

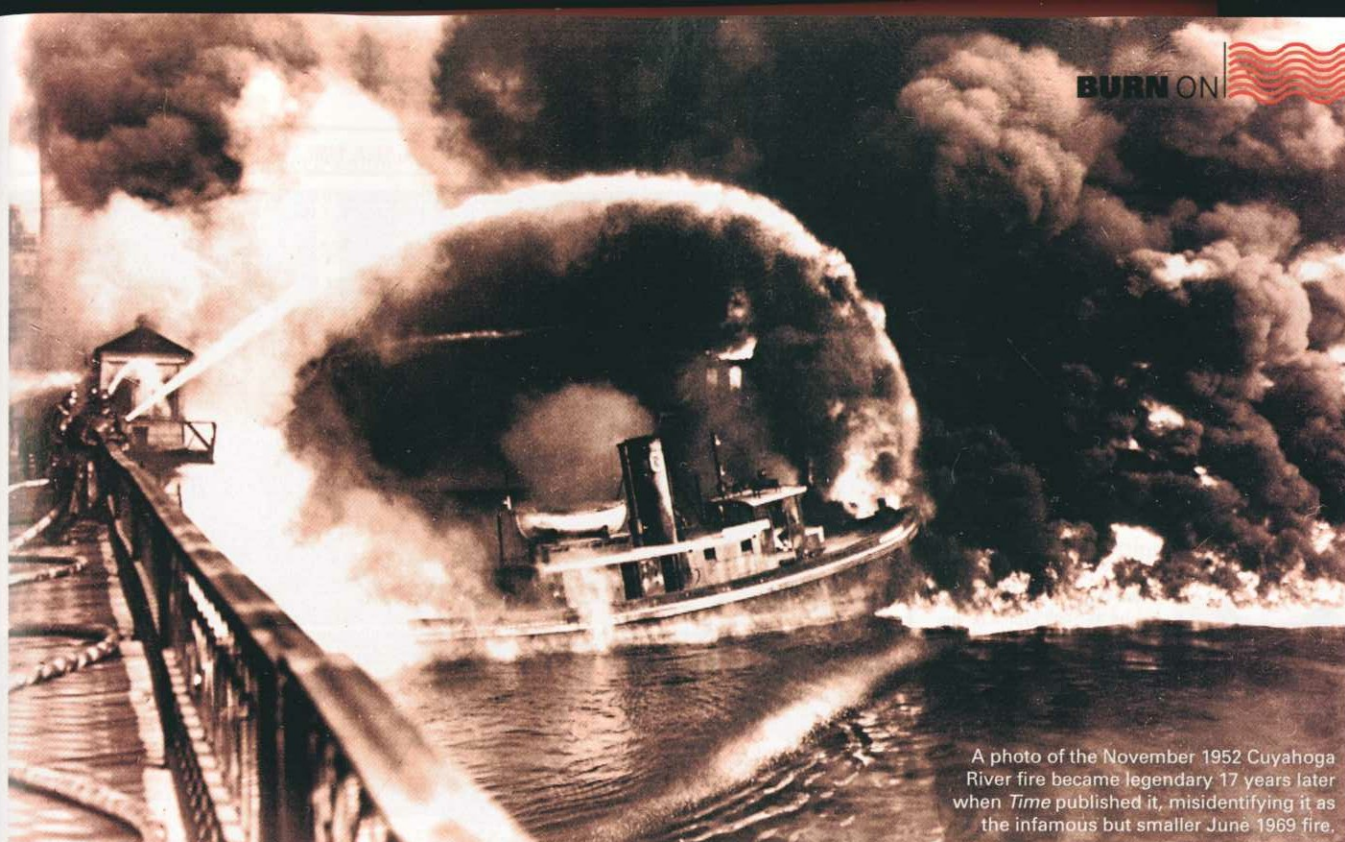


BURN ON!

/ WATER ON FIRE / It's elementally wrong, like earth made of air. So when an oil slick on the Cuyahoga River caught fire on June 22, 1969, 40 years ago this summer, the rest of America laughed instead of recoiled: What kind of city is so estranged from nature that its water burns? ♦ But fire and water are part of Cleveland: the steel mill's flame, the inland sea we call a lake. Of course waves and flames came together in a town built on industry, sweaty work in furnaces and an oil baron's headquarters on a watery highway. ♦ Today, we have done more than clean up the river. We've made our most embarrassing scandal a defiant part of our identity. Our pride can't be extinguished.

EDITED BY **ERICK TRICKEY**

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY Francis X. Bova III, Kathleen Corlett, Faith Hampton, John Hitch, Lindsey Hoepfner, Emily Ouzts and Seth Shapiro



A photo of the November 1952 Cuyahoga River fire became legendary 17 years later when *Time* published it, misidentifying it as the infamous but smaller June 1969 fire.

Smoke Damage

LET'S CLEAR THE AIR: HACK COMEDIANS, BAD TIMING AND A HEALTHY DOSE OF MYTH SET OUR RIVER FIRE LOOSE ON THE NATION. FORTY YEARS LATER, WE'RE TAKING IT BACK.

/BY MARK WINEGARDNER/

IF OUR RIVER HADN'T BURNED, it might have been necessary to ignite it.

When I was writing my novel *Crooked River Burning*, I would have made the fire up if I'd had to. But I'm afraid I'm not talented enough to come up with anything half as potent. The Cuyahoga River fire and its unnatural, smoldering aftermath is the perfect metaphor for late 20th-century Cleveland.

It's the 1969 fire I'm talking about. You may be surprised to learn that there were many others, dating back to at least 1868. One of the worst, in 1952, inflicted nothing so much as smoke damage upon Cleveland's earnestly industrious postwar image.

Why should it have? Over a century, nearly *all* of America's great industry-bearing rivers had at some point burst into flame. Until the ecology movement of the 1960s, no one particularly cared. Weird, sure. Tricky to put out, you betcha. Time to increase the percentage of water in the water, fellas! But bottom line, it was just the price of progress, the cost of doing business.

Then times changed. And so did Cleveland. The city *Ebony* once called "the best place in America for a Negro to live" became the site of the second major race riot of the 1960s. One of the richest men in town, Reuben Sturman, was a Fed-baiting pornographer. Ghouardi left town, and so did scores of businesses and tens of thousands of people. By the time the Cuyahoga burned in 1969, we simply muttered what had become our dismal mantra: If a thing like this happens, it just figures it'd happen to Cleveland.

The Cuyahoga already worked as a symbol of our city. It puts the "cleave" — one of the bizarre words that is its own opposite — in Cleveland, both dividing it and joining it together. It is the hopelessly kinked line of demarcation between the East Side and the West Side, the line between America's East and its Midwest. It was once the center of economic development here, the very reason the place was settled, an impetus to industry, back in the bygone decades when America made stuff.

That Cleveland should be known for that 1969 fire is ridiculously unfair — and yet, in spite of that unfairness and more so *because* of it, utterly apt: a big, flaming ball of Revelations-style apocalyptic urban mythology belching black smoke and enshrouding the city in inextinguishable, toxic zeitgeist and accursedly bad luck. Not to mention embarrassment — to which Clevelanders simultaneously took exception and stoically accepted as our grim fate.

You may also be surprised to learn that the 1969 fire was *not* a big national news story. Not at first. Not until a month after the fire, and all because of another body of water — a tidal pool on Chappaquiddick Island into which Sen. Ted Kennedy drove a car. In the passenger seat was a young woman to whom the senator was not married. He swam away. She drowned. The Aug. 1, 1969, issue of *Time* with Kennedy on the cover, wearing a neck brace, was among the best-selling issues in the formerly Cleveland-based magazine's history.

[continued on page 63]

FIRE SALE!

THE RIVER FIRE of 1969 is imprinted on our psyche like an orange-glowing chemical spill. So why bother suppressing our insecurities when you can tell the rest of the world to kiss your Burning River backside with Rollergirls panties? (If you'd prefer to celebrate our history in a more low-key way, we've got something for that, too.)

YEAR OF THE RIVER T-SHIRT



/ OUR TAKE / *Time* filleted us with its 1969 article on the river fire. This clever retro tee reclaims the Cleveland jokes it spawned (just like we reclaimed the river) with a worried fish in the fiery river of 1969; a flame-topped fish in 1972 to commemorate Mayor Ralph Perk's flammable hair; a three-eyed mutant fish for 1988; and a smiling fish representing the river's many species today.

/ HER TAKE / "We've got to get past the embarrassment," says Jane Goodman, communications director of Cuyahoga River Community Planning, which raises funds by selling the shirts. "Let them make jokes."
/ PRICE / \$13.99-\$29.99, cafepress.com/cuyahogashop

CROOKED RIVER BLEND

/ OUR TAKE / Crooked River Coffee's namesake blend has an oily brown complexion, like the famous flaming river. ("But it's not burnt!" says owner Howard Sobel.) The dark roast offers full-bodied flavor with syrupy caramel notes. It's even certified organic. The river? Let's just say it's cleaner these days.
/ HIS TAKE / "The city itself has grown in sophistication and self-respect," Sobel says. "The river is a metaphor for all that is great in the community."
/ PRICE / \$11.50, shop.crookedrivercoffeeonline.com

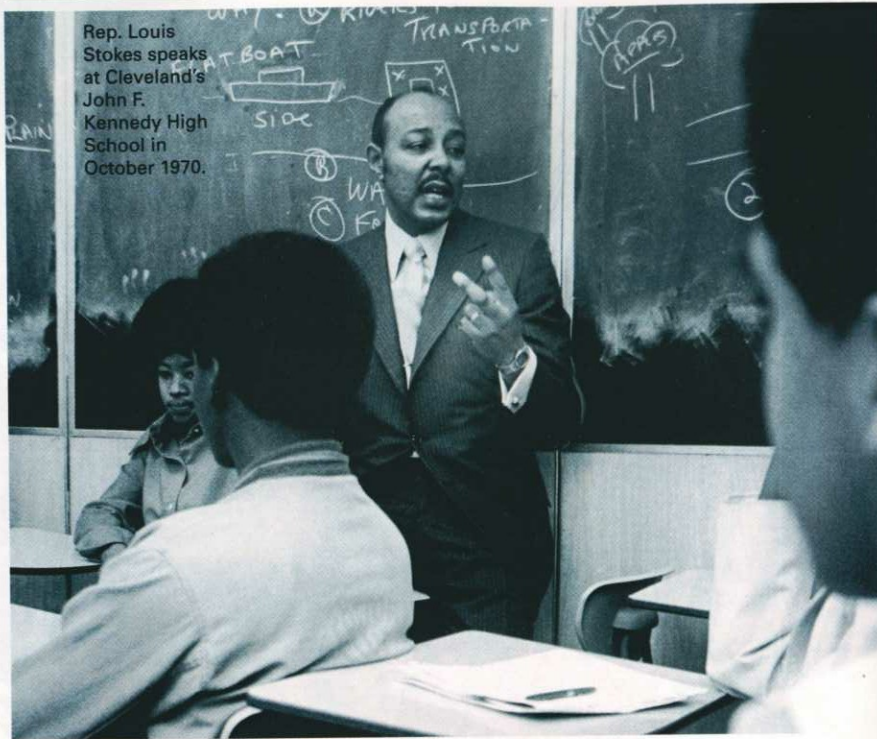


BURNING RIVER ROLLERGIRLS BLACK PANTIES

/ OUR TAKE / This little number with BRRG in Olde English lettering across the derrière is smokin' hot. The roller derby league's founders wanted to be as infamous as the river fire. Their logo, the Hazard, steals the symbol for hazardous waste.
/ HER TAKE / "We wanted a raw and gritty feel," says Pretty Scarrie (aka Carrie Carpenter), assistant captain of the Hard Knockers, of the league's name.
/ PRICE / \$10, burningriverrollergirls.com



Years the river fires occurred: 1868, 1887, 1912, 1922, 1930, 1936, 1941, 1948, 1949, 1952, 1969



The Trailblazer

U.S. REP. LOUIS STOKES

Louis Stokes was a freshman congressman representing Cleveland in June 1969 when the Cuyahoga River caught fire for the last time. In 1970, he convinced Congress to approve an innovative program to clean up the river: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was authorized to remove debris and dredge the riverbed and banks to improve water quality and protect fish and wildlife. Two years later, Congress passed the Clean Water Act, the main environmental law protecting rivers and lakes from pollution.

/as told to Erick Trickey/

I WAS SWORN into office in January of '69, so this was one of the major events that, as a young congressman, I was subjected to trying to respond to.

Being in Washington was very embarrassing at that time, when on the national news, you'd hear about the river that caught fire in Cleveland or about Ralph Perk setting his hair on fire. You'd be teased from time to time [by other congressmen]. But those who had responsibility in that area, they understood what I was trying to do.

I remember sitting down with congressman [James] Howard, [a member] of the subcommittee having jurisdiction over water projects. I explained to him that this was a major event, where across the country Cuyahoga County was being laughed at. I said this would be an excellent project for Congress: If we could clean up the Cuyahoga River, it would demonstrate that you could clean up any body of water in the nation.

I was very proud I was able to get that legislation passed and help begin the [effort on] the Cuyahoga River that has now made it a clean, navigable body of water.

I think issues such as the Cuyahoga River's burning were part and parcel of people saying, "We have to be able to provide clean air and clean water and a clean environment." My brother, Carl, [Cleveland's mayor,] came to Washington and testified about the need for a Clean Water Act.

We were very proud when the warehouse area grew up around the Cuyahoga River and the Towpath [was redeveloped]. It's an asset of the city, to be able to go down and see what has been done since 1970.

[continued on page 61]

By chance, that same mega-selling issue contained the debut of a new section, Environment. It was teased on the inside cover with a letter from the publisher and a picture of the Cuyahoga with someone's slime-covered hand in the foreground. Inside, the story praised Cleveland for allocating \$100 million to clean up the river *before* it caught fire. It pointed out that the real culprits were polluting communities upstream. But it also included this quip: "Anyone who falls into the Cuyahoga does not drown," Cleveland's citizens joke grimly. 'He decays.'"

The joke, you will note, is attributed to no one in particular. It's cracked by *us* as a whole — and by *Time*, a Cleveland expat gone off to New York.

But the tipping point was still to come. A few weeks after that article, a guy named Jack Hanrahan took the Cleveland joke to an entirely new level. An Emmy-winning writer for *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*

— the hippest show on TV — Hanrahan wrote a bit in which the hosts gave Cleveland the Flying Fickle Finger of Fate Award because its river had burned. For the next few years, Cleveland was the constant butt of jokes, on *Laugh-In*, all over the dial and in every hack stand-up comic's act — just

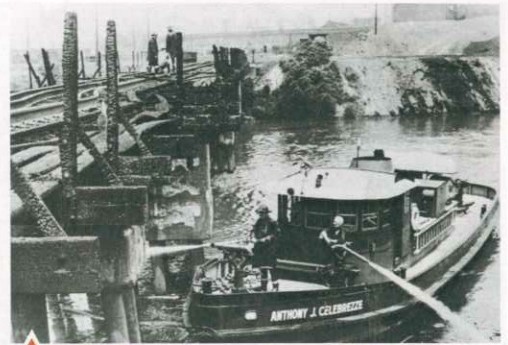
as the number of stand-up comics was exploding.

Don't blame showbiz for everything, though. It didn't help matters when our mayor's shellacked helmet of hair caught fire, too. Or when white flight blew our property values to bits and car bombs did the same to our mobsters. Not to mention all the other sad things that happened to Cleveland in the '70s — things that, collectively, make us all feel that even this whole LeBron James story is somehow certain to have an excruciatingly unhappy ending.

And the punch line (which, if you have this city in your soul, you feel coming) is this: Jack Hanrahan was born, raised and died in Cleveland.

He started out as a cartoonist for *The Cleveland Press* and went on to write not just for *Laugh-In* but every genre of iconic '70s TV: *Get Smart*; *Marcus Welby, M.D.*; *The Waltons*; *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*; *CHiPS*; *Police Woman*; on and on.

It was a wonderful life. Until it wasn't. Drugs and drinking and maybe even karma took their toll. Thirty years after his heyday, almost 40 after his Emmy (and 20 or so since he pawned it), he was wandering the streets of Eureka, Calif., homeless, penniless, toothless and confused, yammering to the oblivious, the inconvenient and the unseen. He ended up on a Cleveland-bound bus with no



↑ Firefighters had extinguished the June 22, 1969, river fire by the time photographers arrived.

money, no ID, nothing but the clothes on his back.

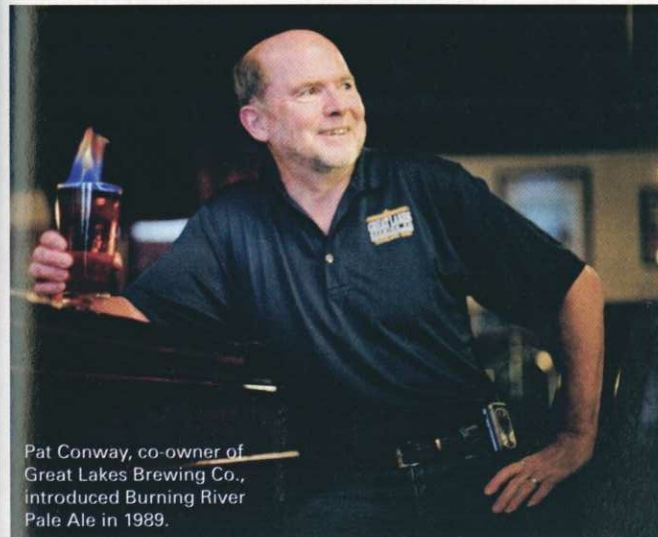
He came home.

We took him in. All was forgiven. A newspaper story about him brought in money, food and clothing. Old friends came forward to help. He spent the final months of his life in the relative comfort of a VA hospital, where, with new teeth, better meds and more frequent moments of clarity, he was something of a showman.

Lost in Eureka. Found in Cleveland. What a twisted, crooked fate.

He died last year. I don't know what happened to his body. I don't want to know. I don't have the heart. Let's do the man proud and print the legend: Jack Hanrahan's cremated remains were scattered from a railroad bridge into the Cuyahoga River.

Length of the Cuyahoga River, in miles = 100



Pat Conway, co-owner of Great Lakes Brewing Co., introduced Burning River Pale Ale in 1989.

Mr. Clean

PAT CONWAY, GREAT LAKES BREWING CO.

Attendees at the ninth annual Burning River Fest, celebrating environmental awareness, last August = about 4,000

Roughly 90 percent of beer is water, so it's easy to understand why the co-owner of Great Lakes Brewing Co., Pat Conway, is obsessed with making sure it's clean. Conway, a water preservation advocate, hosts the Burning River Fest, an environmental festival. His goal is to end the question brewery-goers occasionally ask when they see Burning River Pale Ale on the menu: Is the water that went into the beer safe to drink? /as told to Beth Stallings/

WE INTRODUCED the pale ale around '89. The style came first, and then we chose to call it Burning River. The name is kind of cheeky, slightly irreverent and probably not the most sound public relations strategy, but we thought, *What the hell, let's do it.*

If our streams and lakes hadn't gotten cleaner over the years, I don't think we would have used the name.

It's part of the history of Cleveland now. We have this wonderful, valuable resource at our fingertips, and it should be considered our Grand Canyon, our Yosemite.

To celebrate it, nine years ago we started the Burning River Fest. Cleveland needed a strong summer festival. It's not just people coming to

hear music. We've got eco-partners talking about water quality, alternatives to synthetic fertilizer, global warming and green architects talking about building.

On Aug. 15, we are moving the Burning River Fest back to Whiskey Island to the Coast Guard station at the mouth of the river. It's a beautiful Art Deco structure that was built in the late '30s, but it's been abandoned since the 1970s. We want to resurrect that building as a source of education. We'd like to raise money to have a sleek schooner take people out all summer on water-quality tours so people can better understand the lake. Then people would be more apt to want to save it.



OUR FIRE INSIDE

WE ASKED 11 CLEVELANDERS HOW THEY THINK THE FIRE HAS CHANGED THE CITY'S VIEW OF ITSELF. HERE ARE THEIR TALES OF SHAME AND PERVERSE CLEVELAND PRIDE.

1 / Joe Hannum

co-founder, Cleveland Comedy Fest

To me, it was the first great Cleveland punch line. It is kind of analogous to the first car that rolled off the assembly line in Detroit or the first oil well that anybody struck in Texas. It led to many, many other Cleveland punch lines and one of our greatest exports, which is our comedy and sense of humor.

2 / Dick Feagler

host, WVIZ's Feagler & Friends

I went around for years saying to people, "Look, the river doesn't burn — the oil on top of the river burned." But nobody seemed to think that was mitigating enough. I felt like it neither won nor lost anything when they put the fire out.

3 / Ray Wouters

server, Shooters

People love coming down here just to sit by the river. I get tables from New York and California. Everyone knows it has been on fire. I think Clevelanders take pride in it, but in a backward way, because that's how Cleveland works.

4 / Mike Polk

comedian and creator of the "Hastily Made Cleveland Tourism Videos"

First of all, I just want to say that I had nothing to do with it. I wasn't around. It just shows how much we rock. How many people can say that their river caught on fire? It caught on fire, and we're still just

like, "Eh, we'll stick around. We want to see where this is going."

→ / Jonathan Adler

law professor, Case Western Reserve University, and author of the paper "Fables of the Cuyahoga"

Our river happened to catch on fire at precisely the wrong time. The nation was yearning for symbols and examples of environmental decline and the need for progress, and that just happened to be the time when we had a river fire. The real story of the river fire is a city that learned over time to appreciate the river as something more than a place to deposit waste.

5 / Mike Fedorka

owner, Shine's Bait & Tackle

We used to catch bait down around there. When the steel mills were discharging into the river, if there were any fish or bait swimming by, it was trying to jump out of the water because it was dying.

→ / Mansfield B. Frazier

columnist, CoolCleveland

I was raised hunting and fishing. So the first time I saw the Cuyahoga River, I just couldn't believe it. My father was going to a fish wholesaler down along the river, and I said, "Why is this thing so nasty?" And he said, "Well, they dump stuff in it." To me, it was a symbol of American greed, of corporate greed and lax government oversight.

6 / Bruce Hudec

captain, Goodtime III

In the 38 years I've been in the river, it has dramatically changed. I can hardly believe it's the same river. There are turtles in the river; there is a family of red-tail hawks up the river; there are great blue herons that live in the river. There are all sorts of songbirds — I saw a couple of red-wing blackbirds today.

→ / Elaine Marsh

co-founder, Friends of the Crooked River

We still have work to do. We are still discharging raw, untreated human and industrial waste into the river. Water is not a renewable resource.

7 / Samantha Shunk

member, Cleveland State University's varsity women's rowing team

Every time we go to a regatta, someone goes, "Oh yeah, that river — the Cuyahoga — it's got all those turns, and it caught on fire once!" I'm like, "Yeah, you

know, our river caught on fire — but that's why we row so fast."

→ / David Beach

director, GreenCityBlueLake Institute at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History

I think fewer and fewer people are making jokes. I think Cleveland is getting a reputation as a city that's starting to think about things differently. I think you could say something about resilience as a city, that we have successfully brought back a severely degraded river.

Number of 2009 canoe trips on the river organized by Friends of the Crooked River = 10

Number of smallmouth bass, common carp or suckerfish caught from the lower Cuyahoga River that it's safe for a person to eat per month, according to the Ohio EPA: 1



Betty Klaric returns to the river she chronicled, this time to fish.

Fishing for Answers

Maybe asking a 77-year-old environmental reporter to squeeze through a fence and navigate uncut grass in the Flats was a bit much to ask, but Betty Klaric just shrugged: Lead the way. Klaric is considered the first major newspaper reporter to cover the environment exclusively. She took on the beat for The Cleveland Press in 1965. So we set out with fishing pole and night crawlers in hand to get her thoughts on how the Cuyahoga has changed.

/as told to Andy Netzel/

Cleveland Magazine: So on the off chance we actually catch something, are we going to cook it up?
Betty Klaric: From this part of the river? No way. It still doesn't look good. From up near the headwaters? Sure. Granted, the river has always looked good up there.
CM: It has to look a little better, though, no?
BK: I certainly don't remember irises growing on the side of the river. Or any flowers, really, so that's a promising sign.
CM: So how nasty was the river back then?
BK: When you flew into Cleveland, you would see an orange aura.
CM: Orange?
BK: Yes. In pools along the river and just hanging over it.
CM: When the river caught

fire, was anyone surprised?
BK: There were not a lot of people paying attention to the environment. It was a fringe group. Even when the fire happened, at first, nobody paid that much attention to it locally.
CM: Did your fishing rod just move?
BK: I don't feel anything biting.
CM: Looked like it moved. If something does bite, are you prepared?
BK: I'm holding on!
CM: Obviously the fire became a big deal. Mayor Carl Stokes held press conferences. You wrote a ton about it.
BK: It became bigger than any of us imagined it would.
CM: Do you feel guilty at all, now that Cleveland is still defined by this 40 years later? I mean, the

jokes aren't going away.
BK: It doesn't bother me, because it had such a positive effect. I became more or less a crusader. I wanted things done.
[Fish leaps from the water]
BK: Oh, my! What do you think that was? A carp?
CM: I don't know, but it's proof there are fish in here!
BK: Hey, come over here. We have a worm for you.
CM: Think the health of the river will ever be ignored again?
BK: Oh, no. The environmental movement has become a business, and it's not going anywhere.
CM: I think my line is stuck on something.
BK: Tire?
[Cuts line]
CM: Well, let's call it a morning. Too bad we didn't catch anything but the bottom of the river.

THE RIVER'S SOUNDTRACK

OUR BURNING river is a surrealist's puzzle — a violation of nature's laws and an irresistible songwriters' metaphor. Here are some lyrics that an oil slick and a spark have inspired.

"Burn On" | Randy Newman
Sail Away, 1972

Cleveland, city of light, city of magic / Cleveland, city of light, you're calling me / Cleveland, even now I can remember / 'Cause the Cuyahoga River / Goes smokin' through my dreams

That slow, lazy orchestral score, those sing-song horns like mockery — no wonder we thought Newman was jeering at us. And no wonder the song was used in *Major League's* opening montage. / **THE VERDICT** / Should we really care what the *Toy Story* composer thinks?

"Cuyahoga" | R.E.M.
Lifes Rich Pageant, 1986

Up underneath the river bed, we burned the river down / This is where they walked, swam, hunted, danced and sang / Take a picture here, take a souvenir

Michael Stipe knew two things about the Cuyahoga: that it burned and that Native Americans named it. That's all he needed to write this song about a dying river, long-vanished tribes and the rewriting of history. It's a subtle protest (a call to "start a new country up") and one of R.E.M.'s best. / **THE VERDICT** / Poetry worthy of our river. We just wish they had known the U in "Cuyahoga" is silent.

"Cuyahoga" | Crookneck Chandler & the Tibbee Bottom Boys
Aw Yeah!, 2007

Cuyahoga, you're looking alive now / Heading out to Lake Erie / You can hold your head high now

Sunny rock and bluegrass drive this reaction to Newman and Stipe's pessimism. "People really like the fact that it's open and honest about the past, but a very hopeful song," says lead singer Hank Mallery. / **THE VERDICT** / It's the antidote to the burning-river blues.

Ranking of "Burn On," Randy Newman's song about the Cuyahoga River, in MP3 song downloads at Amazon.com = 84,321