

*Ring of Bone: Collected Poems*  
By Lew Welch  
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In conversation, Lew Welch often indicated that he wrote and revised more for his public performances than for publication. Because of the intense refinement of his performance skills, he became a seminal figure amongst the West Coast Beats, and a key figure in promoting the spoken word for American literature and culture. As Gary Snyder notes in his Foreward, “As for poetics, jazz musical phrasing of American speech is one of Lew Welch’s clearest contributions.... he turns sometimes to street-talk, street jive, blues, bop rhythms, and can score it on the page. This is done without cuteness or obscurity” (12). This welcome new edition of *Ring of Bone* brings back a pioneer of this Beat art form for our current consideration and celebration.

During a Naropa University lecture, Philip Whalen remarked how he shared Welch’s goals: “I depend upon on music for architectonics...My sense of the shape of words and how they go together. [My musical sense of writing] is in my experience of different sizes and weights and the time that you have to create” (Naropa Audio Archives 76P069-070). To illustrate these three aspects of sizes, weight, and timing, Whalen demonstrated Welch’s habits for revisions via jazz scatting, rearranging lines, and rhythms and rhymes, while substituting placeholder sounds much as songwriters do when at a loss for the right choice of words. Whalen regarded him with respect because Lew often memorized his drafts and recited his latest revisions. Kerouac was a tremendous influence with his

sketches of impressionistic improvs, overheard bar riffs and mood scenes, and subsequent writing refinements of these in letters, notebooks, journals, and manuscript drafts. Like him, Welch habitually rehearsed his brainstormed ideas in letters, shoring up his hopes for ideal and yet artistic life styles. Jack's fantasies of being a sage in isolation rang true for Welch as a cure for his anxieties. Actually this hermit solution masked "a geographical cure" for their alcoholism, to use an Alcoholics Anonymous term. And that remedy seldom succeeds.

In 1957, Welch moved to San Francisco. The hippest comedians around North Beach were Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley. Their records and routines were prized and memorized. Their improvisations applied jazz /hipster argot to everyday human traits while simultaneously acting out rapidly shifting casts of characters, from down and dirty citizens to celestial gods and Presidents. In hindsight, it seems obvious that Lew's quick-change voiceovers foreshadow future monologists like George Carlin. Both performers relied on counterculture foils for examining common middle-class conundrums, anathemas, and clichés.

The subjects of Welch's stylish riffs were intended for young, college-educated audiences. For those souls emerging in the 1960s from the savagely conformist 1950s, his poems shared common hopes, perplexities, and doubts about how to realize a satisfying, supportive, and yet loose life style. He was an excellent mimic and singer. His most entertaining poems featured mock confessions backed up by quick and rueful cameos of self-deprecation. These talents provided a steadier livelihood than publication

for Welch, because his poetry readings were more available and hence more lucrative. For my fellow young San Francisco writers, I can testify that his performances set stylistic benchmarks for our communal future where poetry became integral to public celebrations.

His stylish works also catered to a new generation's appetite for absurdity. Readers and audiences recognized themselves in his baffled and vulnerable characters, and they were delighted by the way his routines played off his self-criticisms, faux innocence and neurotic tics. His charismatic mix of confusions, sheepish confessions and conflicting impulses are on display in his "Answer to a Question from P.W":

In Mexico I'll finish the novel I'll write, rough, while  
fire-watching in Oregon.  
The problem is what kind of typewriter to pack in?

I ought to be able to live 6 months in Mexico on what I  
earn at the Mountain in 4.  
They say you can buy dirty books down there.

Since they give you horses to pack things in, how would it  
be if I took in a big old typewriter and left it there?  
They don't give you horses to pack things out.

Going to Mexico by motorcycle would be the coolest, but  
Thoreau warns against any undertaking that  
requires new clothes.  
Walking is pure, but I haven't achieved simplicity yet.  
I'll never willingly hitchhike again.

Next winter I can buy Snyder's Austin for \$200, but how  
can I get the money together?  
They repossessed my Oldsmobile.  
I've never made the foreign-country scene.

Like the sign over the urinal: "You hold your future

in your hand.”  
Or what the giant black whore once said, in the back of my cab:

*“Man, you sure do love diggin’ at my  
titties now stop that. We get where  
We going you can milk me like a  
Holstein, but I gotta see your  
money first.” (54)*

Besides setting benchmarks for young writers’ readings, Welch also anticipated new venues for poetry away from academe: bars, clubs, concerts, union halls, and community centers. But he was conflicted, because Reed College’s intense intellectual regime also had strained his self-confidence. He constantly critiqued his work to friends, insecure about his intellectual status. However, in Welch’s life, concepts from art and philosophy, anthropology or biology mixed with popular songs, graffiti, advertisements and slogans. Welch had worked in marketing, so such commercial techniques came easy. Some thought this *déclassé*. In defense of his appropriations from “middle brow” and “low brow” sources he wrote: “That is language. Speech. The din of a Tribe doing its business. You can’t control it, you can’t correct it, you can only listen to it and use it as it is” (234). His Bay Area admirers circulated a rumor that, as an aficionado of Gertrude Stein, he invented a catchy Raid insecticide slogan: *Raid Kills Bugs Dead*.

His audience felt most included when his poems simulated rich intimate conversations. Some passages stuck in their minds as tenaciously as pop song hooks, so Welch’s phrases became codes among his fans. Many were supplied by his performance favorite “A Round of English”:

It was all about a lady who gave vulgar soirees.  
It was all about whales, and a harpoon sharp enough to shave  
With. And, "Look,"  
If you're really interested,  
Which I seriously began to doubt,  
You'll get it from the guys he stole it from."

*She baréd her bosom  
I whopped out m'knife  
Carved my initials on her thin breast bone.*

"Thin brass done, beautiful!  
How'd you ever think of a thin brass dome?"

And somebody young as we were sagged into the room,  
Face all caked with blood and  
Clothes still damp with the natural leakage of a  
5-day wine drunk:

*"Well, I may be inverted,  
but thank God I'm not insatiable."*

On the page, such lines may not resonate as they do live. The following passages about  
ironic disenchantments with graduate school may risk falling flat.

*Came then to Chicago, to matriculate  
Among the pros.*

\*

I always expected to find, among those buttresses,  
Some rude Falstaffian man, surrounded by dogs,  
Polishing at the armour of his lord . . .  
Heard, instead, the voices of children, raised in song:

♪

Shakespeare Milton  
Shakespeare Milton

Shelley as well

Shelley as well

Sarah something Teasdale  
Sarah something Teasdale

Edith M. Bell  
Edith M. Bell

♪ (26-7)

The kicker lay in those last eight lines, which were sung to the tune of “Frere Jacques.” Welch’s showstopper moment came when he added choral effects in a sing-song voice in these eight lines, inserting overlapping echoes and fragments in falsetto, bass, and other voices so that audiences might imagine a choir of earnest PhD’s blissfully singing these fatuous lines as if in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

Another mode for his *ars poetica* is founded on his respect for William Carlos Williams and that poet’s reliance on exact descriptions in everyday speech. For Lew’s ecological poems, such as “Wobbly Rock,” he claimed that “accuracy” was his first goal. This criterion was promoted more than any other theme in his published remarks on craft. When these poems succeeded, as in “Springtime in the Rockies, Lichen,” their conversational clarity and supple word play were memorable. For these particular methods, the most common flaw occurred when simplicity morphed into insignificance. But when this style was coupled with his musical talents for nimble, short-lined stanzas, a happy synthesis arose. Courtesy of his graduate linguistic training, Welch delighted in changes of duration of vowels and consonants when blended with sleight of hand syntax. The short poem [“I Saw Myself”] demonstrates such skills:

I saw myself  
a ring of bone  
in the clear stream  
of all of it

and vowed,  
always to be open to it that all of it  
might flow through

and then heard  
“ring of bone” where ring is what a

bell does (89)

Here overtones are created when transparent phrases like “of all of it” and “open to it” dance in a complex syntactical exchange with “that all of it,” because “that” changes this phrase into a universal force, like *Tao*. This poem belongs to the section “Hermit Poems,” which precedes the larger group “Way Back.” Snyder eloquently summarizes the historical literary importance of these particular poems: “In those works Lew achieved the meeting of the ancient sage tradition and the ‘shack simple’ post frontier back country of out-of-work workingman’s style, and then the (elite) rebel modernism of art”(11).

That alone seems enough of an accomplishment to justify the welcome reissue of Welch’s *Ring of Bone*, which in turn may create a new audience for Welch’s available performances on the web. Three of the better recordings are *The Magic Lantern*, Santa Barbara, April 1967; Spring 1969 at San Francisco’s Renaissance Corner (both available at <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Welch.php>); and *He Remains: Lew Welch Reads From His Work, 1968*, San Francisco’s Glide Memorial Church, June 1968 (available at <http://www.citylightspodcast.com/he-remains-lew-welch-reads-his-work-1968/>).

