

rodia

bryan

By Simon Kennedy

A well-meaning but pretentious lawyer said some rather ~~offensive~~ trite things about Simon Rodia's "American success story."

A lady archivist (who likes to joke in a thick Middle European accent that "I am just another old book") spoke sweetly about the Watts Towers as a "gigantic flower of folk art" and assured a crowd of some 15 dignitaries, 10 newsmen and most of the neighbors in this wrong-side-of-the-track freight line community whose skins are black as the diesels' soot or names as flowery as Castilian introductions that the poor little tile-setting peasant from Rome would "never die."

No one said any prayers beneath Rodia's wonderfully eccentric towers during "memorial services" held there last Tuesday morning.

"Simon didn't have much use for priests or ~~a~~ religion," said an urbane engineer who recalled that the straight-backed little old man had once insisted on carrying the engineer's briefcase into a lecture hall at the University of California. Into a lecture (calling him "Dear Sir, Dear Child, ~~Dear~~ Dear Boy) which ended up with a standing ovation for the nearly ~~blatant~~ non-verbal, barely-literate old man whose only book was one volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica and ~~was~~ ^(his) favorite story ~~was~~ ^(The) Marco Polo.

A little old man who was ~~the~~ "Witch Doctor" to local truants who bumed down his house in 1957 and were slowly but pleasantly tearing down his towers before they became legend and were fenced off.

Simon didn't like priests but at this moment in far Martinez a black-garbed cleric bent ~~sanctimoniously~~ ^(Coffin) sanctimoniously over his ~~grave~~ and mumbled the Latin which soothed Simon's kin.

~~And meanwhile the officers of the Committee for Rodia's Towers at Watts"~~

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Meanwhile the officers of "The Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers at Watts" mumbled their brand of academic Latin and poured the cold water of polite acceptance on a legend as cranky and strange as that of ~~so many outlaw artists who have flourished without reference to higher learning or the academies.~~

But there were some words spoken off to the side, out of the ~~mix~~ whirr of television cameras, away from the microphones (which had to be held close as a TV helicopter flew close to the towers.)

Said a 72-year-old Negro woman who came to the sub-marginal community of Watts in 1930 and watched Simon build his towers for 24 years:

"He didn't bother nobody. In the '30s he got along with the neighbors and the kids. Kids were different later. Then they bum his house down, tear down all those pretty pieces of glass from the towers. He use' to go out and lay tile free for neighbors and do gardenin' for us. All he wanted was ole bottles and bits of broken plates. Didn't talk much to nobody. If you had some bottles you'd send one of the chil'ren to ~~him~~ ^{R.I.} him. He'd come over talkin' about the towers and take the stuff away in a wheelbarrow or a tote sack.

more quiet, ~~then~~ ^{Something} ~~then~~ ^{Somethin'} changed around here and he went away. Just up and went.. Long before anybody talked about tearin' down the towers. Somethin' changed in the people here. And he went away."

A young, ~~bearded~~ bearded sculptor takes you aside, fifty yards down the railroad track from the towers, on the side from which nobody ever takes pictures, the unrespectable side of Simon's world.

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↳ "There's a story no one talks about," he says. (The mumbling of academic ovation continues beneath the phantom towers, a lost drone on a hot July morning mixed with smog.)

↳ "Simon had this Hudson when Hudsons were contemporary. A red one with a siren. His neighbors threatened to call the police and Simon was an easily frightened man when police were mentioned.

↳ "One night when there was no moon, Simon came out here in this bare stretch of ground between the ~~foot of the towers and the~~ towers and the ~~main~~ railroad tracks and dug an enormous hole. He buried the red Hudson in that hole and there it sits to this day. I plan to dig it up some night. Some night when there is no moon."

He smiled a mad smile, madder than Simon ever smiled and it was apparent that the spirit which sent up those "concentric towers or cones of spirals," this "greatest structure ever made by one man without aid" was not dead in the world.

↳ And standing ~~off to the side~~ on this off-color side of the Watts Towers, a few feet down the track, it became quickly apparent that the triangular lot wedged between the rail line and 108th St. had pre-determined the course of Simon's strange constructions.

↳ For the wedge-shaped lot was a boat, the walls of Simon's enclave were its hull and his towers its three-masted rigging.

↳ Simon, in his 40th bachelor year, alone with the night voices which lead others to giant balls of string or to the world's greatest paper bag collection, had begun the construction ~~of a ship. It took him 22 years to launch her.~~

↳ And, thumbing through his encyclopediac tale of Marco Polo once again, saw himself embarked across an unknown sea and toward his own Cathay.

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Or did he imagine his little lot plowing through a river of stars and toward a dream world that the academians will never categorize?

The mumble of consecration inside the triangular boat continued. Simon was not around to protest.

