Arts & Entertainment

Music writer stones rock 'n' roll apartheid

By Mike Frost and Chris Burbach

"In the beginning, rock was a Moment: if all had gone well, its brevity should have been central to its glory."

--Dave Marsh, "The Who," *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*

Actually, that's minimizing the impact somewhat. For, if there is one thing music critic Dave Marsh, who came to Lincoln Thursday to speak on discrimination in the media as part of a forum sponsored by the Civil Liberties Club, would probably insist, it's that rock 'n' roll music is more than a flash-in-the-pan phenonmenon.

It's an expression of what modern society is all about. Everything — from the multi-million dollar label magnate to the lowly session musician — is a reflection of his environment.

Even the most facile songs are rich with sociological and economic commentary, Marsh told an audience Thursday afternoon in the Nebraska Union. "If you sat down and argued about what the meaning of that Eurythmics song that everbody thinks is meaningless — 'Sweet dreams are made of this, who am I to disagree' — what does that mean? I think that's one of the most profound critiques of the consumer-based society. It's that whole passivity when you say 'yeah, this Mars bar is what I really want. I'm not going to argue with that.' Then some other guy says, no wait a minute, what about this one and everything becomes a commodity. And really to me, it's real obvious that's what the song says."

It becomes important, then, to listen not only to the lively beat and the cleverly based lyrics, but to ask yourself, "What does this say about society?" From our conversation with Marsh Thursday afternoon, it was clear Marsh has asked himself the question quite often. And, sometimes, the answer frightens him.

MF/CB: How did you get involved with writing? Was it something you always wanted to do and so you chased after it or did you back into it?

Marsh: When I heard the famous critical hit of 1965, *The Beach Boys Today*, I thought people should write about this music, and nobody was doing it. And then people started doing it and I thought there was a lot of nonsense being talked, especially historically. This idea that there wasn't any rock 'n' roll between Elvis and the Beatles. Now, come on I mean, what were The Supremes, what was Del Shannon, what were The Beach Boys, what were The Four Seasons? I just thought it was crazy.

So, when I was 19, I was going to Wayne State University in Detroit and some people started a rock magazine down the street called *Creem* and I ended up editing that for four years. So, I got into it deliberately, as a revisionist, to change what was going on.

Rolling Stone 'disappointment'

MF/CB: What do you now think of *Creem* and another magazine you were associated with, *Rolling Stone*?

Craig Andresen/Daily Nebraskan

Dave Marsh

Marsh: *Creem* had, at a certain point, decided to be purely a comic book and at the beginning of that change, that's when I left and that's why I left, because I didn't want to do that. In the last year or so...it's gotten quite a bit better. It's still got a lot of jive nonsense, but it has gotten somewhat better.

Rolling Stone has been a real disappointment for the last couple of years. They've just had a change of regime and I'd like to think it'll get better.

I have my quarrels with the way *Rolling Stone* covers things, as I did when I was there. But I got no reason to want to see *Rolling Stone*, or anyone in particular currently connected with it, fail. I'd like to see it succeed. I mean succeed in a real term, I don't mean sell a lot of papers, although that's part of what succeeding for them means. I'd like to see them be good...A good *Rolling Stone* story is as good as a story as anyone does.

MF/CB: How is the newsletter (*Rock & Roll Confidential*, a radical music periodical Marsh publishes) going?

Marsh: Really good. We're closing in on 3,000 subscribers and we haven't been out a year yet and it's coming close to paying for itself and it's had an impact. It's built up a network of people who are involved with it in one way or another.

MF/CB: Did you have a concept in mind when you started the newsletter that it's either lived up to or not lived up to?

Marsh: Yeah, and I'd say it's probably exceeded that original concept, simply by being involved in a number of things that either wouldn't have existed without it, or wouldn't have existed in the same way without it. Whether that means kind of asserting leadership in the anti-apartheid struggle in radio and television, or whether it means trying to work with some of the people who were involved with Artists Call, a musicians group...or whether it's just drawing people's attention to bands like Los Lobos and Jason and the Scorchers, who I think we were the first people to write about.

Jackson explodes myths

MF/CB: You're in town to speak on what you've called the apartheid that exists both in AOR (Album-oriented-rock) music and music videos.

Marsh: Yeah, I guess I'm here to talk about separate but equal.

MF/CB: What do you think of Michael Jackson's success, in that context?

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Humanity loses as racism masters Harold

Review by Eric Peterson

The Yale Repertory Theatre production of *'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys*, which played Thursday night in Kimball Hall, was effective and well-contained. Building from a very slow beginning, the three-member cast revealed the choking of natural emotion in a racist atmosphere.

Master Harold is a young white South African schoolboy played by Evan Handler; 'the boys' are black men much older than he, who worked for his mother in the St. Georges Park Tea Room in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 1950. Sam, the 45-year-old waiter, was powerfully played by Zakes Mokae, and the older janitor, Willie, was played by Ray Aranha. Both Mokae and Aranha have worked in productions of playwright Athol Fugard's other plays, and Mokae originated the Sam role on Broadway, which won him a Tony Award.

It is easy to see why Mokae was singled out. His movements and voice carry a grace and authority that never need to be asserted or shouted.

There is no break in the performance or change of scene — *'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys* follows the classical unities of time, peace and action. What this allows is a steady building of emotion from a quiet beginning.

The day starts placidly in the restaurant. The setting is designed to reassure, with the dingy walls, the jukebox, the Coke and Cadbury advertisements on the walls. The first actions and conversations are equally familiar and friendly, and Sam and "Hally," as he calls the schoolboy, clearly have a lot of affection for each other.

Even so, there are early indications that Master Harold wants to dominate the relationship. Whenever he gets kidded too roughly, he pulls rank in slight ways and his voice gets an authoritative edge. At one point he starts riding on the back of Willie, who is washing the floor, and after a few rearings back, throws Harold off. It's all in fun, but spectators have to be reminded that that is the way things really are between the races. Harold becomes very uncomfortable when Sam and Willie act out the caning of a black prisoner, roaring with laughter at something he may feel guilt for.

There is considerable condescension in more serious moments: "Tolstoy may have educated his peasants but I've educated you," Harold tells Sam. And although they like talking about the books they've read together, for Hally learning is a matter of naive pride in knowledge — for Sam it seems something deeper and more important. Willie is oblivious to all this. In his barely-covered agitation and misery, his extraordinarily wrinkled forehead and sweat-drenched shirt, he looks as if he has permanently become accustomed to ducking blows.

The telephone rings several times during the play, usually breaking a moment of concord between Hally and his friend Sam — the sense is one of abrupt public intrusion into a private world. And always the call has the same meaning — Hally's mother is bringing his crippled father home from the hospital, which depresses the estranged son intensely. The schoolboy increasingly takes his frustration about his family out on Sam and Willie — but it is quite clear that his bullying attitude might emerge even without the aggravating factor of his father.

Harold refuses, for example, to consider the foxtrot as art rather than entertainment; for him, dance is the same for blacks no matter what its forms — "the release of primitive emotion through movement." When he is taken in by Sam's description of the beauty of it, he asks to hear more about it, and — "Aaah-haah!" Mokae growls softly, his fingers wriggling behind his back as he bobs slightly in excitement.

For Sam, dance has bigger dimensions than any that Hally can quite take in; it becomes the biggest metaphor in the play. "To be in one of the couples on that dance floor is like being in a dream in a world where accidents don't happen," Sam says . . . and the avoidance of collisions is something which only he is able to do. Willie beats his lover out of his own daily frustration. Hally separates himself from his friends out of family frustration. Only Sam can keep his own motion.

The climactic and deeply disturbing action of the play occurs after the schoolboy breaks all connections of friendship, tells Sam and Willie to call him "Master Harold," and repeats a racist joke about how "a nigger's a..s ain't fair." Sam listens sadly and calmly, and then in a very tense moment lowers his pants to show the truth of it — "He's quite right; it's not fair." Harold is too ashamed to look, but does not acknowledge the remorse Sam has tried to awaken in him. "You've made me feel naked, and I've never felt it all my life. How do I wash off yours and your father's filth?" Sam asks the boy without raising his voice. Despite a final attempt to recall the days when Sam made a kite for Harold which almost liberated them from their predicment, the boy refuses the offer of friendship and his old nickname, and leaves in the rain. The irony of Sam's and Willie's subservient position, and the warmth of their shared sadness, are underined by a song of Sarah Vaughan's: "Little man, you've had a busy day."