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Folklore of the Heroin Addict: Two Examples

RESEARCH WITH MALE addict-patients at the Lexington Clinical Research Center,¹ shows that a set of shared, learned rules and related behaviors characterizes the "culture" of the urban heroin addict.² This is a culture about which very little is known. During informal conversations and interviews with informants, it became apparent that the culture of addiction, like other cultures, included folkloristic items in its repertory of shared knowledge. Folklore, as a part of the whole, can serve as a focal point for pervasive cultural themes.

Such a use of folklore is not without precedent. As Bascom notes:

The recording of folklore, in itself, is a useful field technique for the anthropologist. It gives further leads for the investigation of the content of culture, insuring that important cultural details are not overlooked; it provides a nonethnocentric approach to the ways of life of a people, emphasizing, as Boas pointed out, the things which are important in their own minds; it may offer clues to past events and archaic customs . . . ; it may provide a means of getting at esoteric features of culture which cannot be approached in any other way; it reveals the affective elements of culture, such as attitudes, values, and cultural goals and, moreover, may verbalize these in a form which needs only to be translated and quoted as evidence of a consensus of opinion.³

By examining some examples of folklore, then, we may gain insight into the addict's "attitudes, values, and cultural goals."

Fiddle briefly mentions one type of folklore of the culture, called "toasts."⁴ Abrahams, in his study of Philadelphia Negro folklore, indicates that toasts are not specific to the addict culture. As defined by Abrahams "The toast is a narrative poem which is recited, often in a theatrical manner, and represents the greatest

¹ The Center, formerly the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, conducts treatment and research programs in the field of narcotics addiction. The Center is populated by about 450 addict patients, most of them committed under the provisions of the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Act of 1966. I am grateful for the helpful comments and suggestions of Ellen Stekert, Paul Kay, and my colleagues at the Center.

² Michael H. Agar, "The Simulated Situation: A Methodological Note," *Human Organization*, 28 (1969); Michael H. Agar, "The Culture of Addiction: Some Preliminary Notes," paper read at the American Anthropological Association Meetings (1969).

³ William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 284.

⁴ Seymour Fiddle, *Portraits from a Shooting Gallery* (New York, 1967), 16.

flowering of Negro verbal talent."⁵ In another work, Abrahams notes that toasts are also found in "hobo jungles."⁶ A perusal of one collection of hobo folklore does suggest the similarities, although the term "toast" is not used.⁷ Toasts obviously are not specific to the addict culture; but many of them are known or referred to by addicts of all races, and a few focus on addiction-related topics. Further, the addiction-specific toasts may be fairly esoteric, since the only item in Abrahams' data about addiction is a short joke from the nonaddict's viewpoint.⁸

Preliminary interviews suggested that two addiction-related toasts were particularly well known by the patients at Lexington—"King Heroin" and "Honky Tonk Bud." To check their distribution and search for other toasts, two assistants interviewed fifty patients, half of them Negro and half Caucasian. Patients were selected by availability rather than random sampling. Since the number of persons interviewed constitutes 20 percent of the Center's male patients, the sampling is large enough to give a reasonable estimate of the true proportions, even though it is nonrandom.

According to this data, 86 percent (96, 75) had heard of "King Heroin"; 35 percent (48, 21), of "Honky Tonk Bud." (Figures in parentheses refer to proportions for the Negro and Caucasian subsamples, respectively.) Only 6 percent (8, 4) of those interviewed could recite "Honky Tonk Bud," while 16 percent (16, 16) could recite "King Heroin." Sixty-five percent (68, 63) of the sample had never heard of the term "toasts," although, of these, 97 percent knew of one or more by title.

A request for other known toasts elicited a variety of items, although only a few were mentioned by more than one respondent. These included "Morphine, Morphine," "The Fall," "Signifying Monkey," and "Stagger Lee." The latter two have been analyzed in detail by Abrahams, so I will not discuss them here. "Morphine, Morphine" is a short toast emphasizing the power of morphine over the individual. A similar theme will be seen in "King Heroin."

"The Fall," like "Honky Tonk Bud," is quite lengthy, and only partial versions could be obtained. This toast apparently deals with the relationship between a pimp and a prostitute, expressing some of the themes found in Iceberg Slim's autobiographical account of a pimp's life.⁹ The remainder of the elicited items were mentioned by only one of the respondents. Those recalled included drug-related commercial songs, individual compositions, and possible toasts. Since versions could not be obtained, and the items were not well known, they will not be discussed here.

According to informants, toasts usually originate and are recited in prison settings or in treatment centers such as Lexington, although, 27 percent of the sample said they recited or heard them in the streets, usually while sitting around with other addicts after injecting heroin. Almost all, 92 percent, indicated that toasts were primarily recited during periods of confinement. According to informants who participated in in-depth discussions, confinement frequently provides

⁵ Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Hatboro, Pa., 1964), 99.

⁶ Roger D. Abrahams, *Positively Black* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), 47.

⁷ George Milburn, *The Hobo's Hornbook* (New York, 1930).

⁸ Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, 231.

⁹ Iceberg Slim, *Pimp, The Story of My Life* (Los Angeles, 1969).

time blocs where no formal activities are required by the institution or desired by the addict. To occupy such time blocs, groups of addicts frequently gather and converse. Topics can include a number of things, such as drugs, "hustles" (methods of illegally obtaining money or drugs), women, and so on. In these situations, toasts can be recited by any who knows them. Informants emphasized their entertainment value, but otherwise felt that no special significance could be attached to them or their users. On the basis of the survey data, one would suspect that an ability to recite toasts might be a valuable social skill, but the informants did not agree. Unfortunately, I have no observational data to supplement their assertions.

Because they seem to be the best known addiction-related toasts, "Honky Tonk Bud" and "King Heroin" will be discussed in some detail here. Because of the small number of informants who could recite the toasts in their entirety and the even smaller number who would recite them, insufficient variants are available for a comparative analysis. The only complete version of "Honky Tonk Bud" was recited into a tape recorder by a twenty-four-year-old Caucasian from Connecticut. While a version of "King Heroin" was collected in a similar manner, a lengthier version that had been written down by a thirty-five-year-old Negro from Detroit was later discovered and was used instead.

After a toast was collected, the contributor was informally interviewed in depth for interpretive data. Using this material and my own knowledge of the addict culture, tentative explanations of the significant themes in the two toasts were formulated. Following this, four key informants—two Negroes and two Caucasians—discussed the explanations in depth. These sources all contributed to the discussions at the end of each toast. The four key informants all agreed that the final discussion accurately represented the significant themes in the toast.

In the texts, appropriate contextual translations are placed in brackets where necessary. Every fifth line is numbered for later reference in the discussion sections. I am responsible for the arrangement into stanzaic form.

Honky Tonk Bud

Honky Tonk Bud, the hip cat stud,
 stood digging [watching] a game of pool.
 Although his bags were dragging [low heroin supply], Bud wasn't bragging.
 He knew he was real cool.
 He was choked up tight with a white-on-white, [patterned white shirt]
 had on a cocoa front [jacket] that was down [stylish].
 Sported a hand-painted tie that hung down to his fly
 and he had on a gold-dust crown [hat].
 It was the fifteenth frame of a straight pool game
 as Bud stood digging the play.
 With an idle shrug Bud suddenly dug
 a stranger heading his way.
 He was a medium-built cat. He had on a funny-time [peculiar] hat
 that must have been five years old.

Wore a messed up vine [clothes], he needed a shine,
and shivered as though he were cold.
Kept rubbing his nose as he moved in close
and water came down from his eyes [withdrawal symptoms].

Now Honky Tonk pinned [looked] as the cat moved in
and measured him up for size.

10

Now to any other stud but Honky Tonk Bud
this cat would pass for an ordinary flunky.

But to a well-trained eye on many a high,

Bud dug this guy as a junkie.

He asked for Joe, but Joe wasn't around because his bags were down [low
heroin supply]

and he had gone to his man [dealer] to score [buy heroin].

Now the cat was bugged 'cause he needed some drugs
and he turned to split for the door.

Bud said "Say, man, you look sick, like you need a fix.

Perhaps I can do some solids [good things] for you.

15

I'm Honky Tonk Bud, the hip cat stud,
known up and down Eighth Avenue.

Now if you want to cop [buy heroin], let's talk shop.

Perhaps I can help you to score.

But you need a bale 'cause the deal's wholesale—

that's the only connection [heroin sale] I'm for."

Now the cat looked down with a half-way frown,
as if to make up his mind.

"I got the bread, but I'm leary," he said,

"I'm looking for the best I can find.

20

I want to cop, if you've got a lot
and if the stuff's all right.

But there's another cat with loot in my hat [whose money I have],
and I'm not letting you out of my sight.

Now if you can cop us a bag and it ain't no drag,
then perhaps you can cop us some more.

For we need a load to carry on the road—

we're travelling boosters [shoplifters] you know."

Now Bud hesitated; he had this cat underrated.

He knew he was out to make the big sting [cheat him].

25

He also knew that a flam [fake heroin] wouldn't do,
and that he would have to come up with the real thing.

He said, "I can get you a lease on a real nice piece [ounce],
and you won't have to put up no ends.

First you try and then you buy,

and that way we'll both stay friends.

Now you wait in the store while I go to score—

I won't be gone for long."

Bud showed back real quick 'cause he too was sick
and they split to the pad to get off [inject the heroin].
Bud pulled out two hypes [eyedroppers] and also two spikes [needles],
and rolled up two one-dollar bill gees [strip of paper used to tightly fasten
needle to dropper].
He cooked up in haste [prepared the injection], not a drop did he waste,
and they both began rolling up their sleeves.
Bud said, "Easy man," with the spike in his hand,
"you got to take it slow.
This is high-percentage shit. Just a little bit
will knock any old time junkie to the floor."

30

Now the cat tried real hard, but he was too scarred.
He just couldn't hit the spot [find a vein].
"Oh," Honky Tonk said as he struck red [hit a vein],
"man, this stuff sure is hot."
Honky Tonk sighed as he untied,
"Man, I sure am high."
And the cat spun on his heel, flashed a little gold shield,
and said, "Pin it, Jim, I'm the F.B.I."
Now the courtroom was full, 'cause Honky had pull.
All the hustlers and pimps were there.

35

Some who knew him, the agent who threw him,
and some rats [informers] who had come in to stare.
There was Sweet Drawers Lucy looking real juicy,
Half-Head and Stumbling Blue,
Humphrey the Grinder, a stone mainliner,
Stick-Pin and Tough Tit Sue.
There was Creepy McFaror, the whore house terror,
Rum Dum and Cabbage Head Nick.
Fo-Fo the Rabbit who just kicked his habit,
Fast Eddy and Speakeasy Vic.

40

All eyes turned right, as Soft Tone Ike
eased in with a cashmere vine.
A professional killer named Stinking Sam Miller
following not far behind.
Dope dens were closed, tricks [prostitutes' customers] couldn't find whores,
and crime had a sudden decrease.
The numbers were in, but no one could win
'cause bookies had put on the freeze.
Now Honky Tonk Bud, the hip cat stud
was truly a well-liked man.

45

He never hollered, he just merely followed
the rules that were made for the game.
Now D.A. Grace presented the case
and the agent involved at the stand.

50

He told in detail how he had made the sale
and our boy was a big time man.
He wears a \$200 vine. He has an adding machine mind,
drives a Cadillac long as a train.
Talks like a squirrel, and he's backing ten girls [pimps for ten prostitutes],
and he's a master of the confidence game.

Now William G. Spence of the hip cat defense
was rated an all time great. 55
In his hand laid Honky's five grand,
and also the results of his fate.
"We can't beat it," he said, as he counted the bread.
"These are the facts you must face.
For William P. Pagent, the narcotics agent
has built up an airtight case.
The jury picking's been done. I can't get to none,
and the lab technicians won't buy.

"The D.A.'s so scared he won't take no bread,
and I can't buy the F.B.I. 60
I've tried other things, I've pulled political strings,
but the word is no can do.
And the Chief Justice says that Judge Sterns
will probably make an example out of you."
Now these are the facts as the D.A. attacks
the character of Honky Tonk Bud.
The hustlers sneered as they dug his name smeared,
trampled and dragged in the mud.

Now the jury went out for a four-hour bout,
left everything in tranquility. 65
A foreman concerned, named McDailey, returned
and announced that the defendant was guilty.
The spectators yelled, and a sudden hush fell
as Bud stood facing the court.
Then in all sudden wonder, it sounded like thunder
as Judge Sterns cleared his throat.
He said, "Bud, it would shock the nation if you got probation
with the evidence we have against you.
"But without explanation I can't give you any consideration.
Twenty years is the best I can do." 70

Now the whores cried and the junkies sighed,
for Bud had got long time.
For the crime he committed it was justly unfitted
in the nature of the crime.
Now, after a brief intermission, the judge gave his permission
for Bud to have his say.

He was facing long time with a lot on his mind,
so he ran it down this way:

"Now I ain't crying, but the agent is lying
and he left you all with the notion
That I'm a big wheel in the narcotics field
and I hope he cops promotion.
I dug from the jumps you were holding the trumps
when you wouldn't let my lawyer object.
But a stack is a stack, and a fact is a fact,
and I never even touched the deck.
For I copped a full load [heavy sentence] because I strayed from the code
and you made an example out of me.

"While some drunken villain runs over your children,
pays a small fine and goes free.
But it's all the same, 'cause it's all in the game.
I dug when I sat in to play.
To keep all the low cards and give all the odds,
but that's the price us dope fiends must pay.
And I want to note and reporters can quote
that I lost this case with a grin.
And there's many who know, who will tell you so,
that it's the same grin I wear when I win."

DISCUSSION

Bud is a "culture hero" who embodies several high-status attributes. He is known in his area (16), has pull (39), and is well-liked (49). He also draws a large audience to the courtroom (39-46), which in its reactions to the authorities identifies with Bud's position (64 and 71). Abrahams, commenting on a similar toast segment, suggests that the listing of names (41-46) indicates Bud's "security in the friendship network."¹⁰ Among the attributes that demonstrate Bud's status is his ability to "hustle." There are several indications of Bud's hustling ability in the text.

First of all, Bud loiters in the pool hall watching a game (1). Since Bud can afford the time to watch in spite of a low heroin supply (2), his hustle is a reliable one. (One informant suggests that line 2 indicates a large heroin supply; the others disagree). In addition to its reliability, the hustle is also lucrative, since Bud can both support his habit and afford good clothes (3, 4, and 53). His ability to employ an expensive lawyer and afford bribe money (56, 59, and 60) is another such indication.

Bud is also a diverse hustler, not limited to one particular hustling skill. He deals heroin (17), pimps for ten prostitutes, and uses confidence games (54). When he perceives a hustling opportunity, Bud utilizes it. He attempts to sell the stranger fake heroin (26) although, in this case, the hustle is unsuccessful. The important point is that Bud did not miss the opportunity.

¹⁰ Abrahams, *Positively Black*, 122.

Another high-status attribute is Bud's use of high-quality heroin. His "wholesale" purchase (18) indicates that he buys "weight" (bulk quantity, usually one ounce or more). At this level, heroin is less adulterated than that obtained from dealers in the street. Bud later describes the quality by referring to it as "high-percentage shit" (34).

Another indication of Bud's status is his relationship with the "square" (non-drug-using) society. For example, he never "hollers," but rather "follows," the rules of the "game" (50). In other words, he fatalistically accepts the "bust" rather than pleading or informing in return for a lighter sentence. He refuses to accept defeat, wearing the same grin as he does when he wins (83-84).

The toast also mentions some characteristics of the authority-holding "square" society. Although their assigned responsibility is to correct Bud's illegal behavior, much of their own behavior is also illegal or unjust (77, 78, and 82). Such illegal activity is exemplified by the agent's false testimony (75) that Bud had completed the sale (52). Actually, the two were trying the heroin when the arrest occurred (36); the sale had not taken place. Further it is not ethics but rather fear that prompts the D.A. to refuse a bribe (60). Bud also criticizes the lighter punishment of what he views as a more serious act (80), especially when compared with his punishment (72).

The toast does display some respect for one aspect of the authority system. It was a "fed" who busted Bud (38), and the presence of fed "heat" is enough to reduce illegal activities (47, 48). Further, the lawyer says that he "can't buy the F.B.I." (60).

In summary, then, Bud is a respected, well-liked man. His hustling skills provide him with a reliable, lucrative source of money. He is a "stand-up cat"¹¹ who does not accept the authority system that hypocritically tolerates some illegal acts while punishing others. In short, this toast describes the addict as a financial success, admired by others in his environment.¹²

"King Heroin," on the other hand, differs in its view of the addict. By examining this toast, we learn of a different perspective on addiction.

King Heroin

Behold my friends for I am King Heroin,
Known to all mankind as the destruction of men.
From where I first came nobody knows,
I come from the land where the poppy seed grows.
I'm a world-known force and all know its true. 5
Use once and you'll know it too.
All nations have gathered to plot my destruction
For I am breeder of crime and corruption.
I've captured men's wills, destroyed their minds,
Caused men to commit brutal crimes. 10
Now I can make a mere schoolboy forget his books,

¹¹ Harvey W. Feldman, "Ideological Supports to Becoming and Remaining a Heroin Addict," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 9 (1968), 133.

¹² For some related themes in nonaddict Negro folklore, consult Abrahams, *Positively Black*.

Make a world-famous beauty neglect her looks,
 Make a good husband forsake his wife,
 Send a greedy man to prison, for the rest of his life.
 Some think my adventures are a joy and thriller, 15
 But I'll put a gun in your hand and make you a killer.
 I'll make a good man sell his country or deny his flag,
 Make a good girl a whore for a five-dollar bag.
 I can make many addicts go out and steal,
 Make a hungry man even miss his meal. 20
 For some I'll make a profit of five or ten,
 I'll make a man in trouble tell on a friend.
 Those greedy few who use the most,
 I'll kill off quick with my overdose.
 So I'm not to behold, more treasured than diamonds, 25
 More precious than gold, more potent than whiskey,
 More deadly than wine,
 For I am the destruction of all mankind.
 Would you like to hear more of the things I can do
 Of the women I defiled, of the men I slew. 30
 In Germany, I stopped an army, in France they ran,
 I'm honored in China, respected in Japan.
 Now the law has taken you from under my wing,
 How dare they defy me for I am the king.
 Now you must lay in the county jail. 35
 And I can't get through by visit or mail,
 Now you must suffer all parts of my game,
 Lie in discomfort, squat in pain.
 Awake in the morning so hungry and weak,
 With your tongue so swollen you can hardly speak. 40
 Vomit your guts out with a hacking cough
 Six days of this madness and you might throw me off.
 Curse me by name, defy me in speech,
 But you would pick me up if I were in reach.
 As sure as I am King Heroin, you will come for a taste. 45
 Many a shot will be cooked, because now you are hooked.
 Now you heard my warning and didn't pay heed,
 So put your feet in the stirrups, and mount my steed,
 Sit tight in the saddle and ride me well,
 For the white horse of heroin will take you to hell. 50

DISCUSSION

"King Heroin" describes the addict quite differently from "Honky Tonk Bud." The only references to the "Bud" type addict are in line 15—"some think my adventures are a joy and a thriller"—and in line 21—"for some I'll make a profit of five or ten." The rest of the toast discusses heroin as a powerful force with negative effects.

The power of heroin and the resultant fear and respect in men are indicated frequently in the toast, beginning with the title itself—"King Heroin." The drug is characterized as the "destruction of men" (2 and 28) and "a world-known force" (5), which can control entire nations (7 and 31-32). Heroin also totally controls the individual. He needs only to use it once (6), and he will return to use it again (44-46). This occurs in spite of heroin's ability to "ruin" men (30 and 50). The two "ruinous" effects cited most frequently are deviant behavior and harmful physical effects.

Heroin can force one to commit crimes (8 and 10), such as murder (16), prostitution (18), and theft (19), and can lead to incarceration (14 and 35). Heroin can also destroy marriages (13), override patriotism (17), or turn a man into an informant (22). It can force a student to neglect his education or a girl to ignore her physical appearance (11-12). In addition, heroin causes malnutrition (20), can result in death from an overdose (23-24), and produces suffering, the withdrawal syndrome (38-42).

In short, the addict described in "King Heroin" is a "deviant," an abnormal type who engages in socially unapproved behavior because his addiction controls him. His deviation from normal patterns of behavior, together with the harmful physical effects, depict him as a social failure who suffers physically from his addiction.

TWO VIEWS OF THE ADDICT

The two toasts describe two quite different types of addict self-image. Bud is a successful, admired figure, while the addict in "King Heroin" is pictured as a social failure. This apparent contradiction results from the addict's simultaneous membership in two cultural groups.¹³ On the one hand, he is a member of the "culture of addiction" with the values, goals, and rules of appropriate behavior exemplified by Bud. On the other hand, he is also a member of what Hannerz calls "mainstream" culture,¹⁴ and it defines him as criminally deviant. As described in "King Heroin," he lacks the proper set of values, goals, and rules of appropriate behavior. This dual membership is also reflected in linguistic style. "Honky Tonk Bud" draws heavily on addict argot, while "King Heroin" is almost completely in standard English.

Each toast attempts to resolve the contradictory demands of the two cultural systems. In "Honky Tonk Bud," the validity of the mainstream culture's judgment is weakened by pointing out that its members do not accept their own standards. In "King Heroin," the addict is absolved of responsibility for his deviant behavior, since the power of heroin does not allow the individual any choice.

The conflict inherent in this dual membership is also reflected in many informants' conversations. An informant will discuss the excitement of "the life," or recall and proudly explain a particularly "slick hustle" that he used. Later, the same informant will characterize himself as "sick" and his street behavior as "disgusting."

¹³ For a related point vis-à-vis the Negro subculture, see Ulf Hannerz, "Roots of Black Manhood," *Transaction*, 6 (1969).

¹⁴ Ibid.

The two toasts, then, suggest that street heroin addicts may hold quite different self-images, depending on their cultural identification at a particular point in time. This suggests an interesting hypothesis. Responses to research or treatment personnel may depend on the cultural identification of the addict at the time an interview is administered. If we further speculate that interaction with these "others," who represent the mainstream culture, tends to reinforce an addict's identification with that same culture, then many studies of addiction have focused primarily on the "King Heroin" self-image of the addict. In fact, many studies of addicts emphasize this image—the failure of the addict to adapt socially or psychologically.¹⁵ Only recently have long-term, community-based field studies described the addict as having a "Honky Tonk Bud" self-image. We still have a great deal to learn about this aspect of addiction, since relatively few studies of this type have been done.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the toasts suggests several things about heroin addiction. First of all, "Honky Tonk Bud" describes a social success and portrays many of the correlated attributes. Among these are hustling skills, quality heroin, and a refusal to acquiesce to authorities. "King Heroin," on the other hand, describes a social failure who behaves abnormally and suffers physically. If we assume that folklore represents cultural content, then we have evidence for two types of self-image that could be held by the addict.

The toasts reflect the addict's simultaneous membership in two cultures where the values, goals, and rules of appropriate behavior place conflicting demands on the individual. As a member of the mainstream culture, the addict fails to meet demands; as a member of the addict culture, the addict can successfully meet demands.

Perhaps research or treatment by members of the mainstream culture tends to reinforce the self-image associated with membership in that culture. Such interaction would reveal the addict as a failure. On the other hand, interaction with others "in the streets" (in the addict's community environment) might reinforce the other self-image, the admired hustler. This second self-image has been recently discussed by a few professionals. Perhaps future studies will produce more information on this aspect of addiction. To understand the heroin addict, we need to understand the "Honky Tonk Bud" self-image as well as the one reflected in "King Heroin." The "Honky Tonk Bud" self-image can increase our understanding of what it is that "the life" in the streets does for an individual.

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¹⁵ See, for example, Isidor Chein and others, *The Road to H* (New York, 1964); Arthur P. Noyes and Lawrence Kolb, *Modern Clinical Psychiatry* (Philadelphia, 1963), 473-481.

¹⁶ See, for example, Agar; Feldman; Edward Preble and John J. Casey, Jr., "Taking Care of Business—The Heroin User's Life in the Street," *The International Journal of the Addictions*, 4 (1969), 1-24; Herbert Blumer, *The World of Youthful Drug Use* (Berkeley, Calif., 1967).