

In this great future, you can't forget your past Peter Simon's Eye and I

In the beginning there was but one concept
And that's the concept of I
Then arose Apaleon the Devil,
claiming that it's you and I
And from that day on
There is trouble in the world
And the world has gone astray
—Bunny Wailer, *Amigedeon* (Armagedon)
1976,

By VICTOR FORBES

He's a Rasta man through and through, Peter Simon is. From the cover of his book, entitled *I and Eye*, to the end credits, where the acknowledgments "Give thanks and praise," Peter Simon is dread to the bone. How, you may wonder, does this self-described scion of upper middle class privilege, college grad turned hippie turned spiritual wanderer, become (in the words of the aforementioned Mr. Wailer) the "whola, full-up, up-full man from Zion?"

It's 5:30 on a Saturday morning, going into Sunday, and as is my wont, I am at the computer pushing some words around, shooting for another publication, sitting, thinking, maybe trolling on *Nerve*, with sports radio sizzling rudely in the background, static signal unable to come clean over shared computer lines. You know how it is, of course. Sure you do. And over the airwaves, over the white noise, faintly, I hear a voice. Ann Ligor, one of the few distaffers on WFAN, a hostess of knowledge, intelligence and savoir fare, talking about Jackie Robinson with a guest — a photographer who has a famous sister. I tune in a little tighter, making my attention rivet to the conversation because there's not a thing I can do about the lack of good reception. The antennae lies to the side, long broken off the boom box and the masking tape didn't do much to hold it but just before Ann tells me who she's speaking with, I know it's Peter Simon. The great Peter Simon, the one and only Peter Simon, my first hero, my first role model, and the first person whose success irritated me beyond belief.

The year was 1966 and I'm a cub reporter at the *Riverdale Press*, the weekly neighborhood newspaper of a very beautiful area of New York City located in the upper most reaches of the Bronx. Yes, that *da Bronx*. As you may know, Peter's father was the Simon of Simon and Shuster (yes that Simon and Shuster), the only son and youngest in a family of four children where the sisters were nailing three part harmonies in their early teens and Peter, the adored little brother, was writing and publishing a 32 page family

newspaper monthly with a circulation of 24, a number marked proudly on the front cover.

In an introductory essay to *Eye and I*, Peter's sister Carly describes this somewhat idyllic era "before music changed all our lives in the mid-sixties" during which Peter also served as sound engineer and co-author, with Carly and another family friend of "spontaneous, startlingly musical operas. As well as operating the family tape-recorder." With his sister at the height of her talent "as a fifteen year old with nothing to lose — the productions were spontaneous, startlingly musical, and redolent of hyper hormone humor and startlingly bad taste." Not only that, but my boyhood hero also sung (and improvised) the arias. Again, I didn't really know any personal stuff about him, but all I ever heard around the Riverdale Press office for the first six months I worked there was Peter Simon this, Peter Simon that and Carly didn't have a hit record out, his father was long since dead and even longer out of the publishing business. Finally, he went away to college allowing the guy above me to move up the food chain and me to finally reach the somewhat exalted position of Sports Editor. Given my own desk, my own assignment, a new location overlooking Van Cortlandt Park and a chance to write and shoot and develop my own pictures, I began to carve out an identity and forget about this Peter Simon character. I even trod his old stomping grounds, Riverdale Country School, where I covered a basketball game and photographed the future National Football League Hall of Famer Calvin Hill playing high school hoops.

I hate to admit it, but I have the listener number to WFAN memorized, but you can forgive, because in 1967, I was the best sports writer in the city, and you can look it up in my high school yearbook, under a picture of Mike White, who had the best jump shot in the city from long range. One morning, many years ago, my clock radio went off at 5:30 and I was listening to IMUS. He was running a contest in which he played a song that was a cover and wanted to know who the original artist was. For guessing this right, you'd win a Don Imus bobble head doll. This particular morning, the song was "Drip Drop" as recorded by the great Bronxite Dion DiMucci. Of course I knew it was a Lieber and Stoller composition initially released by the Drifters, who had a modest hit with it on the Rhythm and Blues (meaning black) charts. I recalled shopping in Greenwich Village, at The House of Oldies, where Freddie

Belmont and I laid down three dollars for Dion's original version of the 45. I had the answer but had to wait through another caller's wrong response before I was able to get through. I won the prize and told the producer, Bernie, that I was Vito from Belmont Avenue and that I was president of the Dion Preservation Society, whose sole purpose was to monitor radio stations around the country making sure Dion received royalties from airplay. To do this, we had a rather large antennae set-up on a roof top between 188th and 187th Streets in the Fordham section. I don't know if that bit of nonsense made it on the air, but I did get my prize a few weeks later.

So I dialed and told the screener that I knew Peter from way back when, when he was a journalistic superstar in my old neighborhood and I would like to talk to him. The show was winding down. Rachel Robinson, Jackie's elegant and well-spoken widow had just said goodbye after a long conversation (the great baseball player was a family friend and a photograph of Peter and his father, with his hero, Jackie and Jackie's son, Jackie Jr., in the Dodgers' Ebbets Field dugout is prominently featured on page 4). My only connection with the Robinson's dated back to the mid-1960s when I held a summer job at a delicatessen on Sixth Avenue and delivered lunch to the offices that housed the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

I was immediately put through, shared some talk with Peter about Riverdale and was pleased as punch that he seemed equally happy to hear from me. Actually, I never knew him when we lived in the same neighborhood and worked for the same newspaper. Being a few years behind him, I was kind of an awestruck kid in the presence of a superstar. It was many years later that I finally met him and it was through a contact in the art field, Elliot Blinder, who was managing an artist, Fanch Ledan, whose work was to appear in an issue of this magazine. Somehow, the conversation turned to something that caused Peter Simon's name to be brought up and I told Elliott that Peter and I shared a common bond dating back to pre-hippie days and that I would love to meet him. Elliot arranged this and we also created an art print for him, a photograph hand-colored by his wife Ronni called *Wisteria Road*. It was an arduous printing task and getting the image to pop on uncoated archival paper was no mean feat, but everyone was finally satisfied by the time Peter left Ronkonkoma to catch a ferry for the

Vineyard. His closing comment to me, on the radio, was that Wisteria Road was prominently featured in his new book and I should contact his web sight and he'd have his publisher send us a copy.

This pleasant exchange kind of assuaged the pre-dawn blues and a few weeks later, a large envelope from Little Brown and Company (with offices in Boston, New York and London), arrived at *Fine Art* headquarters on Long Island, which was anxiously opened and voraciously ingested cover to cover before the next day's sunrise.

For anyone born of a certain era, reading Peter's account of those times, and viewing the pictures, is a flashback to a time when the world really was ours for the taking. As he writes, on the occasion of a *Rolling Stone* special photography issue which featured a shot of Carly and her then husband James Taylor on their honeymoon in Hawaii: "What you're looking at are two people who were young and madly in love. That was indeed a time when everything was new and the world was our oyster. As a generation we felt that way, and perhaps this attitude comes across in the photograph." Certainly, for a brief time, I think we were all with the program in some way, whether we were in love or not. The carry over of that energy, that brightness equated with that of a shooting star, is unbridled on every page of *Eye and I*.

As one of the indisputably great chroniclers of recent and current history — yes, Virginia, the sixties are recent — Peter's primary gift has been to sustain the cultural continuum. Through *Eye and I* and his other books, his work for periodicals, and even his more laid back current projects (weddings and family portraits at the golden hour on the Vineyard, among others) his words and pictures show that we were more than a generation lost in space. We were, for the most part, idealists. Our hope was fostered by modern times, free love and the back to nature movement and buoyed by the unity of millions through shared cultural, spiritual and political activism which culminated in small victories, the end of the Vietnam War and the eventual removal of Nixon from office. There are even-handed accounts of the downside of the era: open relationships gone sour, dastardly deeds done by brethren (Peter was screwed by his own partner in the communal farm), bloated and drug addicted rock icons, mis-guided gurus and flocks of disciples searching for deep truths but settling for a contact high from the object of their adoration.

What separates Peter Simon's work from that of his contemporaries is the ambience generated through an exchange of energy between photographer and subject. While Annie Liebowitz advised, "Don't be an out-

right fan. Be with them on equal terms..." The self-effacing Peter Simon approach was, "Who am I to tell Jerry Garcia how he should look and smile?" For this approach, Garcia lauded Simon as "The left wing of all media photographers," and Simon was afforded total access, before, during and after the shows.

In editing some 800 plus photos down to the 300 or so that made the final cut, one can see that Simon's subjects are totally at ease, whether they're stark naked plowing a field, grouply naked on a Vineyard beach, on a rickety rowboat with a German Shepherd (for James Taylor's *One Man Dog* album), or, as in the case of Bob Marley, flashing dreadlocks while smoking a spliff on the hood of his Bavarian BMW in front of his Kingston, Jamaica home. *Eye and I* is rife with world class photographs. Many have appeared in previous Peter Simon books and album covers, and many are shown here for the first time.

It was a natural progression from the confines of the big city to the hills of Vermont for a few years of communal life and then to the herb fields of Jamaica, where one found the true hippie idealism that died in America alive, at least until the importation of crack and cocaine, in the ital rastafarian camps and the words of the prophets: Big Youth, Burning Spear, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer and Bob Marley. Simon was there in 1973, pre-Eric Clapton "I Shot The Sheriff" when you could barely find three reggae records in even the biggest of the big city music outlets. Let's see. It was *The Harder They Come* soundtrack, *The Wailers' Burnin'*, and maybe something by Burning Spear. That all would change shortly, as the riddims and message of a handful of artists from that small tropical paradise with a population of "sufferers" soon could be heard on concert stages throughout the world. *Reggae Bloodlines* with collaborator Stephen Davis, chronicles the height and power of reggae in Jamaica during a watershed period of creativity. It came about as a result of a front page article in 1975 in the *New York Times*. That was the year we started *SunStorm*, featuring an interview with Bob Marley in our very first issue and I had already spent a year in Jamaica, teaching school, learning reggae guitar and understanding everything about the music was totally the opposite of everything I came out of, and the same could be said for life, for life in that country, on that land, was not like life anywhere else. No amount of communal intrigue, no amount of time spent with Ram Dass, no amount of tripping with the Grateful Dead, could prepare you for the red hills of St. Ann, the three o'clock roadblocks and the chicanery/viciousness of the two-legged tropical snakes. Were it not for the bungling ineptness of a ratchet wielding street punk,

Mr. Simon could easily have been just another tourist, missing in action on a dreadlock holiday. But then Peter Simon seems to have been born not only to a well-to-do and loving family, but to a greater mission. His life spared from murderers on more than one occasion, the angels protecting Peter have given him the Eye to go with the I described in the presage to this piece. Via his linear passage through time, his vision, his incredible moments of deep spiritual intimacy with, for want of a better word, the superstars of a generation, Peter shares his experiences firsthand and forthrightly. His journal entries are the equal of his photographs: shimmering passages of insight, reflections of the major events that shaped an era and the minuscule ones that shaped a life. Peter's journey is our own. He has managed to lead the uncompromised creative life, full of much love and many lovers. Now happily married for twenty-five years, he is even afforded the ultimate victory: his thirteen year-old son Willie and his friends think he's cool, as did the cops on the Vineyard, back in the day. "The cinematic vision of various island police folk of that era fearlessly driving down my dirt road in their Chevy Blazers and taking off their badges and guns to share joints with me was beyond my previous experiences. I figured the counterculture revolutionary war was over and we had finally won." The victory was short lived. It seems that this world today is far more volatile and dangerous than it was when we were bombing rice fields and under the threat of Russian hydrogen bombs.

A quarter of a century later, President Clinton with Hillary in tow, vacationed at Carly's home on the Vineyard, prior to the public knowledge of his foolishness. Peter spotted the power couple alone together in a breezeway and had tears in his eyes as they both spontaneously reached out to hug him. No, silly, it wasn't for a quick three-way, it was because they were touched by the sincerity of his emotional words: "I feel really honored and proud that you are able to represent our generation in office. We all have stood up for many things over the years—equality, peace, justice and a warmer more compassionate way of relating to one another. Thank you for bringing it all to the mainstream."

And thank you Peter, for bringing it all back home, for showing us that the Eye belongs with the I on the path to the ultimate yoga of I and I. Your book of beautiful, touching and sometimes heartbreaking images (i.e. John and Judy Belushi) and your passionate and sincere words, stripped of pretense and self-serving editing, will continue to enlighten many more generations along, what your buddies in the Dead refer to as The Golden Road To Unlimited Devotion, which I am sure, is the preferable route to our ultimate destination.