

Eszterhas, Joe

San Francisco

By Joe Eszterhas

(Eszterhas, an editor for Rolling Stone magazine in San Francisco, wrote this article for Newsday)

SAN FRANCISCO, June 15—About a month ago, the two guys who wrote the song about leaving your heart in San Francisco ate their own lucrative words. They apologized. The city they wrote the song about is dead, they said. San Francisco has been replaced by a cold-blooded highrise filled with schizoids and zomboids. Or, as Herb Caen, columnist and town conscience, said: "The city is cruel to the weak, deaf to those who love it, subservient only to those who are wrecking it. Like all neurotics, the city hates its friends and loves its enemies."

Whatever happened to San Francisco? A long time ago, when it was known as the Paris of America, you could believe in romance. It was a zesty and full-flavored town. The air was filled with saltwater, coffee, sourdough, steam beer and eucalyptus. Legends haunted the sidewalks and shrubbery of Nob Hill, Union Square and North Beach. Lucius Beebe fandangied in his princely fey style. Jack London looked weatherworn and worldwide in his battered leather jacket. Saroyan peddled his bicycle up and over impossible inclines.

Willie Mays belonged in that lore-filled time, a larger-than-life hero of a heroic world. That he was never treated here with lionized respect, that his heroics were almost taken for granted, goes a long way toward explaining why the songwriters say their

song is a lie. Willie Mays is gone and nobody cares.

Life goes on with a foghorn's drone. The price of Parisian bread and Irish coffee keeps going up. Faded and time-kissed downtown offices keep coming down. Fog hangs over it all like some apathetic fate. Willie Mays is gone and Herb Caen, cornered by an ecstatic New York skycap, is jolted by the thought: "I don't recall a San Francisco skycap having anything good to say about Willie Mays."

A generation ago, when the Giants came to Candlestick from the Polo Grounds, another columnist, the wise and ornery Charles McCabe, wrote: "San Francisco has been saying for decades that it is big league. In its secret heart it has never been quite sure. These days it is." Willie Mays is gone, there is a mile-wide psychic crater out there in center field, and if San Francisco has a secret heart, then it belongs to people like the mayor, Joe Alioto, and not to Willie Mays.

A few weeks after Mays' trade to the Mets, the Giants met the Dodgers at Candlestick ("The Giants is dead," Chuck Dressen once said). The mayor himself, Joe Alioto, showed up to inspire his team. The Giants were in last place and they needed inspiration the way some women need silicone.

Each game was more humiliating than the last. A San Francisco Chronicle headline even read: "Giants Make Like Keystone Comedy." Willie Mays was gone and Joe Alioto was there to rally his team and a radio announcer with a tired, cigaret-choked voice

started the play-by-play paraphrasing "The Godfather": "So with the mayor here we can't lose. Joe Alioto will make them a deal they can't refuse." It was a long way from heroism.

When Willie Mays was traded away, it should have hit the town like one of the earth tremors everyone is paranoid about. Willie Mays played 14 summers here. He became the second-biggest home-run hitter in baseball history, for a while. He was always gracious, classy, eager to please. When little kids asked him for an autograph, he always took the time, perhaps remembering Rogers Hornsby's dictum that any ballplayer who won't sign autographs for little kids isn't an American, he's a communist.

The trade was announced, Horace Stoneham smiled and the town shrugged its shoulders.

The day it was announced was like any other. Carol Burnett was in town shooting a new movie. Gov. Reagan was in town, too, photographed hustling into the men's room of the Jack Tar Hotel, prompting an aide to say "See? He's human!" Carol Doda, the silicone queen, was getting her medicine-ball front into high gear on a neon Broadway bedroom-stage.

Sportswriters reacted with predictably jellied knees. Their attitude was best summed up by a writer who lamented Mays' "market value" and suggested he should have been "peddled" long ago. It wasn't clear whether he was talking about a prize bull or a man.

In an old English bar on Union

Street called Thomas Lord's, decorated by a fireplace and posters urging "Go 49ers Go," a middle-aged man with long blond hair creeping over his ears drank his Guinness and discussed trading a Hall of Famer for a minor leaguer. He goes to about a dozen baseball games a year, doesn't miss any 49er games, and he is a private detective.

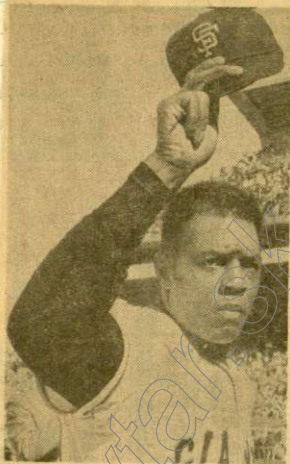
"Well, sure," the private eye allowed, "some people might feel a little bad about Mays being traded, but that's just emotionalism, that's just naive. Let's face it: Willie is over the hill."

"Just look at what he did for us this year. Nothing. Zilch. He struck out a lot. He hit into a lot of double plays. He might get a few key hits, a few homers even, but it isn't worth the expense of hanging onto him. He's just too old. We were paying him million-dollar Medicare. He should have had the dignity to retire like Koufax or Jim Brown."

"So the way I see it, if a man doesn't have that kind of class, he shouldn't get too upset if he's treated like any other piece of meat. We should have traded him a long time ago."

The team publicity machine is grinding overtime to fill the centerfield crater with hot air. So Willie Mays, has-been, is gone. So what? San Francisco has the King. The King is David Arthur Kingman, 23 years old, 6-feet-3, 210 pounds, only two years out of college. A.k.a. the Oregon Cowboy. He is





The giant of Giants' farewell

near the top of the standings in home runs and RBI.

The hot-air machine says the Oregon Cowboy hits home runs that are longer than Babe Ruth's. Does he think of himself as a Willie Mays? "Well, I don't know," the King aww-shucksed, "as long as I keep hittin' I'm happy."

Willie Mays is gone and the kid

peddling their bubble-gum cards the way Horace Stoneham peddles legend now have a new hero: the King! The Oregon Cowboy! When I was a kid growing up in Cleveland, I remember trading three Ted Kluszewskis, on Mickey Mantle and two Ernie Bankse for a single Willie Mays. I treasure that card even though Willie May broke my heart.

When the Indians got into the 195 Series against the Giants, I was 1 years old. Vic Wertz, biceps like Poj eye, haircut like Dick the Bruise was my hero. The Indians got creamed. Wertz hit a towering drive to deep center field and Willie Mays made one of the game's historic body-twisting catches. The Series ended for me with that gravity-defying leap.

I came to San Francisco from Cleveland not long ago and looked forward to seeing Willie Mays in Candlestick this year. It would be rejuvenating to see a genuine childhood idol. The closest thing to a hero in Cleveland was Sam McDowell, a beer-bellied bellyaching southpaw who got into losing battles and acted like a prissified prim donna half the time. His arm was forever victim to some mysterious disease. I thought it was either chronic laziness or a terminal allergy to Lake Erie.

So I got to San Francisco and this is what happened: Willie Mays is gone. Center field should have been boxed and shipped to New York with him. Juan Marichal can't buy a victory. An look who is the dean of the San Francisco Giants' pitching staff? Sure, Sam McDowell.

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