I'm Taking Back Redneck
Kevin Eldridge

I'm taking back "Redneck"
There's a southern accent...down where I come from
The young'uns call it country...the Yankees call it dumb.
I've got my own way of living...and every word's begun
With a southern accent...where I come from.

-Tom Petty
"Southern Accent" 1986

No, I don't have a southern accent. That is, at least not one that is easily discernable anymore. If one listens closely, one might still catch the faint trace of an Appalachian drawl trailing off the end of certain words. The casually thrown off expressions like "I reckon" and the ubiquitous "y'all" might, if one is observant, provide a hint of the ancestral dialect that supplied the soundtrack to my formative years.

My family are all back in Tennessee, and their speech patterns are much more recognizable as belonging to that particular region than mine. My grandparents were salt of the earth, working—class gentility. They worked blue-collar jobs, lived on a farm and raised their children in a tradition that valued hard work, neighborliness and manners. They attended church regularly, were life-long members of the Masonic Order and their respective union locals, and lived their lives in accordance with the values of thrift, temperance, forbearance and modesty. My parents and siblings are all college educated professionals. My mother and sisters are charmingly soft-spoken southern ladies with wry, low-key senses of humor and quick intellects. They are all gracious to a fault. My dad was the rural East Tennessee iconoclast, whose ZZ Top beard and bib overalls belied a PhD in nuclear physics and sagacious knowledge of a wide range of modern computer systems and networks.

The area they all call home is a part of the western edge of the Smokey Mountains, and our home town rests atop the Cumberland Plateau. Rising
one thousand, seven hundred and sixty-five feet above sea level, the flat apex of the plateau is ringed by mountains which help keep Cumberland County a little cooler than the surrounding "flat-lands" in the summer, albeit about 10 degrees colder during winter. The sandstone outcroppings that breach the maple and evergreen woods supply the "field stone" that provides the distinctive exteriors of many of the houses, retaining walls, walkways and barbeque pits that dot the countryside. Rivers cut by retreating glaciers after the last Ice Age form tributaries that carry the spring run-off from the surrounding mountains, eventually winding their way down off the plateau and into the Tennessee River, two counties and about 50 years away. Narrow, two-lane roads, still unpaved in places, wind through shimmering alfalfa fields, gently rolling hills, over small stone bridges and switch back through deep draws of old-growth woods that may only see direct sunlight for an hour or two each day. These roads transit through colorfully named areas such as Big Lick, Crab Orchard, Ozone Falls and the Homesteads. The early settlers had some peculiar notions of fitting names for places; however, one couldn’t say that our ancestors were anything if not original.

All of this splendor provided an idyllic backdrop to the final years of my secondary education. I lived with my grandparents while attending my last years of high school, and though I only sensed it intuitively at the time, it seemed as if there was something oddly familiar about the place, even though I had only known of it from afar. My family moved around a lot during my childhood, but the way in which my parents had raised me suddenly gained a whole new context I’d never sensed; not until I had taken up permanent residence in the place where they themselves had grown up, living with the parental figures who had raised my mother. It was almost as if I had been in training for my whole young life to assimilate into this culture.

I found Cumberland County High School to be an easy fit. The students were friendly and welcoming to newcomers and, as a result, I didn’t experience any of the awkwardness that had always seemed to accompany being the "new kid." It didn’t take long for me to figure out, however, that the student body of C.C.H.S. was pretty typical for a small-town American high school. There were a couple of fairly well-defined groups who shared certain characteristics and tended to hang out together.

One such group was made up largely of the children of the town’s
“elite,” i.e. the doctors, lawyers, accountants, politicians and such. These kids tended to affect a conservative, clean-cut, buttoned-down appearance, drove shiny new vehicles from the time they turned 16 and wore clothes purchased from establishments whose names didn’t end in -mart. They were known as “preppies,” since they were all preparing to transition straight into college after graduation. Then there were the rest of us; the working-class kids who, for one reason or another didn’t have a post-secondary education in our immediate future. Those of us who had vehicles owned early model “beaters” purchased for cash with savings from after-school and summer jobs. My pride and joy was a 1963 Ford Econoline van, bought for $600 earned through working as a ground crewman at a crop dusting strip. Our long hair, flannel, denim and work boots stood out in stark contrast to the khaki’s and Izods sported by our preppie classmates. Little did any of us realize that a mere 15 years hence, our style of dress would be made over into haute couture thanks to a bunch of musicians in Seattle; however, in the mid-70s, our appearance simply served to differentiate us from our more upscale schoolmates. It was a sort of down-home version of S.E. Hinton’s “greasers” and “socs” (pronounced “soaches”), only without the violence. The preppies’ more generous label for us was “country,” but the more commonly heard term of endearment was “redneck.” The Oxford English Dictionary has the word redneck as being of U.S. origins and defines it as “a member of the white, rural, labouring class of the Southern states; one whose attitudes are considered characteristic of this class; freq., a reactionary.” I guess we came by it honestly enough, since we tended to embrace our rural Southern heritage more openly and willingly than our urbane (by East Tennessee standards at least) contemporaries.

We spent our time after school and on weekends in my grandparents’ barn or one of my buddy’s living rooms with our guitars, learning a hodgepodge of traditional bluegrass standards like “Cripple Creek” and “Salty Dog,” mixed with Eagles covers and the latest offerings fresh out of Music Row over in Nashville. We wiled away many silent hours at the edge of any one of the dozens of lakes and ponds scattered all over the plateau fishing for bream, crappie, bass and the elusive yellow-bellied catfish. Sundays, while our fellow citizens were locked inside their favorite house of worship, we were cheering on our favorite mechanic in his home-built hot rod at the local drag strip or
dirt track. We unapologetically idolized Lynyrd Skynyrd, Hank Williams, Jr., The Dukes of Hazard and Richard Petty. The rebel flags that festooned our cars and trucks, jackets and bedroom walls were a symbol of our pride at having been American by birth, southern by good fortune, and descended from heroes who fought valiantly in the War of Northern Aggression. We no more considered it to be a symbol of racism, hatred or intolerance than we would have considered Charlie Daniels to be a communist. All told, we didn’t consider redneck to be a put-down, but rather a descriptor that set us apart from the masses.

As I made my way into adulthood and out into the world beyond the comfortable familiarity that was Cumberland County, Tennessee, USA, I was introduced to other cultures and world views. My non-judgmental nature made it easy for me to get along with people from all of the different walks of life that I encountered. My travels around the country and all over the world gave me a wider perspective, but also tended to expose the limitations that one necessarily accepts as a price of coming of age among a homogenous demographic, insulated from multicultural influences. As I was exposed to other outlooks, politics, religions, work ethics and cultural values systems, I found myself moving away from many of the aspects that had come to define my southern upbringing; my cultural disconnect widening in conjunction with the temporal and spatial distance between the grown man I was becoming and the carefree moments atop the Cumberland Plateau. The term redneck also started to take on a darker and more ominous essence as I heard it used in the context of other social, racial and ethic circles. It no longer had the teasing, yet affectionate connotations that characterized its use by the C.C.H.S. preppie crowd. Now it had become synonymous with bigot, ignorant, illiterate, racist and a host of other epithets that were a far cry from the exuberant not-quite-men racing through the Tennessee countryside on a balmy summer night with “Freebird” blaring through the open windows of a ’71 Nova as we celebrated our liberation from academe and the wide-open possibilities that stretch out endlessly before all 18-year olds.

As I came to reject this now hateful term, feeling that it no longer represented either me as a person or the values that I stood for, a most remarkable and unsettling phenomenon occurred. The now hated epithet became a catch phrase espoused by an Atlanta based comedian whose
observational humor on rural southern life struck a chord with the rest of the nation. His shtick always ended with a good-ol’ boy admonition that “... you might be a redneck.” The “R” word had now reached the mainstream and was being bandied about the pop-culture landscape with a new-found aplomb. My friends and co-workers who had never experienced southern culture couldn’t believe that people actually talked, lived and thought in such a manner. They couldn’t argue, however, when I pointed out to them that you just can’t make this stuff up.

My family back in Tennessee saw the humor in this style of comedy marketed now as “blue-collar.” We had made many of the same observations for years, long before the rest of the country became aware of the fact that G.E.D. stood for “git-er-done.” We would hear this stuff and good naturedly point at one another in mock accusation when it was pointed out that “If you keep a can of Raid next to the dinner table...you might be a redneck.” They did, however, find the use of the word redneck offensive when it came from other demographic groups in the form of a racial or ethnic slur. My mother, who is a very gracious and easy-going woman, finally took umbrage one day when a guest on “Oprah” freely used the term in a derogatory manner in a dissertation on “taking back the N word.” She wondered why he could fling redneck around, but no one outside of the African-American community could ever use the “N” word as anything but an expression of hate.

One might ask at this point, why I don’t just come right out and drop the “N” bomb as freely as I do redneck. Well, for starters, I don’t own it. But seriously, my reluctance to use that term and others like it comes from hearing it bandied about quite freely by certain members of my family and their friends and acquaintances while I was growing up. Even as a child, I could read the tone in their voices and understood that this was a term that was uttered with negative invective. I couldn’t understand why I was taught to be polite to strangers and friends alike by people who could then turn around and use such foul terms to describe others. Given such a paradox, I simply have not found an appropriate occasion to use such language.

Radio host Dom Imus, who rose to prominence in the 1980s at the forefront of a genre known as “shock radio,” set off a firestorm of controversy over the use of objectionable language in late March of 2007. Imus’ ill-conceived use of an expression heard within certain genres of
popular music and motion pictures not only resulted in his being fired from his job as an on-air radio personality, it also opened up lines of dialogue over the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of words and expressions crossing demographic “boundaries.” It also drew attention to a recent trend involving different groups who declare that they are “taking back” certain words and expressions for use solely within their purview. Now Hispanics, homosexuals and women all claim exclusive use of certain words and phrases that are conversely considered offensive and inappropriate from outside of their real or imagined demographic lines of demarcation. For instance, third-wave feminist Inga Muscio declares in her work _Cunt: A Declaration of Independence_, “I posit that we’re free to seize a word that was kidnapped and co-opted in a pain-filled, distant, past, with a ransom that cost our grandmothers’ freedom, children, traditions, pride, and land.”

Within this current atmosphere, I now choose to declare, in a gesture that is equal parts reactionary and tongue-in-cheek, that “I am taking back redneck.” I don’t mean in the sense of the word made into a caricature of itself by Foxworthy, et al. Jeff Foxworthy has defined redneck as a state of mind marked by a “glorious lack of sophistication.” I prefer to work from a different stance that re-defines redneck as: “The conscious rejection of any _pretense_ to sophistication.” By taking back ownership as a demographic of one, I can re-shape the essence of the term while at the same time rejecting its negative connotations. Taking it back also affords me the opportunity to now be proactive with, rather than reactive to, its use. Now, instead of bristling when someone laughingly refers to all people from Tennessee as rednecks, I can transform its meaning into one of my own choosing, rather than having that meaning chosen for me. While “empowering” (another stylish catch-phrase of our times) my own use of the word, I simultaneously dis-empower those who would use it in a now futile attempt to bring me down. Once a word like redneck looses its power to offend, it becomes just another quaint and colorful colloquialism, like “bumpkin” or “hayseed” or “hick.” Who knows...this might lead to a whole new paradigm in which derogatory and insulting expressions directed toward certain persons or groups simply become inconceivable because no one allows the word to bring them down. Taking it back can therefore allow “redneck” to define one (me) as multi-dimensional rather than simple, articulate rather than unintelligible,
worldly-wise rather than ignorant, and accepting rather than intolerant. It allows me to respect tradition without being a slave to it, while at the same time not bow down blindly to political “correctness” in an effort to seem progressive. In short, I can acknowledge my roots as a part of what made me who I am without apology. Furthermore, even though I don’t identify myself as a redneck, should others choose to identify me as such, they now do so on my terms rather than theirs. I’m not saying that I’m going to start any sort of large scale political movement, and I am by no means presuming to try and tell anyone else what they can or can’t say. This is simply one man’s personal little manifesto, declaring that I am no better and no worse than any who choose to refer to me (or not) as a redneck. Now, if y’all will excuse me, I must get down to the local flea market before it shuts down for the week. There’s a beautiful set of wrought iron lawn furniture that will look just perfect in my living room.