

Conversing with Blue Apache

By Kenn Hartmann



Far from neon midnight, the campfire shadows flicker on a cluster of pines, a worn-out garage and old yellow frame house on Gunnell Avenue in Bemidji on a warm sweet July evening, the Aurora Borealis dancing like flames in the starlit sky. "These are the final truths as told to me by Blue Apache," thus begins a story that Mister Jams tells, a sober account of his fascinating relationship with the post-apocalyptic biker whose red skin has turned blue due to nuclear radiation or severe melancholy over dismal fate of humanity or whatever dramatic cause could shift a skin hue to blue, the blue of vintage guitars or 57 Chevys, a sinister blue, a gangster blue – the blue of BB King or Lazy Bill Lucas, a blue that'd shock an old lady into reckless abandon or make a penitent man cut loose in the sun.

I lean forward on rough-hewn log bench and stir fire with charred tip of a broken broomstick, having spent last night in Sweet Home Chicago and now feeling road weary and content beneath northern Minnesota stars. I've heard the tales of Mister Jams; he oft recites from his chapbooks on all night binges of poetic wonder. Blue Apache is a raging Native, a consequence of quaint historical perspective, what Mister Jams calls "frantically schizophrenic, well woefully anyways." Mister Jams has been telling this story for years, decades really, I first heard it while frequenting Hungry Mind bookstore in Saint Paul that time a couple criminals rushed in off Grand Avenue requesting sanctuary from cops. Hungry Dave gave it to them. The cops didn't see it that way and busted in to apprehend fugitives, "This ain't a goddamn church," growled one of Saint Paul's finest. Hungry Dave stood helpless. In the future, Mister Jams suggested they seek shelter at Roy McBride's art gallery, The Church of St Vincent Van Gogh and further suggested, "Now that's a goddamn church."

The Blue Apache story is about a planet devastated by cosmic upheavals, our planet actually, the one we live on now, the Earth shook by a ravaging surge of Biblical or at least Graphic Comic book proportions. According to Mister Jams, Blue Apache stands alone, an aboriginal survivalist, the ultimate Bug-Out tinkerer who finds a rusted steel skeleton half buried in arid dust caused by collapse of civilization. Blue Apache emerges from shelter to find a motorcycle rising from an unholy grave in drifting ash of burnt cities, desolation and vast wasteland, a weathered rag lodged like a prayer flag in twisted spokes. Mister Jams says, "Either that or he finds a spaceship. It's a work in progress, an opus, part Mad Max part Star Wars." Mister Jams contends that the language of the story is the story. He compares ancient rhythms to modern verse, "like Willy the Shake or Midnight Blake, Poppa Hem or Jack the Fact, like Joy Harjo or Jim Northrup, perhaps like writing a song – the joy of the augmented 7th."

"Hartmann, so glad you made the Gathering, long way, eh? Chi-town to B'midge on a sickle, I'm overjoyed, by the way, got a 20-spot?" asks Mister Jams, who jumps on his bike and rambles off to get ground coffee for tomorrow's breakfast. When he splits, his brother Sean comes out of the worn-out garage and cracks a beer and says, "No change, coffee always done that to him. Next he'll be reciting poetry." We both gently kick twigs into the fire and laugh. I first met Sean at a Brownstone on Summit Ave in St Paul down the street from F Scott Fitzgerald's pad, where Mister Jams rented from a Macalester English Professor; in those days Mister Jams would read Cyrano soliloquy or passages from Cohen's "Beautiful Losers." At the rehab on Selby/Dale, he'd read from Robbins' "Even Cowgirls get the Blues" and anything by Kerouac. At flophouse on Hennepin in Minneapolis, he'd read aloud "Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness." They no longer sell Bukowski under that title; it's now just "Tales of Ordinary Madness." However, when he lived at Ahbleza House on 19th off Franklin, he was mostly reciting Doctor Who, Bruce Springsteen and Floyd Westerman, although he was constructing a montage of Edward Curtis photos in between gigs.

Standing around fire, sharing beer with Sean, I can see through pines and across fields to lakefront carnival, with Ferris wheel, cotton candy and throngs of Pollyanna's gathered in giddy clusters to celebrate independence. Sean's done traditional Great Plains Sun Dance Ceremony and done time, both accepted coming-of-age rites of contemporary Indigenous population, he also creates wicked guitar riffs and creative beadwork, and is one of those rare individuals who after a millennium of absence would strike a sentence midstride "So?" We talk until fire is low, just embers and hot coals. Hey, I ask, where the hell is Mister Jams? "Probably in his room on computer or playing his axe." Probably inspired, I say. "More likely fueled," says Sean. Hey Sean where's beaded skull I wanted? "Fargo." Sean's got a flat above a nightclub downtown where he works as dishwasher. I say let's go. He considers the perilous dark roads trip two-up on my sickle, "you mean, ride bitch? It's late; there's drunk deer and roads can turn tragic." Yeah, you're right; but can there really be a downtown Fargo? Ted Mahto gets up from his folding aluminum chair. Ted's old, a hundred years old, maybe older, patriarch of the Mahto Clan and he's sat for hours, half sleeping half watching fire dwindle, listening to endless rap of his eldest son Mister Jams, then his younger son Sean, then me. "Kid's these days; hey


Hartmann, make yourself at home, sleep if you want, I'm going to the casino, heh heh" he says bounding down gravel driveway as a car honks out front. Where does Ted get the energy? We wander into the old yellow house. Sean sprawls on the floor to sleep. James Ray Manspeaker gets up from tired sofa and says, "go ahead Unca Kenn, sleep on couch, you can have my spot." Thanks Jimmy Ray, these bones been hurting with age and appreciate the comfort of mottled spring cushions, no matter how lumpy.

Jimmy Ray is blind and moves about room like a burly cat. I can't tell what he's doing, shuffling papers, futzing between phone and computer. What the hell you doing Jimmy Ray? He turns his head side to side like Stevie Wonder, trying to tune his ears to the source of sound, not just my voice, but Sean's soft snoring, the dull wheeze of window fan, a car outside gunning engine. "I'm going to write music, rap music," he says, "I'm going to write poetry." He's rolling a cigarette. "You want a smoke?" Nah. "You wanna know what's strange after I fell off your bike?" I had taken James Ray to the liquor store on the back of my sickle earlier afternoon, when he dismounted cradling twelve-pack, he lost his balance, the cans crashed across the gravel driveway and he did a pratfall, his white cane zigzagging like tent poles. "In the fridge I can't tell the difference between pop and beer cans without cracking open to taste – if it's pop I hide can so nobody knows I opened it. But all those beer cans got gravel dents so I know which ones to open – they should make Braille beer cans and bottles." Yeah well, I'm not sure who 'they' is, but they probably should.

But where the hell is Nates? Kevin Mahto, who I've known since 1970, the middle bro' Kevin, AKA Nates from Fort Yates. Also known as Zippy in the gangster biker world, hardcore old school circle, and right now everyone is nervous about telling me where he's at, perhaps for their own skin not mine, but I'll find him if I have to cover every inch of this town, Bemidji ain't that big, how f'n big can it be? Hell, the first time I met Nates we roared off with abandon, horizons west, headed to the Grand Canyon and Big Sur but got stranded in Omaha or Lincoln first night, hassled by cops for sleeping in bus station. James Ray keeps moving, doesn't sleep; I close my eyes and rest on the lumpy cushion dreaming of pow wows and shapeshifters and the Golden Eternity. Tomorrow will be the day I hook up with Nates.

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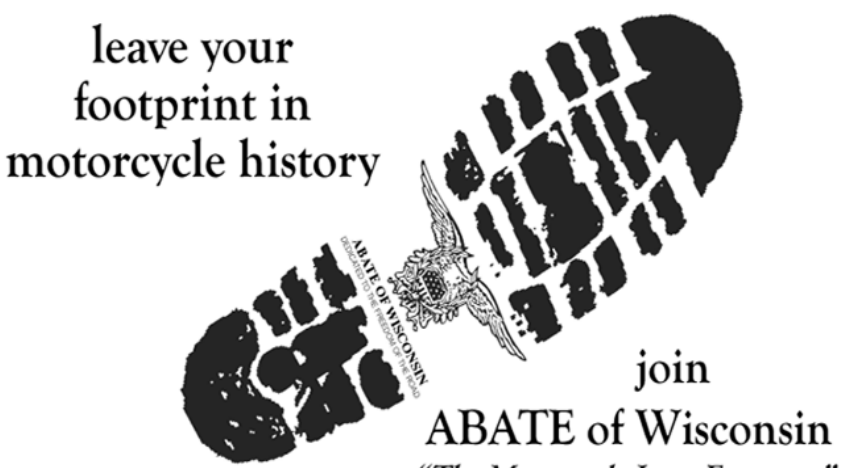
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