

THE CHORD OF G

Sitting on the dock of the bay, watching the inevitable roll in

I DON'T KNOW what I got out of graduate school at LSU in 1968 except a year's delay in reporting for active duty as a second lieutenant. But I know what I got out of living on 19th Street.

Today I can't even find the diploma that says I have an M.A. in government. My other degree, that of a white college boy in a poor black neighborhood in central Baton Rouge, has never left me. Its lessons were, in a way, familiar Southern fare—I could generalize them as losses of innocence—but the chief teaching was, at least for me, singular in its impact, probably because I never saw it coming. All I had in mind was teaching Alfred to play guitar.

I moved to 19th Street in a rush. Classes were to

start the next day and all the cheap apartments in town seemed to have disappeared—which is how I ran into John. He was just back from Vietnam. We'd answered an ad and gotten to the complex at the same time, only to find the room already rented. It came up we were both in the government department, and it wasn't too great a stretch to join forces. John had seen a sign on a house in toward town and thought that maybe we could share it, so we drove over. It was a small clapboard bungalow, plenty of bushes around it, a screened porch, and a clothesline in back. Across the



"The true nature of society comes from the society itself. So when Alfred asked me to teach him to play the guitar I said yes."

street was a vacant lot next to a church. I was getting about \$200 a month from a fellowship and John was on V.A. benefits, but we decided we could split the monthly rent of \$100, furnished, and still scrape by. I got the front bedroom, John took the back.

I was gone most of the time at first, either in class or at the library, but after my routine established itself I was at home more often. That's when I began to notice the neighborhood. The majority of the residents were black, and most

evenings, especially on Sundays, there was a touch football game across the street. I would sit on the porch watching the game, drinking a Pearl, and plinking my guitar. I guess it was on one of those early autumn weekends, still hot and humid in Louisiana, that the little kids from the block figured it was time to see who those white boys were.

I can't remember all their names, just their spirit of adventure at penetrating the lives of people unlike themselves. We got along, and the visits became daily. At some point Alfred joined one of his younger brothers in coming by. Alfred was 14, long and lanky, high-water trousers and frayed shirt, and smooth, coal-black face. You could see in a flash that he was

never going to assimilate into the white world of the South. He was as rooted and as authentic and as African as you could get. His idol was Otis Redding.

Since I could play "Dock of the Bay," we had something in common. I'd do my self-taught fingerpicking and he'd sing—*really* sing. Like we were performing in a club somewhere. At first it made me self-conscious—you could hear us down to the end of the block—but after a while it was O.K. More than that, I had never seen a human come alive in quite the way Alfred did.

He dropped by almost daily, and

By Rod Davis

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though our music sessions were no more than goofing off, really, Alfred and I were each important to the other. I felt completely disconnected at school; when I was with Alfred, everything was tangible—the two of us in two metal chairs on a paint-flecked porch enclosed by rusty screening. There was nothing ethereal—no competitive associate professors or cocktail reception chatter or thin-blooded philosophers. There was simply Alfred's wailing and his half-formed hope for a shot at Music—he was no Athlete—and there was me, and there was my roomie, John, screaming in his sleep because of the artillery shelling that had broken more in him than his eardrums.

In my disaffection with being a student—which eventually led me to quit graduate school and join the Army—I began to see that whatever I would ever discover about the true nature of society would come from the society itself, not from theories about it. So when Alfred asked me to teach him to play the guitar, I said yes.

He agreed to come by three times a week for a half hour, roughly the drill I remembered from taking piano. It hadn't worked for me, but I had hated piano; Alfred had superior motivation.

My idea was to start by placing his fingers on the correct frets and then later get down to some rudimentary charts. His fingers were long and slender, the pigmentation lighter on the pads and palm. I remember thinking, *How unlike mine*. It wasn't supposed to mean anything, but it did, and we both knew it.

WE GOT THROUGH "Dock of the Bay" quickly, and "Tom Dooley" (similar chords), and so on, but some songs I needed to write down so we'd know all the words and could make the chord changes in the right places. One afternoon I got home early and took out several sheets of paper and carefully drafted lyrics and chords. Mel Bay couldn't have done better. I couldn't wait to show Alfred.

When he stopped by, I told him that this time we could do Otis Redding by reading the music. Alfred smiled and bobbed his upper body to some unheard beat, as was his style. We sat on the concrete steps and looked at the sheets. The neighborhood kids were there watching.

Alfred took the guitar and walked around the yard strumming what we'd gone over before. That was O.K., but



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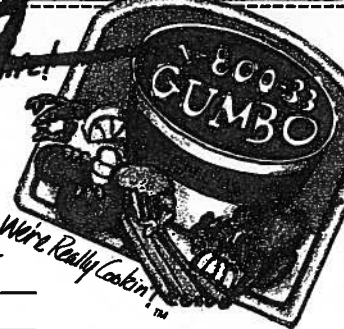
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I said to come over because we needed to start with the sheet music I'd prepared. It took him several more tunes to take his place on the steps and study what I'd penciled in.

"Just start with this chord here," I said, pointing to the first one on the paper. It was a G.

Alfred played a C. "No," I said. "This one here." He studied it a moment. I looked to be sure the letter was clear. It was. Alfred strummed a D7.

"Come on," I said. "Here, this is the start."

I was pointing to the G when I glanced up at Alfred and saw an expression of blank terror. Something caught in my throat, and in my mind. It was like I'd had the wind knocked out of me, been clotheslined on a football field. I held his gaze for a second or two. He was smiling, but it was the wrong sort of smile. Alfred was a sophomore in high school, and what his eyes were telling me was that he couldn't read the alphabet.

"It's a G," I said. "You know how to play a G."

So he did, and I quickly read off the

other two chord letters in the song, and he played them. The next time we had a lesson I drew finger placement diagrams and inscribed the letters above. Alfred came over several more times, but it was as if we'd stumbled onto something we shouldn't have. It had turned things too real.

I stayed on at 19th Street until the end of the spring semester, and Alfred's reality was all around me. I hauled drunks off the yard where they'd slept all night in the cold and bundled them into taxis bound for a shelter. I sat through an invasion by a half-dozen police searching the house, unsuccessfully and without warrants, for drugs, on the theory that two white guys wouldn't be living where we were unless they were up to no good. I walked to the quick-stop several nights a week to use the pay phone and occasionally saw Alfred with a group of his buddies, fooling around. We didn't say much except to exchange pleasantries. Then I never saw him again.

Two decades have passed. I never learned to play the guitar any better, I spent two years in the Army, I went

back and got my graduate degree, and I pretty much blew my future as a political scientist by doing my master's thesis on a literary subject, James Baldwin. Last summer, I had occasion to return to Baton Rouge and drove by the old neighborhood. The house was still there, exactly the same, but now even the youngest of the kids who once brought their world to mine had already looked down the barrel of Alfred's odds.

Of course, I can't see the odds like Alfred did—can't know the so-what brutality of literacy statistics; that one Southerner in every five is a marginal illiterate; that the numbers are one in three if the Southerner is black. So what? I do know that Alfred couldn't have beaten those numbers, and that however he survived the last 20 years, whatever progress came to the rest of the so-called New South didn't come to him.

My regret is that instead of hurting for him, I should have taught him how to fight back. □

Rod Davis is editor of *American Way* magazine.

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