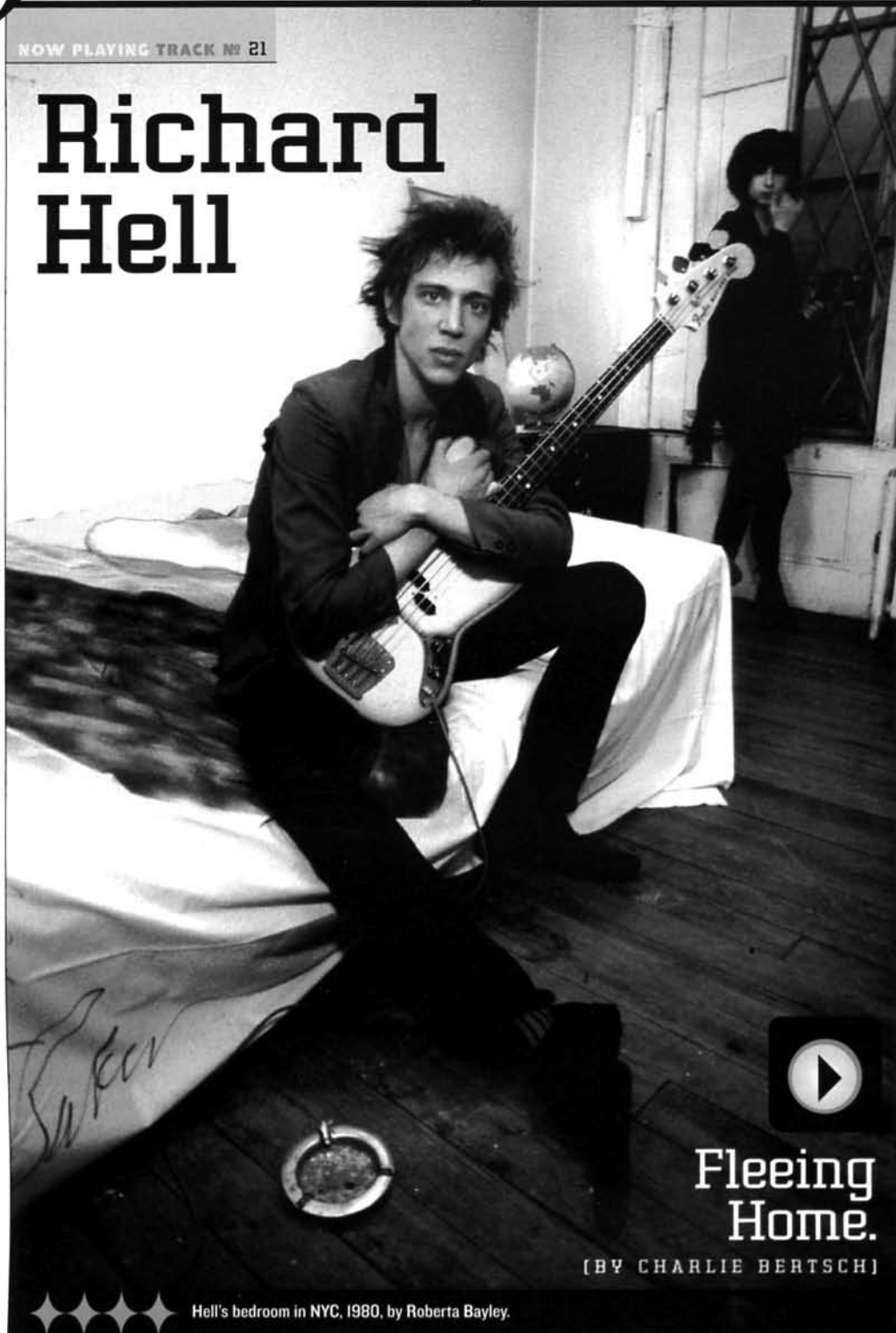
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NOW PLAYING TRACK No 21

Richard Hell



Fleeing Home.

[BY CHARLIE BERTSCH]

Hell's bedroom in NYC, 1980, by Roberta Bayley.

a deliberate speaker, pausing periodically until he finds the right word. His silence is the sound of thought, a welcome counterpoint to those speakers who feel compelled to stuff every crack in a conversation with "like" and "you know." He wants to get it right and he's willing to wait.

"I mean, I'd zipped through in states of half-consciousness once or twice, passing through. But I hadn't really returned until I came back in the mid-'90s, which was a good thirty years after I'd left. And that was really powerful and effective and useful for that book. The impact of seeing again in full 3-D all these locations that had been so familiar when I was a kid but had faded in my memory was amazingly strong." Hell refines his account of this revelation throughout our conversation. "Driving into the state, I started feeling this helpless sense of returning to the place where I was most somehow in tune with the environment. When I crossed the border I saw it already. Everything that I saw had this power of being what I knew was the form of the world. And everything else that I'd seen since was somehow a little bit foreign and now I was back to the actual reality of whatever the world was shaped like." Hell pauses. "Kentucky." He laughs wryly. "The world is shaped like Kentucky."

Now, he is working on an autobiography. Because his wife is participating in a program offered by the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia and his daughter is free to travel with him, he decided a second research trip to Lexington was in order. This time, however, he confronted diminishing returns. Although he is intrigued to see how much his daughter, raised in New



"IT CAN ONLY HAPPEN ONCE. I'M AFRAID, that you have the experience that I did in the mid-'90s when I came back for the first time after so many years." Richard Hell is talking to me, not from New York City, where he has lived since he was a teenager, but from his hometown of Lexington, Kentucky. Although he speaks softly, there's a thickness to his voice, like the distortion you get when the levels are turned up too high. It's almost like a chord, sustained baritone notes blurring the nasal tenor of streetwise Lower Manhattan. "When I was doing my first novel, *Go Now*, I knew I wanted to include a Lexington chapter or two, and I came here for that. And that was the first time I'd really been since I left." Hell is

Inset photo p. 114 by Roberta Bayley

York City and L.A., likes his childhood home—"She's very thrilled by the warmth of all the people and the beauty of the old buildings"—his own response has been disappointingly mild. "I think I've just exhausted that shock."

Most people don't mind having their shock absorbed by a cushion of familiarity. But Richard Hell is not most people. He's not even Richard Hell. When he left his Kentucky home, he also left behind the weight of the name he bore there. Although he has remained "Richard Meyers" in the legal realm of rights and obligations, the majority of his life has been played out under the cover of a stage name. That's hardly unusual in the entertainment business. Hollywood used to be littered with the refuse of names cast aside for their ethnic associations. And a number of the musicians who shared the spotlight with Hell in the New York underground of the mid-1970s underwent similar transformations: Sylvain Mizrahi became the New York Dolls' Sylvain Sylvain and John Genzale, Jr., their Johnny Thunders; Jeffrey Hyman became the Ramones' lead-singer Joey; and Hell's boarding-school-friend Tom Miller became Tom Verlaine, with whom he formed Television, the band that turned the nightclub CBGB into punk rock's ground zero. Indeed, renaming was so common in the world of early punk rock that it was more surprising when musicians performed under their given names.

But the naming of Hell is a more curious matter. Even today, he is best known for "Blank Generation," a song that fiercely interrogates the relationship between names and identity. The chorus is divided in two. Like the name of his band, the Voidoids, its first half conjures an existential lack: "I belong to the blank generation." Yet his voice is full of swagger, its confidence punctuated by the delayed drumbeat that falls in the middle of the word *generation*. Hell invites listeners to see that, if they work hard enough, they can turn their emptiness inside out and realize that it's actually lined with freedom. Before the CBGB bands were grouped together as "punk," there was less pressure for them to conform to a standard. The absence of a label was enabling. Once their classification by the media had taken hold, though, the term "blank generation" became a procrustean bed of its own, with participants in the scene asked to exhibit blankness as a proof of their belonging.

And that's where the second half of the chorus comes in. This time, instead of singing "blank generation," Hell leaves out the adjective, creating a blank within the song itself. That absence is a prison release mailed into the future. Songs like Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and the Who's "My Generation" encourage one group to cohere at the expense of another; "Blank Generation" rejects the principle of cohesion itself. This is why it proved so influential for people drawn to the idea of punk.

LONG BEFORE PROFESSORS WERE discussing concepts like "performative identity" in the thin air of scholarly journals, Hell was exploring them at ground level. In addition to collaborating musically, first with the Neon Boys and then in Television, he and Tom Verlaine created the poetic alter ego Theresa Stern—"born on October 27, 1949, of a German Jewish father and a Puerto Rican mother in Hoboken, N.J."—for whom they crafted an author photo by taking self-portraits in drag and then fusing them together. Preceding their CBGB fame by several years, the Stern project testifies to the extraordinary self-awareness that shaped Hell and Verlaine's rise to prominence. But there's a crucial difference between constructing a fictional persona when

21 Blank Generation

Artist: Richard Hell & the Voidoids

Written by: Richard Hell

Produced by: Richard Gottferrer and Richard Hell

Credited Musicians: Richard Hell, bass and lead vocal; Robert Quine, Ivan Julian, guitar and backing vocal; Marc Bell, drums

From the Album: *Blank Generation* (Sire, 1977)

Publisher Credits: Warner-Tamerlane Publ. Corp. on behalf of Dilapidated Music, Doraflo Music, and Quick Mix Music (BMI)

Courtesy of: Sire Records Company, under license from Warner Bros. Inc.

Special Thanks: Ernie Petito, Aldo Davalos, and Richard Hell

◀◀ || ● ▶▶ LINER NOTES

one is already a well-known artist, as the David Bowie of *The Rise & Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* did, and doing so before one has established a public identity to fall back on. In each case, the persona is used to plot an escape route from the bondage of authenticity. However, to do so in advance of publicity, as Hell and Verlaine did, is far more radical, because it shows that the burden of identity isn't simply the price of fame.

Once Television started to receive acclaim, Verlaine seemed to lose interest in overt role-playing. His highly accomplished guitar-playing took precedence over other forms of performance. Hell, by contrast, maintained a more expansive sense of craft, prioritizing conceptual virtuosity over the technical sort. He spent time fashioning a look, exemplified by his torn T-shirts, that went on to inspire Malcolm McLaren's concept for the Sex Pistols. He bounced around on stage like a Pentecostal in the throes of religious ecstasy. Eventually, Verlaine came to resent Hell's presence, perceiving it to be a distraction, and drove him from the band they had founded together. The unpleasantness lingers to this day. Although the two men may express grudging respect for each other, neither likes to talk about the circumstances of Hell's departure. But it's clear that in this instance, the clichéd excuse of "creative differences" captures the truth of the conflict. Whereas Verlaine drained the life from his public facade until he reduced it purely to his role as a musician, Hell sought to turn his life into art. Rock & roll never became an end in itself.

That helps to explain why Hell's musical output was so limited. It's also the reason that the name "Richard Hell" resonates differently than "Johnny Thunders," "Joey Ramone," or even "Tom Verlaine." Most of Hell's public appearances over the past two decades have been as an author, not a rock star, and his stage name has been stretched to fit. Although he may have picked the surname "Hell" to provoke, it serves a different function now. Whatever shock value it retains comes, not from the four-letter word itself, but from the dignity that it has accrued over the years. A look at Hell's superb website, richardhell.com, reveals just how large and varied a domain his name has come to delimit. From *Genesis: Grasp*, the poetry magazine he edited prior to beginning his musical career, to "Hell on the Movies," the film column he now writes for *BlackBook* magazine, to reviews of his acclaimed 2005 novel *Godlike*, the site demonstrates both the diversity of his talents and his steadfast refusal to concentrate on developing any one of them exclusively.

I first interviewed Hell for *Punk Planet* magazine back in January of 2002, when he was doing press for the Matador Records double-CD *Time*, which coupled material previously

released on a long out-of-print cassette with a 1977 live recording. Because the previous year had seen the publication of *Hot and Cold*, a book compiling three decades of previously unpublished prose, poetry, and visual art along with the lyrics to all of his songs, I asked him whether he wanted people to make more of a connection between his music and the rest of his work, to perceive his art as a whole. He replied:

"To me it's seamless, you know? The book gave me a way of putting together all that material in different forms. Everything supports everything else. It's not just an anthology, or a reader, or a collection of odds and ends. It's a cohesive work. I feel that it's integrated. It's more like a painting, say, where it all exists in one whole that your eye can move around in. You don't have to read it from beginning to end, though you can. But to get back to your question about whether everything I do forms a whole: yes, completely. I see my work as a big sphere. And individual works are like portholes from which you can look into the sphere, providing different angles on the grotesque and ecstatic contents."

Hell's website, already extensive back then, has now grown to the point where it reinforces the impression that all of his creative endeavors are of a piece. As you click through its various sections, it is impossible to forget both the important role he has played in the history of popular music and the fact that he was always much more than a rock star.

At the same time, he clearly has reservations about the way in which people respond to this portrait of the artist as an indivisible will. In the interview I conducted for this piece, he expressed frustration at the comparative approach most critics take to his art. "It would make me happy if people didn't talk about my music when they talk about my books and they didn't talk about my books when they talk about my music." He stops to reflect. "I know it's inevitable that they will. I know that the two things feed each other. I benefit. Still, it would make me happy if that didn't happen." Even if he does regard his work as one big sphere, he would rather that we picked one porthole to look through and stayed there a while, instead of frantically rushing back and forth to take in as many angles as possible.

AS ANYONE WHO HAS TRANSCRIBED interviews can tell you, speaking in complete sentences is a lot rarer than we are led to believe. Yet Hell usually does. It startles me, then, when he gets stuck explaining the progress he has made on his memoir, his words get stuck. "But I'm—I'm at—I'm at—I'm..." This is the only moment in our hour-long conversation when Hell's struggle for expression becomes distinctly audible. And it could be pure accident. Still, the words that follow this temporary stumble stand out. "I'm at being six, seven, eight, nine years old." Maybe this is where the shock of his homecoming gets a second wind. Maybe this is where he finds it hard to digress.

The biography section of Hell's website extensively documents his life as an artist, but barely mentions his life in Kentucky. In the capsule description of his departure for New York, however—"Meyers convinces his ma (no dad: long dead) nothing will keep him home"—he links to one short piece about that period in his life. But you have to click on the word *dad* to get there: "What My Father Did the First Time I Ran Away." In it, Hell writes that "parents have to become this thing you define yourself against." Family is a point of departure. "Who are you going to be if you're not yourself? I would always just want to

leave them behind." This cool assessment is a prime example of the way Hell wards off sentimentality. Its purpose here, though, is complex. He wants to make it clear that his desire to run away was not his parents' fault. "I had no problems with my family when I was in the third grade. I just wanted to run away to parts unknown, where I could be an unknown too." At the same time, the fact that the piece begins with a photograph of his father and a note explaining that the incident happened "a few months before he died (blood clot to the heart)" implies that he is navigating difficult psychic terrain.

In a 1976 interview with Legs McNeil from the third issue of *Punk* magazine, Hell suggests that his character could be reduced to a single, ever-present feeling, "the desire to get out of here. And any other feelings I have come from trying to analyze, you know, why I want to go away." The opening stanza of "Blank Generation" invokes this same desire to flee: "I was saying let me out of here before I was even born." As he makes clear to McNeil, though, this desire is a permanent condition, not bound to any particular place or time. "See, I always feel uncomfortable." His trouble wasn't with any particular situation, but the very prospect of being situated. "It's not going to any other place or any other sensation, or anything like that, it's just to get out of 'here.'" While his struggles with plot may seem merely technical—many writers find the task daunting—they also reflect his recognition that the act of plotting proceeds from a fixed point.

After Hell finishes describing his idea of organizing an autobiography around stories of running away, he delivers the punch line. "I decided not to do it that way." He doesn't offer an explanation. But other comments he makes in the interview suggest he feels boxed in by defining himself as someone who is always searching for a way out. At one point he quotes a favorite line he recalls reading in Isak Dinesen—"God likes change and a joke"—in an attempt to explain why this trip to Lexington isn't affecting him as much as the last one he made in the 1990s. Writing the memoir has heightened his sense that every attempt to turn doing into being—"I did" into "I am"—is founded on a lie. "It's really interesting to be conscious of yourself as a whole link of time, not just whatever is on your mind at that moment, and you see how there's constant transformation. I used to think that was an illusion, you know, that we really stay the same more than anything else. I felt like, 'Hmmm, I really know how deeply I'm the same person I was when I was seventeen now.' But I'm not really, I'm much meaner and colder and more cynical and so is Lexington."

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER OF *Go Now*, the heroin-addicted narrator writes, "My apartment's like a cave. When I was a kid in Kentucky we used to go cave hunting," adding that, "We'd make a fire and cook up plans to run away and hide in the caves, live there, and only appear to civilization as guerrilla marauders, like Jesse James." Although Hell has insisted that his novel is fiction with enough vehemence to make calling it a *roman à clef* foolhardy, it's striking that the story "What My Father Did the First Time I Ran Away" turns on a similar scheme. Hell and two of his friends decide to sneak out to a cave near their school in the middle of the night. His plans go awry when the supplies he has stashed under his pillow are discovered. Instead of punishing him, though, his father drives him out to the cave at the appointed meeting time. "We waited in the car with the lights turned off, and nothing happened and nothing happened; no one came. We waited until I couldn't complain that we'd left too

soon and then we drove home." By concluding this first running-away story with a description of his father "a few months before he died," striking such a delicate balance between freedom and restraint, Hell complicates the generalization about parents he provides earlier. They may still be "this thing you define yourself against," but that process of self-discovery doesn't always take the form of generational conflict. Sometimes children don't meet the resistance they expect. Sometimes they push only to discover that there's no one pushing back. Sometimes they have to define themselves against a blank.

Richard Hell is wary of belonging. He consistently wards off interviewers' attempts to classify him. But he is interested in determining what belongs to him. And he wants to share it with the world. Most of his recent projects, from *Hot and Cold* to last year's CD compilation *Spurts: The Richard Hell Story* to the memoir he's now writing, have been devoted to collecting work that had been scattered widely. It can be painstaking labor, like herding raindrops into a glass. Thankfully, he has been more than up to the task. By paying attention to Hell, there are plenty of artists who could learn a thing or two about cleaning out their closets. At the same time, I don't get the sense that the order he is imposing on his past has subdued the restlessness that pervades all his art. The songs that slither with the promise of escape, the prose that refuses to stick to any one style, the visuals that remind us that words only go so far—they are all mirrored in the looping filigree of his reflections about what it has meant both to live the life of "Richard Hell" and not to live the life of "Richard Meyers."

In the liner notes to *Spurts*, Robert Christgau and Carola Dibbell write that Hell has "lived for 30 years in the same surprisingly neat East Village walkup, with a stove fit for a tenement museum and a library that clearly owns the place." That apartment is the cave he retreated to after leaving both his surname and his anonymity behind; it is the brightly lit underworld from which he could continue waging the guerrilla war described in that passage from *Go Now*, where the narrator imagines himself and his fellow runaways "popping up like hallucinations in supermarkets and raiding unlocked kitchens to pocket some bread and baloney and batteries, running through backyards, caught only for flashes in peripheral vision"; and it is, in a sense, the name "Richard Hell" itself.

"There was nothing worse than getting stuck though." Hell's narrator is honest enough to provide the reality check for his ecstatic vision of a life underground. "You'd find that you'd pushed yourself in so far that you not only couldn't go further but you couldn't go back. You were wrapped in rock and trapped." The "claustrophobic panic" caving inspires is all too literal. But since it is described here in the wake of that initial simile—"my apartment's like a cave"—which is, in turn, a figure for heroin addiction, the passage also serves as an allegory. Fleeing the safe confines of home shows us a world we could otherwise only conjecture. At the same time, that flight may lead us to places even more confining. Is it worth the risk?

Perhaps the revelations of confinement are their own reward. "Sometimes you gave up, and that was great for a minute or two, dreaming of rot and revenge with your face in the tiny rivulets. Lovelorn jewels inside your eyelids." To be sure, this epiphany will eventually come to an end, allowing the "fear and desperation" to rush back into the void it leaves behind. But

the memory of it will endure. Significantly, the last stanza of "Blank Generation" closes with a similar sentiment, as Hell yearns, "To lose my train of thought and fall into your arms' tracks/And watch beneath the eyelids every passing dot." There's freedom in forgetting who and where you are. "But I'm—I'm at—I'm at—I'm..." Maybe the best we can hope for is to draw a blank now and then, and remember what it felt like. ★

To Hell, with Love

By Cintra Wilson

"The point is that, like Richard Hell says, rock 'n' roll is an arena in which you recreate yourself, and all this blathering about authenticity is just a bunch of crap." —LESTER BANGS

AS A SENSITIVE and impressionable lad, young Richard Meyers of Lexington, Kentucky, fell in with the wrong crowd and succumbed to the peer pressure of infamous nineteenth-century French miscreants:

Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé. Thus corrupted, he changed his name to Richard Hell and hooked up with another misspent youth going by the alias of Tom Verlaine. They moved to New York and the rest is the stuff of lipstick traces and the pimento of vandalized bathrooms...a robust and colorful slice of history, some of which survived while large, important chunks were tossed out or painted over by a mainstream establishment that never really got it.

Hell is credited with inventing punk hair and the safety-pin-as-fashion-accessory. It is generally accepted as fact that Malcolm McLaren spiked up Sid Vicious and Co. to resemble Hell's image and likeness. Hell in turn deflected the credit and/or blame onto his accomplices: "Rimbaud looked like that. Artaud looked like that."

Hell's contrary sensibilities found a home onstage at punk mecca CBGB in 1974, alongside such rock-poet-luminaries as Patti Smith. Hell was, according to varied reports, the coolest guy in town; the burgeoning punk scene's "nonpareil of decadent sophistication." He founded (then had creative differences with, and departed from) a series of seminal punk bands: the Neon Boys, Television (both with Verlaine), the Heartbreakers (with New York Dolls alumni Johnny Thunders and Jerry Nolan), and Richard Hell & the Voidoids, where he performed the unabashed "Love Comes in Spurts" as a subversion of the twee "Love Is All You Need" mores of the hippie era, and the classic punk anthem "Blank Generation"—a modern beheading of the bongo-poetry-and-coffeehouse hit "I Belong to the Beat Generation."

"I completely intended to rearrange things," Hell told the *New Statesman* in 2000.

"Everything was different from, and opposed to, the sort of cultural tendencies, youth styles and ideas that pre-

ceded us.... The idea that you made yourself up, as I did by changing my name and writing this whole meaning into the way I looked, didn't exclude realism, or the feeling of how it's stupid to assume that life is necessarily good."

Hell was pretty, oh, so pretty...but not vacant enough for the kind of fame reserved for the truly famous. (During long narcotic leaves of absence, he may have been rendered void but never vacant.) It is slightly tragic that a rock star of Hell's caliber and influence was either too far underground or too groundbreakingly original to scale the pop charts and cash in forever, but since Hell's creative output was (and is) essentially antithetical to that creative sand trap, the fact that he is relatively unknown to a majority of upright squares isn't terribly surprising.

Hell's proto-punk persona had an extra dose of erotic threat. Frontmen like Henry Rollins embraced a cartoon-style testosterone and presented themselves as amusing, hypervigilant barbarians of a Lil' Rascals, He-Man Woman Haters Club, Anarchy, or at least loud unrest, seemed more important than icky girls—love could wait for the New Mohicans until after City Hall was burning, orangutans were free to roam the Bowery, and all the plastic army men got their heads melted off.

Hell, on the other hand, could tutor any rude boy in dismantling social codes, but, being a poet and a Heartbreaker, had a sexuality that had advanced past sticking girls' braids in his beer can. Hell sang songs like "I'm Your Man" with a Mick Jaggeresque, pole-dancing shamelessness—and the world beyond ultra-hip New York, perhaps, wasn't quite ready for a suave cock-rock Visigoth. (It was, after all, still trying to get over feeling emasculated by the jet-set effeminacy of Jagger.) Patti Smith was ushered into the bright lights of wider fame, while Hell, for mysterious alchemical reasons, froze over.

Holy rock scribe Lester Bangs fired potshots at Hell for looking too good and not living up to what Lester thought was his musical potential: