

THE HAIR PIECE

by Irving Wallace

In the 1960s and 1970s, young men who have chosen to grow moustaches and beards and to wear long hair—in an age when conformity demanded a clean-shaven face and short hair—have been hassled relentlessly in every corner of the United States by their elders and by the police. Yet these modern young were not the first to be persecuted because of their hair styles.

The patron saint of all those with a preference for long locks and prodigious beards was a New England Yankee named Joseph Palmer, who lived and suffered his hairy nonconformity a century ago.

Joseph Palmer, born in 1788, was a religious man, a reformer, a believer in communal living, an opponent of liquor and slavery. He came into history in 1830, at 42, when he left the family farm with his wife and son to set up residence in the town of Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Joseph Palmer came into history (and notoriety) because of one simple cosmetic fact—he wore a beard.

Now beards were not unknown to American history, nor was opposition to them unknown either. The explorers of the New World—Cortez, Drake, Raleigh—were bearded. The Pilgrims and the Puritans were bearded. Those were the days when beards were in. Then, suddenly, beards were out. No signer of the Declaration of Independence wore a beard or moustache. No United States president from George Washington through James Buchanan had hair on his face. In 1830, when Joseph Palmer moved into Fitchburg, President Andrew Jackson was smoothshaven, and the visages of all American males were shining and beardless. But Joseph Palmer was an individualist and a nonconformist. He admired the biblical patriarchs like Moses, and Moses had a flowing beard. He admired the Messiah, and Jesus Christ had an impressive beard. So Joseph Palmer decided to grow a beard. And in this facially hairless land of the free, Palmer's flowing biblical

Irving Wallace's best-selling novels include The Word (1972), The Seven Minutes (1969), The Plot (1967) and The Man (1964)—all published by Simon & Schuster.

beard was one of a kind, the only one known from Atlantic to Pacific.

Because of his beard, Joseph Palmer suffered grievously. In Fitchburg, even in more sophisticated Boston, his appearances in public were greeted with jeers, catcalls, and barrages of stones and rocks. Several times, in an effort to intimidate him into shaving, his neighbors smashed the windows of his house. Finally, on one memorable occasion, four hooligans armed with scissors, razor, soap, and brush physically attacked Palmer and tried to forcibly remove his beard. Wrestling his assailants, Palmer managed to pull out his pocket knife. He lashed out in self defense, cutting the yahoos up and driving them off. For this defense, Palmer was arrested for "unprovoked assault" and fined. He refused to pay the fine. He was thrown into the Worcester county jail.

Palmer remained in jail one year, constantly warding off efforts to shave him and constantly refusing to pay his fine. Meanwhile, he began to write passionate letters from his cell stating "that he was in jail not for assault, but because he chose to wear whiskers." What in the devil was there in the law of the land or in the Constitution itself that said a man could not wear whiskers? Through his son, Palmer smuggled the letters of his persecution to the *Worcester Spy* and the newspaper ran them; and because of their unusual content they were reprinted throughout the East. Suddenly, Palmer's arguments about individual freedom and human rights began to give many citizens second thoughts, and made them question themselves. After all, was there anything in the Constitution about shaving or cutting one's hair or looking like everyone else? Of course not. Palmer was right. Sympathy began to build.

The growing publicity troubled the Worcester sheriff. He decided to release Palmer. But now Palmer refused to go. He had been unfairly jailed, and he would stay on in his cell until he was fully absolved. At last, in desperation, the sheriff and his law officers picked Palmer up, carried him out of his cell, and dumped him into the street outside.

He was free, at last. He was also America's most unique martyr, and he had the admiration of the nation's re-

formers and radicals. Tired of Fitchburg, Palmer bought a farm outside the town, a farm formerly owned by a commune that had failed, and on it he established his own transients commune. There was always a pot of baked beans, and homemade bread and butter, and a bed for the night, waiting for anyone who came by to call. Thoreau and Emerson were among those who came to call, and who remained his friends.

When Palmer died in 1875, at the age of eighty-eight and in full beard, he found himself and his whiskers completely vindicated. For his hairitage was in evidence everywhere: beards and long hair were in as they had never been before in American history. Abraham Lincoln sported a beard at his inauguration. Other great names of the period—Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, George A. Custer—all wore beards. After Palmer's death, beards of every cut—Van Dykes, goatees, mutton-chops, Mosaic whiskers—continued to flourish for over a quarter of a century. In those years, a man whose face was unadorned was considered a prig and a sissy. Then, suddenly, once more, the fashion changed. Hair was out. President Taft, who served from 1909 to 1913, was the last chief executive to permit hair on his face. Every president after that—Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon—was clean-shaven, as were most of their constituents. Then, in the 1960's and 1970's, there was still another turnabout. Hair was in again—if not for all, at least for the young.

The national shrine to hair's martyr may still be seen today. Not far from Fitchburg, Massachusetts, in North Leominsters' old cemetery, stands a six-foot white marble tombstone bearing a noble sculpture of Joseph Palmer's bushy face, and the following bold inscription:

PERSECUTED FOR
WEARING THE BEARD
PALMER



Reviews

JOHN PRINE'S BLUE COLLAR BLUES

by William Kroman

John Prine, a 26-year-old former mailman and soldier from Maywood, Illinois, is one of the remaining upholders of the coffee-house folk tradition that flourished during the Eisenhower years. Prine's songwriting is a kind of populist social realism. He writes songs about conscience-bound veterans, old people living on yesterday's dreams, and lonely fat girls like Lydia, a penny arcade cashier who makes love "from ten miles away" with an equally lonely young soldier named Donald. Prine makes poetry out of street English and sings it to melodies that could be mistaken for hymns grandmother played on the harmonium.

People frequently think they are listening to old Dylan tracks when they first hear Prine on the radio. He has the same raw delivery that marked Dylan's early songs, but Prine soft-pedals the Apocalypse. He is more amused than angered by primitive patriotism, and dedicates to the Rev. Carl MacIntire a song with the refrain

*Your flag decal won't get you
into heaven anymore.*

*They're already overcrowded
from your dirty little war.**

Music business headlines are currently being monopolized by sickies and uglies, so Prine, with his grown-out crewcut, is anything but trendy. Perverto-rock is the latest produce of the \$5 billion-a-year record industry's hype machine, and against the backdrop of big-dollar degeneracy, Prine, who sometimes writes about suicide and masturbation, comes on like King of the Healthies. His bittersweet treatment of such themes as loneliness and old age remind us that on the grass-roots level nobody gets paid for being freaky. Sheer weirdness, after all, is

William Kroman is a free-lance writer living in New York City. His work appears regularly in the Sunday New York Times.

not an end in itself but a happenstance by-product of human variability. Most of the world is irretrievably straight, and as Prine writes in "Flashback Blues,"

*Tragic magic prayers of passion
Stay the same through changing
fashion.*

I saw Prine perform at the Cellar Door, in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. Down the street, under kleig lights, Warner Brothers was filming *The Exorcist*, and someone told me the movie people were trying to cast a crowd of straight-looking college students and couldn't find anybody willing to cut their hair to be in the film.

From the rear, the club looks like a bears' convention, with all the long-hairs jammed shoulder-to-shoulder in the semi-darkness. I could feel myself in the presence of deep innocence. Such an audience is a fragment of the counter-nation, an organism that assembles itself to be spoken to, to learn, to observe its artists at work.

Prine makes his way through the crowd, and a voice introduces him as "Chicago's own shit-kicker, little Johnny Prine." Guitar in hand, Prine climbs onstage. His boots are at nose level with the front tables. He looks behind him at the empty stage, then faces front, grinning. "Me and the boys'd like to do some songs for you," he says, and starts pumping his message home:

*Blow up your TV
Throw away your paper
Go to the country
Build you a home.
Plant a little garden
Eat a lot of peaches
Try and find Jesus
On your own.*

The show is being broadcast live by WGTB, the Georgetown University station, and Prine starts talking to the people out in the black winter night cruising for burgers in their green Vegas, or blowing a quarter-tank of gasoline trying to find the action. People in the club start clinking ice in

* This excerpt, and those following, are copyrighted by Cotillion Music, Inc.

their glasses so the people in their cars can hear where they are. Prine tells them he knows a lot of them are just driving around, then suddenly he says, "Turn right!" The audience cheers.

Prine sings "Illegal Smile," his marijuana song, then introduces "The Great Compromise," which he says is a song about America. It tells the story of a fellow whose girl deserts him at the drive-in in favor of a guy in a foreign sports car. Now men line up in the barroom to ball her.

*I used to sleep at the foot
of Old Glory
And awake in the dawn's early light
But much to my surprise,
When I opened my eyes,
I was a victim of the
Great Compromise.*

Although reviewers call him a "blue collar radical," Prine seems more influenced by Roger Miller than Woodie Guthrie. He grew up listening to Jimmy Rogers and the Carter Family on the radio, and began writing his own songs at 14. He doesn't like the label "protest singer," but some of his strongest lyrics deal with social themes. "Sam Stone" tells of a man who returns from Vietnam "with a Purple Heart and a monkey on his back." Stone dies of an overdose and trades the

*House that he bought on
the G.I. Bill
For a flag draped casket on
a local heroes' hill.*

Al Kooper has recorded a version of the song in which a soul chorus joyfully socks out the refrain

*There's a hole in daddy's arm
Where all the money goes.
And Jesus Christ died for nothing
I suppose.*

On his second album, *Diamonds in the Rough*, there is a song called "Take the Star Out of the Window," about a sailor named Robert who returns from Vietnam with blood on his high school ring. "And it's hello California," he says,

*Hello Dad and Mom
Ship ahoy
Your baby boy
Is home from Vietnam.*