

On Mae Boren Axton
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

You learn about old age by going through it, as I am now. I'm finding that the public affairs of the day--the Donald Trump, or I guess now it's the Joe Biden, reality show, who's sneaking into the country illegally, the Covid hysteria, stimulus checks, all of it--fades into the far distance. It's all over there somewhere; or better, nowhere, who cares. The same with the latest show on HBO. Life on this leather coach I sit on all day has become about the veggie omelet I fixed this morning, how a sixteen-year-old girl who lives far away does on the ACT test she is taking right now, and the back surgery coming up the week after next that's scaring the hell out of me. Also, so I'm finding, the oddest, seemingly trivial, matters frequently occupy center stage in my mind.

An example of this last observation, getting caught up with things that don't matter a lick, or maybe do they, I don't know: For the past twenty-four hours, I've been pre-occupied with the realization—I'm pretty sure of it—that despite their life-long claim, Mae Boren Axton and Tommy Durden didn't co-write the song "Heartbreak Hotel," Elvis' first big national hit back in 1956, inspired, so they said, by an article in a Miami newspaper about a local man who jumped to his death leaving a suicide note with just "I walk a lonely street" written on it.

Mae didn't, as she affirmed time and again—she died in 1997--put a Heartbreak Hotel at end of the lonely street and come up with the first lines of the song:

Well, since my baby left me
I found a new place to dwell
It's down at the end of Lonely Street
At Heartbreak Hotel
I get so lonely, I get so lonely
I get so lonely I could die

And she and Tommy didn't work up the melody and the rest of the lyrics in an hour or so.

Mae did pitch the song to Elvis, and right there and then, he decided it was going to be his first single on his new RCA record contract—RCA had bought him out from Sun Records, where he had been a regional success. Thinking about what Elvis did 65 years ago as I've done all day, rather than, say, tonight's Super Bowl game and how amazing Tom Brady is, it strikes me that choosing this morbid song as his introduction to a national audience was a big time gutsy call on his part. I presume the executives at RCA had the shakes over putting this song out as Elvis' debut effort. "I get so lonely I could die"—yikes.

Back to Mae, I've decided that she was a song-plugger with access to Elvis and that's it. Tommy Durden wrote the whole song, melody and lyrics, and had been performing it for months before Mae ever even heard about it. In return for Mae getting the song to Elvis, Tommy gave her the co-writing credit and they came up with the Miami suicide story.

You can read about how this basically went down in a 2016 *Rolling Stone* article called "Solving the Mystery of Heartbreak Hotel"; it's online. *Rolling Stone* debunks the Miami suicide inspiration but goes along with the idea that Mae and Tommy co-wrote the song. After perusing the internet—I can't bring up references to the material I found—I've decided Tommy wrote the song, period; Mae had nothing to do with it. Nor did Elvis. He's listed as a co-writer, which his manager, Tom Parker, insisted on to bring in more money to Elvis and himself.

It does seem certain that something a soon-to-be dead man wrote inspired Tommy, just not the Miami suicide. A 27-year-old man by the name of Alvin Krolik got shot full of holes sticking up a liquor store in El Paso, Texas by the man working behind the counter. It turned out Alvin had been trying to find a publisher for a memoir, or part of one, he had put together that included, yes, "I

walk a lonely street,” and after he met his demise, that got written up in several newspapers around the country.

Thinking about Mae and Tommy and Elvis and Alvin has been what’s been going on in my head, with a few other thoughts and images mixed in for the last day, and now I’m writing about it. What’s that been about? I suppose nothing more than whatever somebody in Scotland who died a year later—not a bad actuarial projection for me at 80--was thinking in 1603.

If I had to give a meaning to my “Heartbreak Hotel” ponderings, I’d offer that they illustrate that, really, none of us has to get caught up with what they—those doing the talking and pointing the fingers--want us to be caught up with. We can give over our thoughts and concerns to what it must have been like for poor Alvin to announce “Give me all your money” and suddenly, surprise, get shot nine times while he convulsed on the floor (according to his killer), hell of a deal. We can do that and let Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez look out for herself, really we can.

And something else, it illustrates a conclusion I’m coming to very late in life: that whatever it is, it didn’t happen that way, it isn’t that way. I can’t think of an exception. Whatever I’ve looked into, it turned out that the accepted wisdom about it is off in a big way. World War II, how best to teach (I was in education as a career), the virtues of diversity, anything, everything, it wasn’t, isn’t, true. All those things Einstein did that were so great? He didn’t do them. And that holds for personal as well as public concerns. That thing that happened to us as children? It didn’t happen that way. That thing that is motivating us right now? That isn’t why we are doing it. And so on

One more, and it’s the big one: nothing matters, not really, except what vegetables went into the omelet this morning, how an ACT test you care about is going, and the back surgery a week from Tuesday—maybe I should cancel it.