

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

# A MAN OUT OF TIME

LOCAL AUTHOR'S NEW BOOK  
**UNTIME** SEARCHES FOR  
THE TRUTH IN  
UNLIKELY WORLDS

By Lynnette Shelley



I still remember when I picked up a copy of *Clockwork Orange* for the first time. I was standing in a cool recess of the Newark Public Library one blazing-white summer day, 16- or 17-years-old, out of school for summer vacation and scanning the shelves for something to read. Not knowing anything about the book other than having heard its title, I flipped to the first page. Completely surprised by the alien jargon I encountered, I kept reading. Overcoming my initial confusion, I found that the mix of Russian, English and the futuristic made-up slang of the protagonist Alec had subconsciously filtered into my brain, so that when I came to the last page, I had become immersed in another world. It wasn't just knowing what a "milk bar" or a "droog" was, I knew who Alec was. Furthermore, through the book's subtle social commentary of a hypothetical world, I knew who I was.

Which is all the more fitting that I should end up once again at the same library to meet Newark author, poet, journalist and radio personality Steven Leech to discuss his new work, *Untime*. On many levels, *Untime* and *Clockwork Orange* are alike (the language-style is unlikely to be familiar at first glance, and both are political and social commentaries), but at the same time, Leech diverges from this pattern by injecting a Kerouac-inspired beat to his prose, with a sophisticated non-linear time construction reminiscent of *Slaughterhouse Five*.

"I call my prose, 'prose with a poetic license,'" chuckles Leech, "because I do take a lot of license."

Combined with multiple points of view, a liberal dose of quantum physics, and a nod to both mythology and voodoo, *Untime* can be a bit imposing at first. However, the book is rather textural. It's kind of like those three-dimensional dot pictures - if you stare at the individual spots you're never going to figure out what you're looking at. But if you look at the picture as a whole - pretty soon you'll see the shark staring you right in the face. It's the same way with *Untime*. While the surface sentences might not be completely clear, the underlying nuances weave together a picture that is all too plain: the American Dream has turned into a nightmare. Through the parallel universes unveiled in

*Untime*, the reader begins to clearly see the world they live in for the first time.

Leech and I discuss his life and *Untime*:  
**Q: What do you want readers to get from these parallel worlds?**

SL: To get a clear picture of what this world is really all about. Compare and contrast... because I have a better understanding of this world by exploring all these possibilities. There's some hope there, because I certainly have no hope, but it gives me hope to think there might be another world out there that might be better.

**Q: If you don't have much hope, why do you write?**

SL: Because I have a lot of faith.

**Q: Why do you like to write about alternate worlds?**

SL: Time travel and alternate worlds - it gives me some hope. Part of our responsibility as human beings is to maintain harmony. I think we're all out of balance now.... But the balance will be regained and those who help create it will be rewarded.

**Q: I've heard you say before that the worst kind of human being in the world is a white Anglo-Saxon male. Now, you yourself are a white Anglo-Saxon male, and I know you've done a lot of work with the black press in Wilmington [Leech was the editor of *The Star* for many years]. Do you think you write out of a sense of guilt?**

SL: No, anger, because I've never done those things. I've never exercised the "white man's privilege," but I take the blame for it.

**Q: Do you think most people are really aware of what's going on around them?**

SL: I think most people are asleep, but that's nothing new. Buddha says that. But I see everything as a kind of cosmic joke. But I'm curious enough to see what happens.... I'd like to be proven wrong. So I'll stick around.

**Q: When do you think you first became "aware?"**

SL: I think I've always been kind of aware.... The Vietnam War was a big awakening for me. And LSD really sort of helped.

**Q: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?**

SL: 23-years-old. I was actually older than most. I think that's one of the reasons I survived. I was there for 11 months. I remember one night going outside and looking

up at the sky and seeing every star in the sky. To actually see the universe was really eye-opening.

**Q: Do you see a kind of thread linking together most of your stories? (Leech has authored several other books, as well as poetry pieces. His last novel, *Raw Suck* (1995), has a similar theme to *Untime*.)**

SL: Revelation has been a main thread. I want to reveal things.

**Q: What has been revealed to you?**

SL: That I have a real connection with things that are beyond me - the Truth.

**Q: What is the Truth?**

SL: In Voodoo, truth is a "mambo snatch." [A mambo is a voodoo priestess.] Truth is creation. That's why I tend to like "original religions because the deities tend to be more feminine.

**Q: Do you believe in life after death?**

SL: I believe in reincarnation. I've seen these people around. I've seen Ken Starr at some witch trial back in the Middle Ages.

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**A**mong other things, Steven Leech has been a school bus driver, a cook, a radical, a longshoreman, a DJ and a socialist. "The problem with socialism," he maintains, "is I think those who were entrusted with shepherding in socialism betrayed us. We had some problems. We had Stalin."

When asked what he considers to be the main message of *Untime*, Leech says, "That there is a real danger that fascists will take over the country. I think people don't understand fascism. Fascism is an economic relationship..."

"I'd like to see a socialist world where it's each according to his ability to each according to his need. Wealth comes from

labor," he says. "In the best of parallel worlds, it's basically a socialist world. Everyone shares everything, and I think technology can do that. I want to say to Bill Gates, 'Show me your calluses. Show me where you've worked.'"

In one section of the book, Leech paints a portrait of Wilmington in an alternate universe where the Nazis had won the war. Delaware is filled with, among other things, "Hollows" and "Wilmingtonians." Hollows, according to Leech, are addicted to petroleum (one of the author's environmental pet peeves) and "they live shallow lives. They don't have any souls to them." The Wilmingtonians, on the other hand, are the minorities, and are similar to beatniks. "Instead of discussing poetry, they discuss capitol accumulation," he explains.

I ask Leech if he thinks people get his work. He hesitates a beat and then answers with a wry smile, "No. That's one of the reasons why I don't have any plans to write anymore. What's the use?"

But then he adds, "An old beatnik friend of mine back in the '50s said that, 'A true artist will create simply because he can't help it'... So I probably will [write again] simply because I can't help it." ☐

*Both Untime and Leech's previous novel, Raw Suck, are available at Rainbow Books & Music in Newark, as well as at the poetry readings hosted by the Newark Arts Alliance. Their next reading is this Sunday at the Art House (132 E. Delaware Ave., Newark). Leech plans to read selections from Untime at the Second Saturday poetry reading at Smokey's in Wilmington on August 8th. You can also tune in to his weekly radio show "Boptime" every Saturday morning from 6-10 on WVUD-Newark (91.3 FM).*