Last Year at Betty and Bob's: An Adventure

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Red on Blue

_Transcript of an early ShazDada radio interview with Red Betty._

**SD:** Hey there, Red, thanks for chatting with me today. It’s been a minute. Nice cape grrlll! So, what’s up?

**RB:** Nice to be here Shaz. [pause] Yeah, I’m good. Real good. Been working out, muscling up my quads, hamstrings, and biceps so I can climb small mountains and cargo netting without complaint. I practice every other day on the climbing wall they’re building over at TAP. It’s coming along. All these colorful little pimples on the gray face of those dirty walls. When I practice I like to put a copy of _Das Kapital_ in my backpack for the added weight of the ascent. I don’t read German so it’s entirely symbolic and well, genealogical I like to think.

**SD:** Are you a Marxist?

**RB:** No. Well, not really. M and E’s brand of capitalism isn’t relevant nowadays to my mind but I remain reverential. You gotta admit they had foresight and some useful definitions. There are a number of more pertinent books I refer to but they don’t pack the same emblematic punch if you know what I mean.
SD: Actually, I’m not at all schooled in Marx so I don’t really know what you mean. Can you be more specific?

RB: Oh my, we’re gonna get into this alternative economies stuff right off the bat, are we? I was hoping we’d talk about music or food or film or shoes. You know, sometimes I get so weary of revolution. I’m getting older …

SD: Aren’t we all.

RB: … and hoisting my bod up a vertical plane takes a lot out of me. Sure it’s exhilarating. Scary. When I reach whatever pinnacle I realize my own limit. The surface, the material, the space I’m negotiating has no limit, it’s a wealth of infinities. And yeah, ok, so is my body but you know, when it’s exhausted it’s ….

SD: Exhausted. Point taken. Let’s talk about shoes for a minute then. I take it those aren’t authentic Christian Louboutin’s you’re wearing. Or are they? Fess up. [both laugh]

RB: OK, good, now we’re on to something. You know, the first time I ever saw a pair of black heels with red soles they were on fuckin Hanoi Jane Fonda’s politically complicated feet. She was on some, uh, late night talk show. I went bonkers. There was my soul shoe, so to speak, on a well-meaning elitist. Now, I’m not usually a mimic artist but in this instance I was motivated to copy. A bottle of Gloss Cherry Red Krylon is never far away in my house. I tagged a pair of my mom’s old stilettos with what I like to think of as a red tongue that sticks out whenever I cross my legs or climb the TAP net.

SD: So how exactly is fashionable styling incorporated into your ethos?
RB: [pause] You’re not quite Terry Gross yet but you do ask to-the-point questions Shaz. [both laugh]

RB: Yeah, the fashion industry is an aesthetico-politico conundrum I put on and take off regularly. Of course I cannot support the commodity fetish of 600 unit stilettos. But I can support an attention to personal presentation and styling choices. I’m especially keen on those that flaunt the bleeding edge of respectability. Now this might seem like an odd association, as you’d probably expect me to quote RuPaul, but I was reading Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend* last month and my heart pounded in sync with Lila’s slow, quiet, falling in love with making beautiful shoes. Mind you she wasn’t making five-inch heels in post-war Naples, but her rebelliousness was channeled through welts and uppers or we could say toeboxes, counters, vamps, and heels. I mention this because popstar fashion examples are so clichéd. The fashionista tactics of celebrity miss the tactility of material, color, fold. A falling in love with fabric and idiosyncrasy in the presentation of self. I’ve got this passage bookmarked in the ebook of the Neopolitan novels. Just a sec, I’ll find it on my phone. [pause] Here it is.

Once she showed me the designs for shoes that she wanted to make with her brother, both men’s and women’s. They were beautiful designs, drawn on graph paper, rich in precisely colored details, as if she had had a chance to examine shoes like that close up in some world parallel to ours and then had fixed them on paper. In reality she had invented them in their entirety and in every part, as she had done in elementary school when she drew princesses, so that, although they were normal shoes, they didn’t resemble any that were seen in the neighborhood, or even those of the actresses in the photo novels.

SD: Reminds me of line in a song I once heard, can’t recall the band, but it went, let me try and sing it ♪♫♬:

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That Vogue magazine that you buy is a flagrant luxury if you ask me, you don't look like anybody else I've seen or even read about.

**RB:** Yeah, exactly, like that. That's what I'm up for.

**SD:** Do you think you're the most fashion-conscious Betty?

**RB:** Definitely not dear. Orange, Brown, and Mauve Betty carry off much bolder statements. White B sticks with matching jogging outfits which is either hilarious, sad, or rad, depending on your perspective. Now, Black Betty Bob is the one with real talent. He's got it. The attention he pays to layering his wardrobe, his excessive accessories, every single fuckin' day, is breathtaking. He's the more-than of personal appearance. Blue, she's another story altogether though. I can't quite figure her out. She makes sure to have a bluish trapping, some bluey thingie, at all times but she's not particularly creative about her wardrobe.

**SD:** Can you say a bit more about her? I've always been curious as she's quite different from the rest of you.

**RB:** Well, for one thing, she's got a paying gig at an advertising firm. We all HATE that as it's the epitome of capitalist malevolence. Aside from stockbroking of course which trumps all wickedness. But she's got a convincing rejoinder about it. She thinks she can do some good with the persuasive power that's given her. Insider activism – that argument. You know she's responsible for that AWFUL vegan food chain jingle, but she claims it boosted vegan dietary trends by 22% or something like that. So what can I say about that? In her own stupid way she's decreasing cow-fart methane production in this country. Honestly, it's more than I can say about my own effectiveness. Bartering and eating rough, my activist interests have not really caught on outside TAP.
SD: Is Blue Betty pleased with her success?

RB: No, not at all. She thinks of herself as an aspiring poet, but making a living, paying the rent, throws a chokehold around her desires. She’s really pragmatic. Comes from a working-class Irish Catholic family with a lot of kids. Grew up with an intractable work ethic. I think she feels guilty when she writes for her own pleasure. She dislikes the jingle factory and has confessed to me that she sucks at it. She’s unhappy, squandering her potential, and I hope she won’t mind my saying this publically. I actually think she could be a good, maybe great poet or librettist. Got a knack for internal rhyme and rhythm she can’t access in jingle construction, no matter how politically correct. She reminds me a bit of Eileen Myles, you know, and I think that’s a big compliment to her potential.

SD: Let’s take a little break and come back for a new round.
RB: So I tried to look up this passage from CAConrad’s *Book of Frank* in the john. But shit, I couldn’t find it. I’ll send it to you later if you’re interested. I didn’t know we were gonna talk about Blue so much or I would have made sure to bring it with me. I think it says everything about our relationship. Blue likes this passage too but it scares her. Unlike me, she has a vivid fear of guns and falling. But anyway, I’m really sorry I don’t have it handy. You into poetry?


RB: Myles is in the scene for sure. Read at punk dives. Lived a block from me apparently in pre-snoopy downtown. Anyway, we must have shopped at the same bodega. Ha. I just remembered breaking a fresh jar of Hellmann’s on the sidewalk right there. It left a stain in the concrete for years. I called it “The REAL Mayonnaise Spill.” [laughs]

SD: What’s in REAL mayonnaise that would cause it to irreparably stain concrete? That’s kinda scary.

RD: That can be our question of the day.

SD: No, no, I’ve got one more before we close this out. Since you mention that bodega. I know you survive now by a barter system which I’m guessing would prohibit you from purchasing that jar of Hellmann’s at your corner shop now. I really want to know more about your approach to queer economies.

RB: Honestly, there’s no easy answer to this. All I can tell you is I do my best to walk the anti-capitalist talk but it certainly doesn’t do Carlos, the owner of the bodega any
good, if I try and barter every damn roll of toilet paper for a service or decoupage ashtray – just kidding – but you get the gist here. For a barter economy to work you need an all-in community and a fairly sophisticated, dynamic system of value measurement. That’s why it sort of works at TAP and the farmer’s market but essentially nowhere else that I know of in the city. I think there’s relational potential in J-coins but that’s a far more complex topic.

**SD:** Obviously there’s much more to unpack on the issue of barter but I want to ask a more personal question. How did you get interested in this as an artist?

**RB:** Uh huh, yeah, well, one of my first activist artworks was back when I was in college. I was poor, really poor,
up the wazzoo in student loans. I couldn’t afford the food plan, so I shoplifted my groceries for two years. Come to think of it, it resonates with the rough eating I do now as part of my work. I think out of a sense of guilt, or righteousness, I decided back then to aestheticize my stealing skills. I took up a Robin Hood ethic mixed with a budding conceptualist nihilism. I spearheaded what I called the Silver Spoon campaign. Replaced shoplifted cans of wax beans and peas and such with my tag, silver spray painted plastic spoons. Only from the supermarchés mind you, the Krogers, Gristedes and Monoprixs, Albert Heijn. I left an ironic spoon there on the shelf for a housewife or stocker to find. I guess I thought I’d instantiate a pang of guilt or wake a consciousness. Ha. [laughs]. I donated all the canned proceeds to the Red Cross of course.

**SD:** Let me get this straight. You shoplifted cans of vegetables and left in their shelfspace a silver plastic spoon? Nothing else? No message, no political declaration? No manifesto?

**RB:** Nope. I felt it was more of an art statement if the political gesture remained symbolic, unsaid. It’s pretty clear isn’t it?

**SD:** Well, not really ... it’s kind of ambiguous or obtuse ... to me. How long did you do this?

**RB:** Maybe six months, not long. I never got caught. But I sucked at self-promotion so it remained a quiet initiative. Known only to me and the people who picked up the spoons. There was no attendant media blitz. I mention it because there was an exchange going on there. I didn't just rip off the food. I gave something back though its value is of course debatable. I’d still argue the affective charge was worth far more than the relatively nourishment free vacuum-packed Green Giant cut beans. [both laugh]
**SD:** So we have some insight into the origins of Red Betty’s alter-economy.

**RB:** I prefer queer.

**SD:** OK then. This is an auspicious beginning to a longer conversation. One more quickie, you and Blue, were you lovers?

**RB:** Well, hmm, how to answer that? You know we Bettys tend towards the polyamorous. Nothin’ newsworthy in that revelation. Between me and Blue, we had a purple moment, sure. Our temperaments didn’t sync as well as our genitalia did though.

**SD:** Thanks for dropping by Red. We’ll have to leave it there for now.