




A WEEK IN INAUGURATION HELL

A Lost Child Amidst the Boomocrats

BY MARK LEYNER  PHOTOGRAPHED BY CARL DE KEYSER



WHO'S IN, WHO'S OUT: THE TICKET-LESS MASSES, ABOVE, PARTAKE OF THE FESTIVITIES ALFRESCO. INSIDERS STAY WARM AT CHIC PARTIES, SUCH AS THIS SAXOPHONE (WHAT ELSE?) SERENADED RECEPTION HOSTED BY TALK SHOW TITAN JOHN McLAUGHLIN.



THE CLIMBERS AND THE GRIFTERS: WHEN MAYA ANGELOU WASN'T EXPOUNDING ON TREES, WOULD-BE PARADE WATCHERS WERE ATOP THEM. NO FUR COATS FOR ANJELICA HUSTON, RIGHT, AMONG HOLLYWOOD'S CONTINGENT.



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have been to Washington to see the King. To see the King's coronation. The King of the Baby Boomers. The King of the Boomocrats. Some intrepid members of the Fourth Estate have even taken to calling him the new King of Rock 'n' Roll, thanks to his indefatigable sax tooting at last month's inaugural balls. What could this possibly augur for rock and roll? Beyond considerations of geopolitical strategy and fiscal policy, this is the question that America's post-boom generation is muttering under its grungy breath. What has a week of being force-fed the soft-rock pabulum of Barry Manilow, Barbra Streisand, Kenny Loggins, Dionne Warwick, and Michael Bolton done to us as a nation? What has this week of relentlessly televised, federally sanctioned Adult Contemporary Format done to the future of rock and roll? Killed it, no doubt. But rock dies frequently, exhuming itself each time to roam and terrify the earth once again. Rock and roll has always been vampiric—libidinal and anarchic, quaffing blood and traveling by night—so I suppose it needed a stake through the heart to effectively kill it once and for all. And here it finally happened—a stake the size of the Washington Monument driven right through its swollen, plaque-clogged heart. End of story. DOA. Stop thinking about tomorrow. It's the first casualty of the Clinton Administration. The Boomocracy's first boom has been lowered.

I wish I could write, without qualms: "Whooping baby boomers descended upon Washington like a triumphant clan, led by their warlord, William Jefferson Clinton." But the taxonomy is too sloppy. What defines a baby boomer, beyond simply someone who is born after World War II? Is it merely an astrological macro-category? Or is there a unique sensibility that these baby boomers share? Did growing up on "Hazel," "Sea Hunt" and "The Andy Williams Show" have some qualitative effect that cut across socioeconomic strata?



HALLUCINATIONS AND OTHER SIGHTS: THE AUTHOR THOUGHT HE SAW HIS HIGH SCHOOL COACH AT THE REUNION ON THE MALL. WHAT WAS EVERYONE ELSE, LEFT, LOOKING FOR? OFTEN FOR THEIR KIDS, RESIDING AT THE TENT FOR LOST CHILDREN.





OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES: PETER HORTON AND SONGWRITER MARILYN BERGMAN. HORTON'S MESSAGE TO CLINTON: GET A VISION AND STAND FOR IT. A SORT OF CLINTON POPSICLE LOOMS ABOVE THE PARADE CROWD, RIGHT.



I'm skeptical. But I'm too attached to my neologism "Boomocrat" to abandon the notion altogether, so, let me try to sketch, with an anthropologist's dispassion, the characteristics of the hard-core Boomocrat reveler. Smug in victory; sanctimonious; given, on occasion, to insufferable pontificating, and prone to frequent use of the pronouns *we* and *our* as in "*We* have taken *our* country back," the Boomocrat enjoys hugging, recovering, searching for the child within *and* winning. The Boomocrat is obsessed with comparative age—this last trait best exemplified by film mogul Peter Guber's classic comment: "This is the first time a President is younger than Mick Jagger." Be careful, the Boomocrat can become belligerent when provoked—there was talk of burning a wooden ying-yang on the lawn of Aretha Franklin for her transgressive flaunting of a Russian sable coat at the Inaugural Celebration Concert at the Lincoln Memorial.

ON THE PLANE INTO WASHINGTON, I SAT NEXT TO A TEEN-AGE GIRL WHO WAS a member of an organization called the Congressional Youth Leadership Council, which was participating in the Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference. She was a sweet kid—the plane was full of sweet kids. I don't like flying with sweet kids; I think it's an almost irresistible temptation for the Grim Reaper to scuttle a jet load of freshly scrubbed, goody-goody 4-H types on their way to a presidential inauguration. After I finished furtively eyeballing the orientation brochure in her lap ("Bring aspirin, cold relievers and Band-Aids for blisters . . . I agree that I will not use tobacco, alcohol or non-prescription controlled substances"), we struck up a conversation. Her father worked in a nuclear plant.

"Just like Homer Simpson," I said.

"Gosh," she replied, after considering the remark, "I never thought of my dad as a cartoon character before."

New Jersey-based writer Mark Leyner, the irreverent author of "Et Tu, Babe" (Harmony Books), has previously observed nine inaugurations—all from the safety of his living room.

"It's all part of growing up," I said reassuringly.

She was terribly excited about the inauguration, so I teased her a bit.

"C'mon," I said, opening her apple juice container (a task made impossible for her by the length of her star-spangled press-on nails), "don't you think Clinton's momentum is totally shot going into this thing? I mean you've got a Cabinet packed with lawyers and influence peddlers, you've got a commerce secretary nominee, Ron Brown, who was a partner in a law firm that represented the notorious Bank of Credit and Commerce International, and when it comes to recusing himself from matters involving former clients, the guy refuses to adopt the ethical standards accepted by Bush nominees, for Christ's sake! And then there's attorney general-designate Zoe Baird, who violated the law by hiring undocumented immigrants. And furthermore, this entire kitsch-fest you're about to attend is being underwritten by corporations who'll be turning their chips in for favors within a week. Look, kid, it's like this: The American electorate was sitting in a bar, and as the campaign progressed and the electorate got drunker and drunker with despair, Clinton started looking better and better, so we took him home. And now it's the next morning and we've woken up in bed with the guy and he doesn't look so good, you know what I'm saying?"

"Gosh, I've never really been in a bar."

I started to feel as if my teasing had become corrupting, so I wished her well and buried my head back in De Sade's "Justine."

ALONG WITH 300,000 FELLOW AMERICANS, I WADE THROUGH ACRES OF COLD mud to attend the star-studded Inaugural Celebration Concert at the Lincoln Memorial. With the ideological fervor of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, sections of the crowd yell "Great taste!" and "Not filling!" back and forth to each other, killing time until James Earl Jones introduces Clinton. This he does with the same magisterial sonorities that he employs hawking the Yellow Pages. Kenny Rogers sings the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as—I'm assured

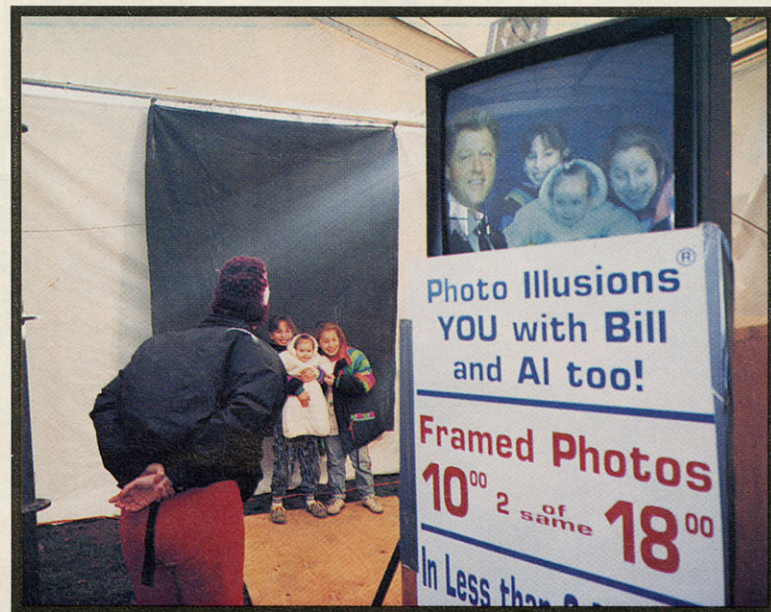


LOWERING THE BOOMERS: JACK VALENTI, LOBBYIST SUPREME, IS SPOOKED BY THE MEDIA EN ROUTE TO THE ROCK THE VOTE PARTY. FUNDAMENTALISTS, LEFT, WOULD CERTAINLY LIKE TO HAUNT CLINTON.





VIRTUAL REALITY: BIG BROTHER WAS ON SCREENS EVERYWHERE, INCLUDING THE GAY AND LESBIAN VICTORY FUND PARTY, LEFT. AT THE REUNION ON THE MALL, RIGHT, ILLUSIONS COME CHEAPER IN TWOS.



by the nitwit beside me who pokes me in the carotid artery with his flag—it's never been sung before.

Opera diva Kathleen Battle and Kenny G (whose album "Breathless" is No. 2 on the Washington charts, right behind "The Bodyguard" soundtrack album) perform an unprecedented duet. Ted Danson and Bob Dylan appear, but do not perform a duet. (This is not unprecedented.) The crowd turns momentarily ugly when the electronic chirping of a child's Game Boy threatens to drown out Michael Bolton. Thankfully, security police descend on the kid, crush the offensive toy, and deport the entire family. Aretha Franklin, in her infamous fur, does a volcanic rendition of "Respect" that has Vice President Al Gore dancing in his chair. Gore's terpsichorean style is unprecedented and can only be compared to a crash dummy being defibrillated.

What's most fascinating about this event is that the vast majority of the 300,000 attendees do not really see it. There's a huge scaffolding for television cameras and lights between the performers and most of the audience. We are all watching it on giant TV screens with a gaudy HBO logo set perpetually in the lower right-hand corner. Not only does this create a symbolic dissonance between a supposedly public event and its private ownership, but it creates an ontological dissonance as well. We are all present at the event, but not *really* there. The event has no reality for us. We are in the realm of the telereal. This is consistent with how Americans currently experience their lives. Instead of the antiquated mammalian sense organs, it is the television screen's pixels that confer the imprimatur of reality. Mothers, doubting the validity of their own labor agonies, routinely demand that their children's births be videotaped so they can be viewed later and verified. That venerable conundrum, *If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, has it really fallen?* has been replaced by, *If state troopers beat your mother to a pulp and nobody videotapes it, has she really been beaten to a pulp?*

Then there's the overarching issue of proprietorship and profit. Given the existence of a pay-per-view presidency, can a pay-per-view emergency broadcast

system be far behind?

As we retreat through the mud, a plaintive call echoes from the loudspeakers, directing parents to the Tent for Lost Children.

AN INAUGURAL MOMENT: I THINK I SEE MY OLD HIGH SCHOOL BOXING COACH outside the Toad the Wet Sprocket concert at America's Reunion on the Mall.

A WELL-MEANING SOUL GIVES ME A PRESS TICKET FOR MONDAY NIGHT'S American Gala at the Capitol Center in Landover, Md. This is a sold-out dress rehearsal for Tuesday night's by-invitation-only Presidential Gala that will be broadcast on CBS. There will be, of course, a glittering roster of superstars from every realm of the lite music industry: Streisand, Elton John, Manilow, Bolton, Fleetwood Mac, and even Judy Collins, who persists in shamelessly referring to Joni Mitchell's "Chelsea Morning" as "my music."

I hail a cab to RFK Stadium, where buses to the Capitol Center are leaving every few minutes. (Protecting the possibility of a future appointment as attorney general, I've been requiring each taxi driver to produce a green card to ensure that I have not, however fleetingly, employed an undocumented immigrant.)

Upon arriving in Landover, I discover that this press ticket is worthless. It does not allow me into the event itself, but merely into something called a "press tent." Performers might or might not appear in the poorly lit, unheated tent for brief interviews; otherwise there are three large television monitors on which reporters can view portions of the performance. The press becomes testy, surrounding a representative from the inaugural staff.

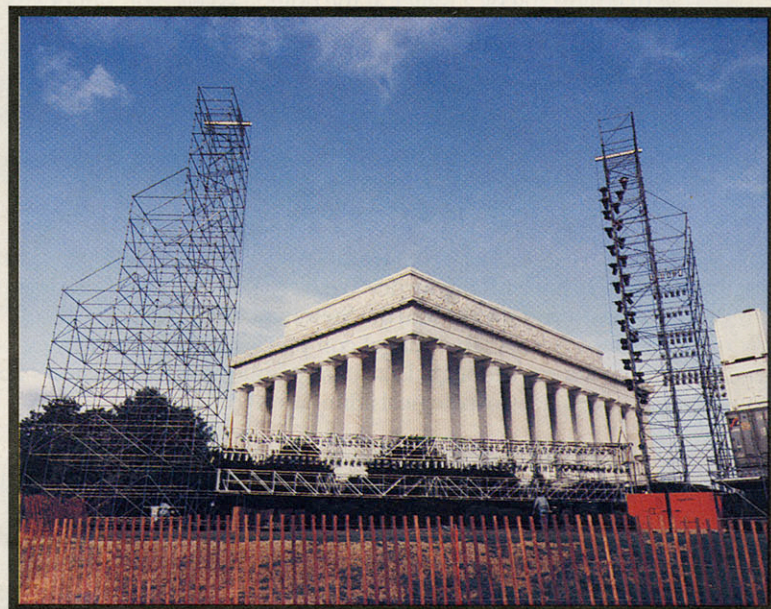
"We were told as recently as an hour ago that we'd have complete access to the gala," complains a shivering journalist from San Jose.

"Wrong," replies the inaugural rep.

"Can't we talk to any celebrities?" whines another shivering reporter, whose press credentials dangle from her neck like an American Indian medicine bag.



REALM OF THE TELEREAL: FOR LINCOLN MEMORIAL CONCERTGOERS, THEIR VIEW BLOCKED BY SCAFFOLDING, THE EVENT WAS A GERTRUDE STEIN CONUNDRUM, THERE AND NOT THERE. NOTHING COULD POP CELEBRATORY SPIRITS, LEFT.





THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE DAMNED: CHRISTOPHER REEVE AND OTHER SUPERHEROES HIGHTAILED IT TO THE ROCK THE VOTE PARTY. WAS THE INAUGURAL JUST A "BIG CHILL" REVISITED? SOME PARADE-GOERS FELT LEFT OUT IN THE COLD.



"I shouldn't even be telling you this," says the inaugural rep, "but two members of Fleetwood Mac may—and I repeat *may*—be coming by later for brief—and I repeat *brief*—interviews."

"I don't understand why we can't go into the arena, there are plenty of empty seats," persists another reporter.

"Look folks," says the official, adopting a more conciliatory tone, "imagine you were Barry Manilow or Michael Bolton and you were rehearsing a number for the first time, would you appreciate a bunch of reporters reviewing that?"

This hypothetical proposition—imagining I was Barry Manilow or Michael Bolton—so exceeds my cognitive capabilities that I decide at that very instant to return to Washington. But when I inquire as to when the next shuttle is departing, I'm told that none will be leaving until the end of the gala—in five hours.

I escape from Landover via cab and subway train, emerging an hour later from the fantastic Dupont Circle metro station. I can't recommend this metro station highly enough. One ascends a slow-moving escalator through an inclining concrete tunnel, as if through a mammoth MRI scanner, toward an ellipse of stellar night sky. Trust me when I tell you that it is one of the most stirring, sublime subway-exiting experiences you will ever have. And bring the kids.

"JUST AS MEMBERS OF AN INCOMING CABINET MUST AGREE TO RECUSE THEMSELVES from matters involving former clients, future Presidents may be forced to sign an agreement that they will never—under any circumstances, including national security crises—reunite Fleetwood Mac again."

I am saying this to my cabdriver as we head toward the Rock the Vote party on Tuesday night. I realize that he speaks only Hindi, but soliloquizing in cabs has become an effective means of organizing my thoughts as I endure this chaotic week of parties and galas.

The Rock the Vote bash is being held at the Sheraton Carlton Hotel. There I'm immediately engulfed by ebullient women from the Arkansas Travelers, who have enlisted me to help them recognize celebrities. (The only one they can identify without assistance is Henry Winkler.) During a lull, I ponder a Zen koan given to me that morning by a waiter at the hotel: "Would you rather kiss someone with braces or someone with no teeth?"

Before darting off to the Madison Hotel for a reception being given by talk show host John McLaughlin, I poke my head into the Rock the Vote press room.

Peter Horton: "Clinton and Gore need to establish their vision . . . take hold of it and stand for it."

Christine Lahti: "It's our turn."

Our?

THE MCLAUGHLIN RECEPTION IS MARKED BY A MORE MATURE AND DIGNIFIED ambience. I chat with Sigourney Weaver, New York Daily News publisher Mort Zuckerman and my pal Martha Stewart. I brush past Sen. Strom Thurmond. I have never seen such a fungal complexion on a human being before. Absolutely fascinating. Although I have long abhorred the senator's antebellum politics, I have a new mycological admiration for the man.

IT'S INAUGURATION MORNING. I HAVE DEVELOPED A STRANGE RASH ON MY buttocks. Perhaps it's the result of contact with Thurmond, or something I picked up from a toilet seat at one of the galas, or perhaps it is merely the result of internalized excitement as the historic transfer of power approaches.

Beyond the glitz and piety of the week's events, beyond the arrogance of some of this new Administration's more rabid devotees, beyond the genuine

yearning of Americans that Bill Clinton succeed in revitalizing this country, my thoughts, as I observe the proceedings, are with Chelsea. As I focus upon her, asleep during Maya Angelou's interminable poem about talking trees, I can't help thinking that she will be the lightning rod of this new government.

She is, after all, the "inner child" of the Administration. How it responds to her may tell us more than anything else about where this country is headed over the next four years. Will she be allowed, for instance, to eat genetically engineered tomatoes? What if she gets a crush on a skinhead she meets at the Sidwell Friends School? Will Bill and Hillary allow her to date a boy they disapprove of—will the "diversity thing" extend this far? What if Chelsea overheard Warren Christopher brief Clinton on use of the nuclear launch codes? Adolescents snoop, it's perfectly normal. And then there's the matter of the telephone. Chelsea's going to need a "teen line." Clinton can't allow a late-night teen-age yakfest to tie up the family phone. What if an errant Tomahawk missile mistakenly levels a pediatric hospice in Baghdad and Clinton needs to call Tarik Aziz and apologize. And Chelsea is *still* on the phone. So she's got to have that teen line. But who's going to pay that teen phone bill? The American taxpayer? What about its effect on the deficit? There are arduous times ahead, and we must all pull together.

LATE THAT NIGHT, THERE WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY CLIMAX TO THE MTV Ball that television viewers were not privileged to witness. An astonishing procession of musicians and celebrities including Don Ho, LaToya Jackson, Wolf Blitzer, Ike Turner, Jerry Vale, Joey Buttafuoco, Johnny Rotten, Kathie Lee Gifford, Yo-Yo Ma, Slash, Billy Idol, the original members of the Archies, Freddy Fender, Bix Beiderbecke and Japan's princess-to-be, Masako Owada, joined by revelers from La Leche League Ball, snaked through the streets of Washington like a New Orleans funeral procession, playing "Don't Stop (Thinking About Tomorrow)."

I followed the procession for a while and then drifted off by myself. I'd become profoundly disoriented. "This is Washington, D.C.," I reassured myself. "This is where Marion Barry *did* inhale; I saw it on America's Funniest FBI Surveillance Videos, so I *know* it happened, I *know* it happened, I *know* it happened," I repeated, clicking the heels of my muddy Reeboks three times.

My rash was spreading. I tried to buoy my spirits with malicious fantasies. (Days after a White House soothsayer discovers that the statue at the Lincoln Memorial had developed a massive fontanelle and warns the President of its ominous portent, Hillary Rodham Clinton—with the support of Gen. Colin Powell and a cabal of mutinous officers—leads a military coup that topples her husband. Hours after Hillary declares herself President-for-life, doctors across the country report an epidemic of impotence among American men. Bill Clinton is exiled to the south of France, where he spends his days swilling Dom Perignon and stuffing \$100 bills into strippers' panties. Hillary, who has become a latter-day Joan of Arc, personally leads military invasions of Canada, Mexico and South America, pursuant to her dream of "One Big America." Chelsea, meanwhile, is left home alone, with a menu of microwave meals magnetized to the fridge.) But it didn't work; I still felt morose. All the jubilant togetherness of the past week, the glee, the optimism, the mob utopianism, the generational jingoism ("this earth, this realm, this Boomland") . . . it had all left me feeling terribly alienated, disaffected, deracinated, depleted, and weird.

I spent several hours going up and down the escalators in the Dupont Plaza metro station. I wandered the streets until dawn and ultimately found myself at the Tent for Lost Children, where I intend to remain until 1996.