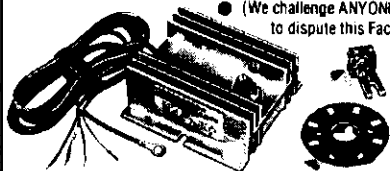


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How to avoid turning prematurely orange.

# JEAN SHEPHERD

● One of the truly universal secret desires that all of us share is to beat our ancient, implacable enemy, Time. We all have private dreams of being the only possessor of the secret of eternal life, or that the doctor will come rushing into the hospital room just as we are muttering our immortal last words, hollering: "Hold everything! I hate to interrupt, but they have just perfected the serum that guarantees eternal life. It will cure all known diseases and make you eternally 21 years old! I have the first dose here! Great Scott, I'm just in time!"

The younger you are, the more logical—and indeed probable—this dream appears. But as time spins on, you tend to have moments of doubt about whether the boys in the lab are going to perfect the serum in time. The mood passes, and you go wandering on as ever.

This dream of beating Time has been a recurrent theme in literature from comic strips to *Doctor Faustus*. Alley Oop was a prehistoric man somehow still magically alive in the 20th century, and a time machine made it possible for him to go back and forth in time at will. And how many science-fiction epics have been based on the time-machine concept? Everyone from Jules Verne to Mark Twain fooled with the idea of being able to revisit past eras.

All of this hit me one dark night recently as I rolled along Route 27 through the Florida Everglades. Route 27 cuts right down the belly of Florida skirting Lake Okeechobee and heading straight through the great primeval sea of grass that is the Everglades. The road is a lonesome two-lane ribbon of concrete through some of the most primitive country on the continent. Ghostly white herons stand silent and remote in the shallows of the canals that run the length of old 27; buzzards and hawks wheel overhead. You pass table-flat fields with herds of mean, red-eyed Brahma cattle sullenly dreaming that somebody will show up for them to gore. Few tourists ever pass by; most of the travelers are truckers and good old boys heading toward Belle Glade for a couple of beers. (A good old boy can loosely be defined as the type who, when you're sitting in a bar minding your own business, catches your eye in the mirror behind the bartender and says, "Just who you think you're lookin' at, chief?") This is followed by a phlegmy guffaw, and you get that sinking feeling that says this is one tight spot your

American Express card just ain't gonna get you out of.)

The cultural level of the area is neatly captured by a sign at least two stories high that greets the visitor: "Welcome to Pahokee Florida—The Home of Mel Tillis."

The girl who was with me picked up her cue. "Who's Mel Tillis?" she chirped brightly. I whistled a few bars of *The Orange Blossom Special* through my teeth and pulled into a tired sun-drenched, one-pump Shell station that was obsolete when the Essex Motor Car Company had its last big year. I rolled down the window and a blast of the furnace-like Everglades roared in. A scrawny teenage pump jockey swam past the window through the heat. "Fillerup?"

"Yeah," I gasped.

"Hey, honey," I said to the girl next to me, "why don't you ask him who Mel Tillis is?"

"Why don't you tell me?" she said. "You sound like you know."

"I do. But I think it would sound better coming from that kid. After all, he's also a native of Pahokee."

GARY VISKUPIC



A black-and-white cop car drifted by in the heat, the hawk-faced deputy in the 10-gallon Stetson and mandatory green aviator shades looking us over as he glided past. I watched him in the rearview mirror and noted that he appeared to be talking into his mike. They don't see too many strangers in Pahokee, and I must admit that if there's one thing I look like, it's a stranger.

The pump jockey languidly finished rearranging the clotted bug juice on my windshield with a greasy rag. As I handed my credit card out the window, the girl asked, "Hey, who's Mel Tillis?"

"Aw, c'mon, you're puttin' me on." The kid scratched away at a flaming patch of acne under his chin.

The girl gave me a suspicious glance as though she was beginning to suspect that perhaps Mel Tillis was a porn-film star.

"No, I'm not kidding. Who is Mel Tillis? That sign back there on the highway says Pahokee is the home of Mel Tillis."

"Sure is, ma'am. That sign don't lie. Mel sure as hell comes from Pahokee. My cousin Claudie went to school with him, even, 's far as he went. Claudie, that is—he never went past fifth grade."

The kid shoved the credit-card clipboard through the window at me, along with a well-chewed stubby pencil that advertised a local funeral parlor and mortuary.

"So he really did come from Pahokee?" the girl persisted, flicking a lank strand of sweat-drenched hair out of her eyes.

"Yep. He surely did, ma'am. He comes back to visit once in a while, and the whole town turns out when he comes down Main Street in that big ol' Caddy of his."

I signed the charge slip, rolled up the window and eased out of the station as the first faint whiffs of cool air came out of the air conditioner just in time to save both of us from total suffocation.

"Okay, smartass, now who was, or is, Mel Tillis?" Some girls just never give up.

"Let's put it this way." I carefully scrutinized a faded billboard claiming the spiritual values of Rebel Yell, a 100-proof bourbon that truly fits its name. "Mel Tillis is the biggest thing to come out of Pahokee since Hurricane Mabel, and that was in 1924. He ain't exactly Johnny Cash or Merle Haggard, but he is Pahokee's own—and that's more than Cash or Haggard can say."

I casually blew a smoke ring toward the air-conditioning duct from my Hav-a-Tampa rum-soaked stogie, a vice I always take up when south of the Mason-Dixon line.

"Oh gawd, you mean this famous Mel Tillis is a Country and Western singer?" She sneered the whole sentence as only a born rock fan can.

"Honey, Mel Tillis is a *country* singer. Not like most of these dudes who wear leather vests and granny glasses and come from such well-known rural areas as Pittsburgh, Chicago, LA and Denver—which happens to be about as rural as Newark. It would never occur to old Mel to change his name to 'Mel Pahokee' like that effete ding-dong that you keep mooning over."

"You mean John Denver?" she hissed venomously.

"You said it, I didn't."

"You can really be nasty sometimes." She shoved the cigarette lighter in so hard I thought it was going to pop right through the firewall. I cackled, knowing I had scored.

"I must point out to you that Mel Tillis, the Pride of Pahokee, often appears on The Grand Old Opry, right up there on stage with Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb, and you just can't go no higher than that. Now you see

why they put that sign up."

She sulked for a moment or two. "Boy, you sure can tell we're in the South when they put up some sign about how a hillbilly singer grew up there. Oh, wow!"

"My dear," I instructed her in my best David Niven manner, "this is only in keeping with that great American tradition. The biggest sign in Nazareth, Pennsylvania tells the world that it is the home of Mario Andretti. We do not honor poets or playwrights or even statesmen, but let some guy make it on the Opry or at the Indy 500 and the town has a true-blue historical hero for all time. After all, America *is* a Pop Culture, so naturally it reserves its highest rewards for pop heroes. Mel Tillis *is* Pahokee."

We rode in silence behind a wallowing tractor-trailer carrying 12,000 ducks to their doom. A thin veil of duck dung sprayed the windshield, and since we were roaring along at better than 80 and Route 27 is a bare two-laner, there was no way to pass. At the end of the first 25 miles I figured I knew each one of those 12,000 ducks personally.

I flipped on the radio even though listening to AM in central Florida can be an adventure all its own. The dial is crowded with whistles, birdies, Cuban stations haranguing the cursed Yankee and mysterious market reports delivered by languid Southern voices giving the going price of okra. Out of the blue, some joker who learned his trade listening to the old Martin Block show intoned: "And now, fellows and gals, stepping into the vocal spotlight, winsome little Bonnie Baker with Orin Tucker and his band, The Bodyguards, and their big smash hit *Oh, Johnny, Oh*."

There was a sudden burst of scratchy canned applause and Bonnie Baker sang again of her love for Johnny amid the noise-makers and Havana propaganda and the soybean reports. My companion stared at the speaker grille.

"What the hell is that?" It was at that precise moment that I was engulfed by one of my famous instant insights: the State of Florida is a vast time machine, the only place in the world where Artie Shaw, Bonnie Baker and Blue Baron are given equal air time and equal billing with Sly Stone, Jethro Tull and David Bowie. Time has totally disappeared in Florida. It has the greatest youth cult in the world on its east coast beaches and still the voice of Bonnie Baker is heard forever squeaking *You'd Be Surprised*. Ninety-year-old Vincent Lopez fans roar into McDonald's on their Honda 350s wearing red-white-and-blue crash helmets and order their Big Mac side by side with the biggest collection of nubile golden teenagers since the Second Children's Crusade ravaged Europe. Eighty-four-year-old gentlemen wearing Panama hats and ancient white linen jackets wheel 1937 Buicks into the Publix supermarket lot.

The lesson is clear: Ponce de Leon came to Florida looking for the Fountain of Youth, and they're still at it down there. ●

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