

A vertical strip of the American flag is visible on the left side of the cover, showing the stars and stripes.

**JOE BAGEANT**

**KARAOKE**

**NIGHT**

**IN**

**BUSH'S**

**AMERICA**

ColdType



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# KARAOKE NIGHT IN BUSH'S AMERICA

*73 virgens in arab heaven and not a dam one in this bar!*  
– Men's room wall, Burt's Westside Tavern

I KNOW it makes me a dinosaur, but I still think there is much to be learned in America's small neighborhood taverns. I call it my "learning through drinking" program. Here are some things I have learned at Burt's Westside Tavern:

1. Never shack up with a divorced woman who is two house payments behind and swears you are the best sex she ever had
2. Never eat cocktail weenies out of the urinal, no matter how big the bet gets.

Learning through drinking was never dull. But when karaoke came to American bars it got even more entertaining, especially at Burt's where some participants get gussied up for their three weekly minutes of stardom. One of them is Dink, a stubble-faced 56-year-old guy presently dressed like Waylon Jennings. However, Dink's undying claim to fame here in Winchester is not his Waylon imitation, which sucks. It is that he beat up the boxing chimpanzee at the carnival in 1963. This is a damned hard thing to do because chimpanzees are several times stronger than a human and capable of such rage that the pugilistic primate wore a steel muzzle. Every good old boy in this place swears Dink pounded that chimpanzee so hard it climbed up the cage bars and refused to come back down and that Dink won the hundred dollars. I don't

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know. I wasn't there to see it because my good Christian family did not approve of attending such spectacles. One thing for sure, though. Dink is tough enough to have done it. *(By the way, a note to readers who email me asking if names like Dink and Pootie are fictional devices. Hell no! Not only do we have a Dink and a Pootie here, we also have folks named Gator, Fido and Tumbug – whom we simply call Bug.)*

Anyway, with this older crowd of karaoksters from America's busted-up laboring lumpen, you can count on at least one version of "Good Hearted Woman" or a rendition of "Coal Miner's Daughter," performed with little skill but a lot of beery heart and feeling. And when it comes to heart and feeling, the best in town is a woman named Dottie. Dot is 59 years old, weighs almost 300 pounds and sings Patsy Cline nearly as well as Patsy sang Patsy. Dot can sing "Crazy" and any other Patsy song ever recorded and a few that went unrecorded. Dot knows Patsy's unrecorded songs because she knew Patsy personally, as did lots of other people still living in Winchester. We know things such as the way she was treated by the town's establishment, called a drunken whore and worse, and snubbed and reviled during her life at every opportunity, and is still today sniffed at by the town's business and political class. But Patsy, who took shit off no one, knew cuss words that would make a Comanche blush, and well, she was one of us. Tough and profane. Patsy grew up on our side of the tracks and suffered all the insults life still inflicts upon working people here. Hers was a hard life.

### **The fat lady sings, then drops dead**

Dot's life has been every bit as hard as Patsy's. Harder because she has lived twice as long as Patsy Cline managed. By the time my people hit 60 they look like a bunch of hypertensive red-faced toads in a phlegm coughing contest. Fact is, we are even unhealthier than we look. Doctors tell us that we have blood in our cholesterol and the cops tell us there is alcohol in that blood. True to our class, Dottie is disabled by heart trouble, diabetes and several other diseases. Her blood pressure is so high the doctor at first thought the pressure device was broken. Insurance costs her as much as rent. Her old man makes \$8 an hour washing cars at a dealership, and if everything goes just right they have about \$55 a week for groceries, gas and everything else. But if an extra expense as small as \$30 comes in, they compensate by not filling one of Dot's prescriptions – or two or three of them – in which case she gets sicker and sicker until they can afford to refill the prescriptions again. At 59, these repeat-



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ed lapses into vessel-popping high blood pressure and diabetic surges pretty much guarantee that she won't collect Social Security for long after she reaches 63. If she reaches 63. One of these days it will truly be over when the fat lady sings.

Dot started working at 13. Married at 15. (Which is no big deal. Throw in "learned to pick a guitar at age six" and you would be describing half the Southerners in my social class and generation.) She has cleaned houses and waited tables and paid into Social Security all her life. But for the last three years Dottie has been unable to work because of her health. (Did I mention that she is slowly going blind to boot?) Dot's congestive heart problems are such she will barely get through two songs tonight before nearly passing out.

Yet the local Social Security administrators, cold Southern Calvinist hardasses who treat federal dollars as if they were entirely their own, have said repeatedly that Dot is capable of fulltime work. To which Dot once replied, "Work? Lady, I cain't walk nor half see. I cain't even get enough breath to sing a song. What the hell kinda work you think I can do? Be a tire stop in a parkin' lot?" Not one to be cowed by mere human misery, the administrator had Dot bawling her eyes out before she left that office. In fact, Dottie cries all the time now. Even so, she will sing one, maybe two songs tonight. Then she will get down off the stage with the aid of her cane and be helped into a car and be driven home.

Although my people seem to step on their own dicks (I couldn't think of a female metaphor) every time they get near polling place, it is not entirely because we are drunken inbreds, although it is a contributing factor. The truth is that Dottie would vote for any candidate, black, white, crippled blind or crazy, that she thought would actually help her. I know because I have asked her if she would vote for a president who wanted a nationalized health care program?"

"Vote for him? I'd go down on him!"

Voter approval doesn't get much stronger than that.

But no candidate, Republican or Democrat, is going to offer nationalized health care, not the genuine article. Of course, we expect the Republicans to be pricks, but the Democrats are no better. Guys like John Kerry think they can stay in Washington and BUY progress with the money they take from health care industry lobbyists buying off both parties with campaign contributions. John Kerry does not know anybody in Dottie's class. John Edwards claims to, but he's not very convincing to these people. As Dink puts it, "Neither one of 'em gets me hard." If Dot is lucky, a

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Democratic pollster might call her, take her political temperature over the phone to be fed into some computer. But that is about as much contact as our system is willing to have with a 300 pound diabetic woman with a small bird and a husband too depressed to get out of his TV chair other than to piss or stumble off to his car washing job.

### **Get sick, get well, Congress says to go to hell**

Americans are supposed to be so disgustingly healthy, rich and happy. But I have seen half-naked Indians in Latin America eating grubs and scrubbing their penis sheathes on river rocks who were a whole lot happier. And in some cases, more cared for by their governments. Once in Sonora, Mexico I got very sick among the Sari Indians and needed a doctor. Every damned Sari Indian had nationalized health care, but the American crapping his guts out behind their shacks, a man who made a hundred times their annual income, couldn't even afford health insurance in his own country. I wish I could say they also had a native cure for dysentery, but they didn't.

Actually, I can think of one politician who stands up for people like Dot and programs like nationalized health care. But he is busy right now being president of Venezuela. Show me a political party willing to put the people on the streets door to door, which is what it will take to mobilize the votes of the working poor, and I will show you one that can begin to kick a hole in that wall between Capitol Hill and the people it is supposed to be serving. But we both know that is not about to happen. Parties do not lead revolutions. They follow them. And then only if things get entirely too hot for them. The Democrats began to support the civil rights movement only after the bombings and lynchings and fire hoses and marchers caused enough public outrage that they realized there were probably some votes to be wrung out of the whole sorry goddam spectacle playing out on American TV screens. That was back when a Watts-type city burn-down, a good old-fashioned revolt could still get Washington's attention. I suspect nowadays it would be one of those national emergencies that Homeland Security would handle.

But Dink and Dot are the least likely Americans ever to rise up in revolt. Dissent doesn't seep deeply enough into America to reach places like Winchester, Virginia. Never has. (Even most blacks here are still pretty much sir-ing and maaming the white folks and staying in their own part of town.) Yet, unlikely candidates that Dot

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and Dink are for revolution, they have nonetheless helped fuel the right-wing revolution with their votes, the right-wing revolution that is said to be rooted in the culture wars neither one of them has ever heard of. I often think the culture wars are just more educated liberal silliness, cocktail chat that never touches the heart of the problem – which is that gutless soft liberals refuse to cross class lines and meet their suffering brothers and sisters face-to-face right here on this earth. The Republicans did a great job of this in grassroots organizing, and they were selling bullshit and a screwjob. Imagine what an honest populist effort might do.

In the old days, class warfare was between the rich and poor, and that's the kind of class war I can sink my teeth into. These days it is clearly between the educated and the uneducated, which of course, does make it a culture war, if that's the way you choose to describe it. But the truth is that nobody is going to reach Dink and Dot or anyone else on this side of town with some elitist sounding jabber about culture wars. It's hard enough reaching them with the plain old fact that the Republicans are the party of the dumb rich. As far as they are concerned, dumb people like themselves have been known to become very rich. Take Ronnie Fulk, the realtor we all grew up with. He's dumber than owl shit but now worth a few million. And he still drinks Bud Lite and comes into Burt's once in a while. Besides, any one of us here at Burt's could very well win the Powerball lottery and become just like Ronnie Fulk.

### **"It ain't all Boosh's fault"**

It's gonna be a tough fight for progressives. We are going to have to pick up this piece of road kill with our bare hands. We are going to have to explain everything about liberalism to the people at Burt's because their working poor lives have always been successfully contained in cultural ghettos such as Winchester by a combination of God rhetoric, money, cronyism, and the capitalist state. It will take a true effort, because they understand being poor and in some respects even accept it as their lot. Right down to getting sneered at by the Social Security lady. But if we talk about their "exploitation by the corporate state," they are going to say "Git ta fuck outta here!" And the revolution which never seems to get started will be again cancelled due to lack of interest on the part of the oppressed. Naturally it is tempting, even for me, to say, "Fuck'em. Let them lie in the bed they made for themselves by voting for people like Bush." Then I remember that it was the worst in our collective national

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character that made their bed for them long ago. Like Dink says: “Except for when I was in the Army, I never had health insurance in my life. That ain’t George Boosh’s fault.” It’s not anybody’s fault that there are 44 million people like Dink and Dot. That’s the free market system – the weak ones die early and hard. And besides, who cares about a fat lady who sings like some dead hillbilly?

It’s one hour before closing time, and if there is one classy thing I do in this life, it is never to be the last customer out of a bar. It only took 40 years to learn that. So I pay up and head for the door and Carol the bartender calls out “GET A CAB BAGEANT.” You’re damned straight I’ll get a cab. This town has public drunkenness laws and born-again Christian cops who take smug pride in enforcing them. . . .humble public servants who will throw you against a police car and make your joints scream if you so much as giggle. Then next day you WILL make the local paper under police notes. No thanks.

Fortunately, the local cab company – which we call “dial a derelict” because of its halfway house resident drivers – is next to Burt’s. So you lean out the door and wave at the drivers watching for a fare. Usually we know the driver, or went to school with one of his or her relatives. And always we can tell by the last name on the cab registration sheet on the visor that the driver is one of us – a fellow link of flesh and blood in the chain of common laborers stretching back over two centuries. It feels familiar and good. Sometimes this symbiosis between the wet drunks at Burt’s and the dry drunks at the cabstand seems to be the last superbly functioning human thing in this town. Meanwhile, Dottie’s voice can be heard faintly leaking out onto the street:

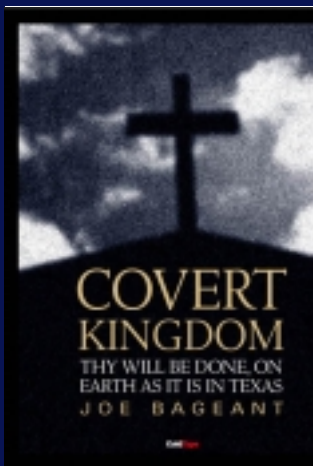
*I’m crazeeeeeeeeeee, crazy for feeling so lonely  
Crazy, crazy for feelin so bluuuuuuuuue...*

And those last notes just slide away like a silk scarf dropped onto some stairway in the heart. It is so utterly human how all of us – me, the cabby, Dot – get what we need from each other in that moment round midnight when we share the common ghosts of this old town.

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**SON OF A  
LABORING  
GOD** Gettin'  
down  
and  
dumb  
at  
Burt's  
Tavern



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DOMINION  
OF THE  
LEASH**

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**DRIVING ON THE  
BONES OF GOD**



You and I  
may get  
smoked, but  
the fat cats  
will still dine  
on peacock  
tongues

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