

arts/entertainment

Detective novelist follows tracks of excellence

By Pat Higgins

The Rat on Fire by George V. Higgins, Alfred Knopf New York, 1981, 188 pages

Crime novels have a long and honorable tradition in American fiction. The avatars of the genre were Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, who wrote so well that they have yet to be topped. However, the leading contender for their crown is George V. Higgins (no relation), who *Time* magazine calls "the best American crime novelist now at work." That's a sensible comment.

book review

Higgins' first book was *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, which immediately established him as an excellent reporter of the seamy netherworld of criminals and cops. He has been prolific in the last decade, concentrating chiefly on detective fiction with forays into more conventional fiction that are basically boring.

However, his book on Watergate, *The Friends of Richard Nixon*, was one of the best of the subject. He

analyzed the case from the perspective of a prosecuting attorney, which is exactly what Higgins was in Boston. He is now a criminal trial lawyer, which helps to add a dose of realism to his writing.

The Rat on Fire is his latest work and it is, as usual, an excellent book. The basic plot concerns a combination lawyer-slumlord named Jerry Fein, who is having difficulties with his ghetto tenants. They don't pay their rent.

Dialogue specialist

His solution is to hire a professional arsonist to torch the place and collect the insurance. Also involved are a crooked fire marshal, honest cops, dishonest cops, state senators, and other assorted low lifes who interact with each other as the plot unfolds.

However, the plot line is almost incidental to the character development. In this regard, Higgins is a member of the Raymond Chandler School of Detective Fiction rather than, say, the Agatha Christie style of whodunits. Higgins' specialty is dialogue, which he does more successfully than anyone this side of Thomas (92 in the *Shade*) McGuane.

In fact, in *The Rat on Fire*, the characters don't actually do all that much. Rather, they sit around and talk about what they have just done or will be doing. It

is consistently witty stuff, too, even though they are dealing with deadly serious matters.

Character pathos

It is rather difficult to find quotable sections in *The Rat on Fire*, not because of a lack of interesting material, but because of Higgins' tendency to use profane vernacular. However, this may give a hint of his style.

"Still," Leo said, "I am not so stupid that even I do not know that Four-flusher Fein is not your best legal-type counselor and could on his best day probably not get Jack Kennedy off on a charge that he murdered Lee Harvey Oswald."

The fascinating aspect of all this is how each character's motives and interests become revealed as the novel progresses. For instance, a slumlord is probably not the most sympathetic figure in the world, but as his thoughts and plans are revealed his actions do not seem totally devoid of logic.

A rather droll running joke in *The Rat on Fire* concerns the Red Sox' chances, or rather their lack of chances, for the pennant, as being the only agreement both sides of the law can come to.

The great advantage of detective fiction is that the reader can breeze through the book in a short amount of time. Check out *The Rat on Fire* and find some quality writing.

Artist takes pride in aggressive physical works

By Penelope M. Smith

If you could imagine a good ole boy involved in sculpture, Mac Whitney would fit the bill. Whitney was in Lincoln to bring his sculpture, Tarkio, to the Great Plains Sculpture Exhibition at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery.

Whitney, 44, fits in well with one's picture of a man involved in monumental sculptures. He is short and powerful, with a weather-beaten face and neck covered with lines like the road maps of Texas he uses to name his works.

Clad in an old sweatshirt and jeans, he rolled red paint, his favorite color, on his 10,000 pound sculpture and spoke of his life and art.

He has what he describes as an odd background. Originally from Kansas, where his father was a college professor, he did theater work and received an art minor as an undergraduate. He then went on to get his Master of Fine Arts in sculpture.

He admits, though, that he had another idea for his true vocation.

"What I really wanted to be was an inventor, but I only made weird things that nobody ever heard of," he said. "One thing I did get from it though, I buy old pieces of junk equipment and fix them and I can invent any damn thing I haven't got to make it."

Lives alone

These days Whitney lives alone at Dead Dog Ranch, his property outside of Houston. He has 12 trucks and a crane. He had a wife once, but said wryly, "Before my career opened up, she got tired of paying the rent and left me." Then he grinned and said, "Now I get my girlfriends to help me paint."

Whitney spends seven days a week working on his sculpture. When it's too wet or windy he paints with oils.

Half the joy in Whitney's work is the physically demanding job of making the sculpture. He cuts his work from sheets of 10-by-40 feet rolled flat sheets of steel and does all the welding and cutting himself, from the intricate sawcuts to bending girders, in a manner that "would drive any steel man nuts."

The works take him an average of three and a half weeks to finish. Sometimes he constructs a model about 18 inches high, and other times he just allows the works to evolve.

"They're very physical pieces. I've arrived at them by very close contact. I learn by doing them and they turn out in a fashion that can't be enjoyed by sculptors who design a work and then send it out to be done by a job shop. There's no opportunity for pride that way."

Quite alive

Whitney's work is abstract, and according to some of the passers-by at Sheldon, it doesn't fit in exactly with their idea of nature. However, Whitney sees his work as something quite alive.

"My pieces have a real presence about them, they're dramatic and aggressive," he said. "This work," he said, gesturing toward Tarkio with his paint roller, "can be very threatening because it's a territorial thing, like a great red bird moving into another bird's territory. If you're that other bird, you have to get him out, it doesn't matter what he's there for."

Whitney is both easy going and unassuming, but is well aware of the traditions of his art.

He also is not overly defensive about his work. A

woman, not realizing who he was, inquired scathingly how long "this thing is going to be here." Whitney just laughed and later said, "Gosh, she looked sour, didn't she?"

Whitney said he has definite ideas of how he wants people to look at his work so that they can best appreciate it.

"My work is all built in the round, you can't get the

feeling for it if you just look in one direction. Depending on how you look at it, it can be linear or planar and the shadows cast by the piece are important too.

Asked if there was anything else he ever wanted to do with his life, Whitney laughed and then said seriously: "No, just my art, that's all anybody ought to live for. If you have it what else would you want to do?"

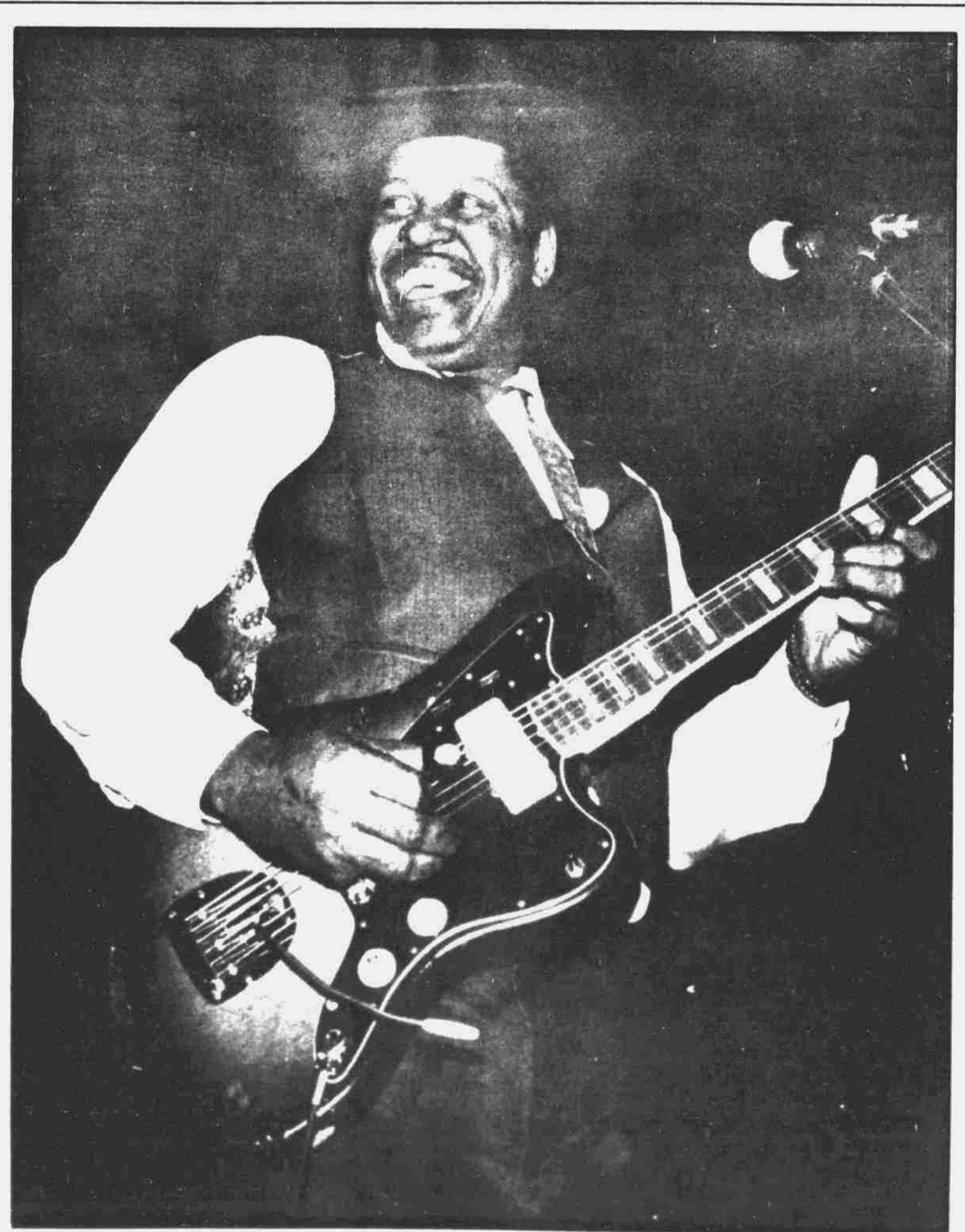


Photo by Jon Natvig

Magic Slim and the Teardrops, a Chicago based rhythm and blues band, put on its final Lincoln performance Saturday night at the Zoo Bar before embarking on a European tour. Slim's straight forward approach had the full house rocking from start to finish. Magic Slim and the Teardrops will be returning to Lincoln in June.