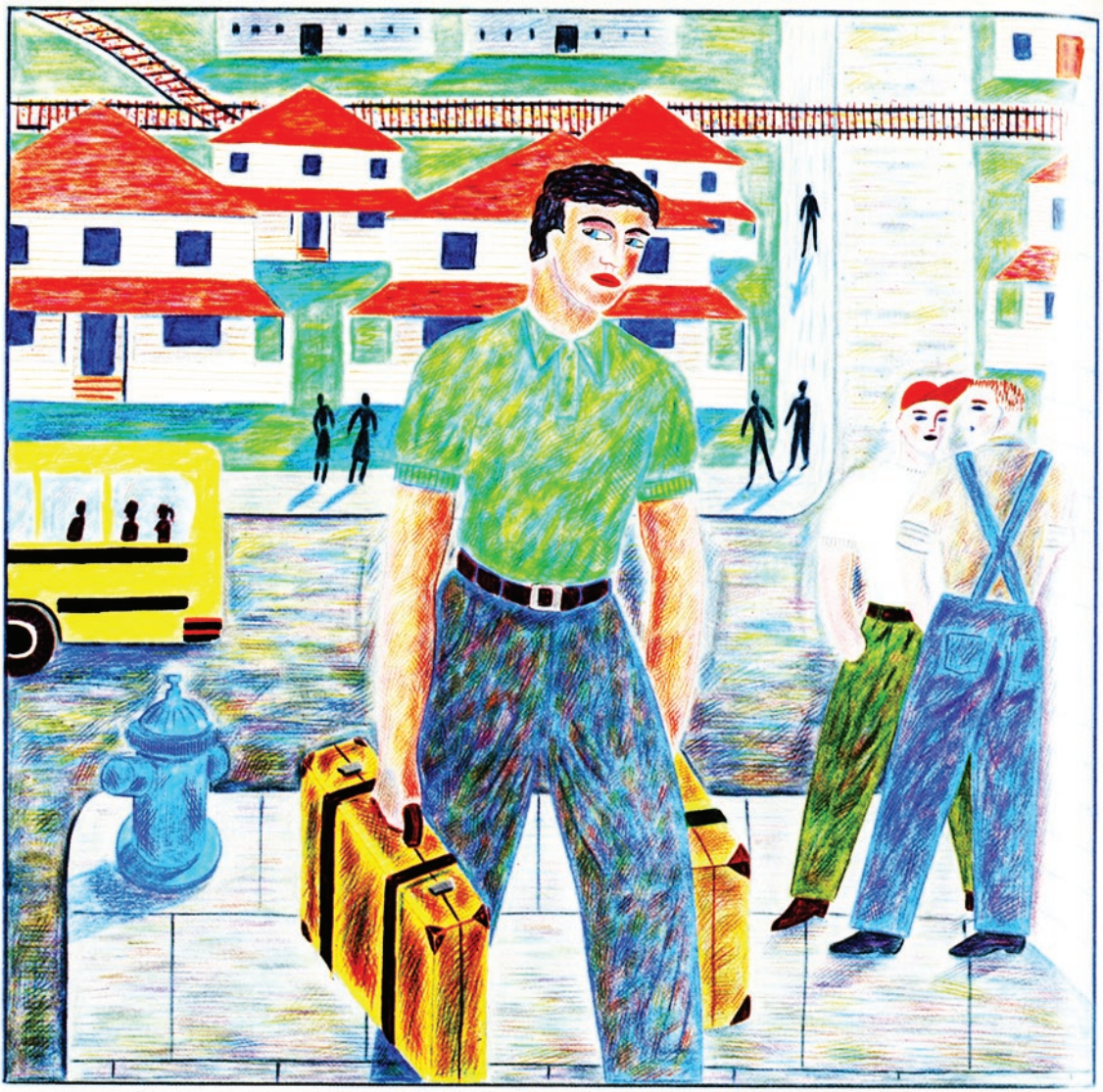

My

As career mobility pushes us aimlessly from one large city to the next, there are lessons to be learned in the marrow of small-town life **BY WILLIAM McGOWAN**

HOMETOWN

AS a teenager I was a bit of an insomniac. Often, late at night, while I tossed with sexual longing and worry for the future, I'd listen to my town make its local music. There'd be the clacking of boxcars being assembled down at the freight yards. At four o'clock, the overnighter heading north would spread its melancholy whistle out over the Hudson and up around the surrounding hills. Sometimes, in spring, I'd hear the churning of a Hudson tributary, the Croton, made into a stretch of angry white water by rains. After last call in the bars on Grand Street, the local motorheads would rev up their cars—those bigmother greasermobiles they were always bent over tuning up. Patching out, they'd wind through the gears, screaming from first to third, then holding it until they got up enough steam to grab fourth on the highway at the town line. Booming fire horns would direct the volunteer force to a blaze. Three blasts followed by another one and then another after that (3-1-1) sent them to High Street; one blast followed by two sets of two (1-2-2) meant the intersection of Maple and Grand. Knowing the code by heart, I'd try to guess which house they were speeding to, sirens blaring, with such reckless tribal energy.

Not being able to imitate those night sounds, I'm often met by blank stares and polite nods when I try to explain my sense of place to someone. It's a little like trying to describe what sex is like to someone who has never had it: You might be able to detail all the mechanics involved, but you'd be hard-pressed to convey the deep sense of connectedness and the complicated knot of feeling it can evoke.

Hometowns are always special to the people who've lived long enough in one place to claim one. That's why the Springsteen song with its archetype of a dying industrial town is so powerful and its images of unemployment, shuttered stores and blighted hopes so haunting.

Yet while our culture pays lip service to the sanctity of community life, we also discourage it. Upwardly mobile young men like me are directed to move anytime or anywhere a better career opportunity beckons, with the wholeness community can bring taking a backseat. The old hometown is a millstone, not a touchstone; staying there all your life is a sign of limitations, if not of being an outright loser. Town life is like the local girls—good for the growing boy but nothing to stay around for, and best savored furtively.

Ambivalence toward the idea of community, however, exacts a quiet price, turning the places in which my generation settles into ironic twists on the Springsteen theme, suffering a kind of death in life. While they may gleam with bright demographics and ever-improving homeowner equity, a lot of these places, like my hometown, have also seen a withering of their sense of community, with old-timers and newcomers alike losing out in the process.

For all its proximity to the city and position as a commuter railhead, Croton remained more a tightly knit river town than the suburb it could have become. A population of 7,000 gave it small-town intimacy; geography kept it self-enclosed. Sitting squat along the Hudson at its widest point, thirty-five miles above New York City, it was also bordered on two other sides by water and on the fourth by undeveloped woodlands.

There were actually two towns in exactly the same spot. The affluent side of town, "Croton-on-Hudson," as the upwardly striving corporate executives and professionals arriving in the Fifties and Sixties always called it, had Westchestery leanings: rush hour to the station, impressive homes and liberal attitudes correct for the time. There was a rarified intellectual crew as well, arriving when John Reed, for one, lived there earlier in the century, a legacy continued through folksingers such as the Weavers in the Sixties.

But beneath this fashionable overlay beat the heart of an older town, just plain Croton, more reminiscent of redneck locals, pickup trucks and the bite of upstate air, and it was this side that made the place what it was. While the other side of town could be snobbish, this part was clannish in the way of hillbilly insularity. There were people who'd been to the City only once—on a class trip—and others who'd never been there at all, never wanted to and were proud of it. Descendants of the artisans and laborers who came to build the railroad and the City's waterworks at the turn of the century, these working-class people, who were born there, married local and had complete lives right there, were the town's soul and center of gravity.

The townies built continuity, taking an active and leading role in the organizations that enriched communal life. Working right in town—on the railroad, in the local building trades and in the village stores and municipal services—they had the time to man the volunteer fire department, coach sports teams, lead Scouting troops and form the mainstays of the VFW, the American Legion, the Knights of Columbus, the Lions Club and the Rotary, the groups that now seem so square but were really the civic glue and the principal force making town life such a palpable, living thing. When new arrivals joined up—as *(continued on page 274)*

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(continued from page 237) many commuters did back then—it was these people who put them through their paces. You had to earn the right to call yourself a Crotonite; so proprietary were they that my family, originally "city people" who arrived in 1958, used to joke that on our twenty-fifth anniversary we'd get a telegram from the village clerk welcoming us.

Not all the townie element were Boy Scout leaders, though. Norman Rockwell may not have painted this side of the canvas, but my sense of town is anchored just as vitally in its idiosyncracies and escapades. It was practically mythic, this side of town, with a gamy flavor and scenes right out of Appalachia or Huck Finn: sturgeon poachers trolling by dark in the Hudson, feuding extended families and a variety of schemers and stumblebums, con men and ne'er-do-wells. Art lessons and children's books paled by comparison, and I preferred to loiter on its corners, despite parental disapproval, watchful and rapt.

It had a gritty mongrel texture, with upturned sidewalks and steep hillsides of knobby wooden houses. The color of wet mud and bruises, it was impervious to the other side's well-intentioned beautification efforts. Insisting on living a four-gear life in a three-gear town, these people were a welcome counterpoint to the ranks of commuters riding the "Silver Worm" into the City every day. One storied character supposedly got zapped by the third rail and was never depressed again in his life. They were flinty, funny people, these townies, with salty tongue and racy proclivities, and a bawdy, brawling attitude that gave town life the personality of a rogue uncle.

Croton was also a town flawed by vivid, almost poetic failure and tragicomic ineptitude. The first time the fire department raised its spanking new extension ladder, it did so at the wrong angle, causing the ladder to buckle and pitching the guy on top into the smoke below. (Miraculously, he escaped with only a few broken bones.) When the rescue squad was called to retrieve boys stranded in white water, there was always the fear that they would strand themselves too. A daredevil in an ill-equipped homemade plane tried to loop the loop at an air show; stalling, he crashed into the reservoir, and his body was never recovered.

With this kind of charge in the air, town life had us in its thrall, and we submitted to its voodoo spell. My townie friends and I had a vast secret life; in our teens we'd run away for days at a time, drinking cheap beer, feeding on fish we'd catch in the river and vegetables heisted from gardens, swimming in one of a half dozen spots unknown to the adult world. We had confidence that if our parents moved away without telling us—a common adolescent nightmare—town life would be our surrogate. Days turned into rites; our doings composed a hidden scripture. We threw ourselves off bridges and rocky outcroppings, as Elmo Lincoln, the first Tarzan, had done when he shot his 1918 film in one of our spots, the Cliffs. Making town life an extension of swelling muscles and pumping glands, we'd tempt fate maniacally at 135 mph in a 427 with bored-out cylinders; commandeer boats for cruises into the Hudson's distant shipping channel to shout curses at passing tugs steaming down from Albany; conduct bloodthirsty rock fights as mock Neanderthals; make love to golden tomboys after nights of playing pool and jukebox boogie in roadhouses with paneling the color of lacquered cocoa. We ran on different rules, against the grain. Learning the Croton River by heart, we'd tame its rapids and currents by holding heavy stones to our chests; sinking to the bottom, we'd walk like somnambulists while the water raced overhead.

Once we cracked the code, the town's secrets were open to us. We knew where to stalk deer and how, on a winter night, to get into the old railroad cars and roust the sleeping bums, getting them to dance for us and tell stories, their eyes gluey and their breath rummy-warm. Even the graveyard became part of the throbbing, living world: We knew which choice family plot was best for a party

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and which for a roll in the grass, and how to escape if the cops made a raid, which we often invited for kicks on a slow night.

More was developed than muscle, however. Being in a small town with people who were diverse by age, ethnicity and income lent itself to developing a moral sense about people that left a lasting impression. Croton may have been isolated and at times claustrophobic, but there was an exceptional amount of contact between people of different classes and generations who in a more stratified place might have remained strangers, even threats. The adman got to know the mechanic; the patent lawyer, the bricklayer. At the time it seemed to be the natural order of things.

Undeniably, there were class differences, but the town wasn't stiff with them, and even battles served as points of contact through which different groups became known to one another. As much as people may have been moving in their own orbits, they shared reference points in the common life of the town, and the informal proximity over time encouraged a healthy democratic spirit by taking the edges off sociological stereotypes.

Town life also bestowed an automatic awareness of the frailties of all people, breeding compassion. The foster kid screaming in rage at his delinquent, unloving parents; the church usher who stole money from bars when tipsy; the guy whose older brother died in Vietnam and who was permanently embittered—these were people deserving sympathy, not scorn or, worse, sentimental apologias. Even the town pariahs, a buck-toothed brood of nine kids whose escapades turned the police-blotter column of the local newspaper into their own family newsletter, won a measure of affection, although only a fool trusted them further than they could be thrown or left car keys behind in the dash. Size notwithstanding, the town held immense complexities and contradictions—like a single human heart.

Remembering the density of the town experience revives it; these days I hold my memories like the rocks we used to clasp while walking underwater, stayed against the current of time. But the very act of recollection underlines the hole left by its absence. Leaving there for college, travel abroad, years on Manhattan's Upper West Side and in Washington, D.C., has been broadening, but it's often lacked depth. Career fulfillment came, as did an active social life. But what I was missing was community—informal contact with people who've known each other over time and who've achieved mutual understanding despite their dissimilarities. The professional world, so highly mobile and socially one-dimensional, wasn't providing that.

Going back to town for the first extended stay since leaving more than ten years ago, ostensibly to relieve a temporary housing problem, I am surprised how strong the feelings shaken loose in that time really are. There seems something exotic about the place; its runty streets and small-change ways open up the world, in a way. Because I can live almost anywhere, I'm struck by an immense curiosity over what it must be like to live where you've always been, to let geography be your destiny.

Driving along, I am like a dog sniffing at the four corners of his turf. Anything new makes my head jerk, and I realize how much the town has marked me. Nights out are like rummaging through the most private of closets, but one that's been in full public view. I am promiscuous for gossip, a slut for hearsay. Tell me everything, but keep in mind the cardinal rule in this town of clans: Never relate anything about anybody unless you're sure a cousin isn't within hearing range. I, too, have no secrets here. People are as watchful of me as I am of them, and they remember my moltings.

I see old men with stringy throats who remember the way I stood at the plate playing baseball, and girls, who when last checked

were barely out of tothood, now exciting tenderness and lechery. I see a good percentage of my first-grade class; though I know few details of their daily lives, there's intimacy there that goes deeper. One of them, who never really liked me, it seems, tells me to remember that I'm no better than any one of them. I drive by the house of the first girl who let me get to second base—but not before making me read aloud *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* to prove required sensitivity. I see the village idiot—idiot savant, I should say, for we believed him to have special, almost talismanic powers and took him on as a mascot. He stares at me in his blankness, and then breaks into a knowing smile before reciting, surreally, every nickname I ever had—in perfect order. Backward.

Neighborly fellow feeling and renewing old bonds kindle warmth, but it's the passions and poignancies of this townie side that do the most to ground me and evoke authenticity, mainly because they've been missing the most from the past ten years. Original sin has top billing here; falls from grace are an enduring hometown specialty. Snow never seems to cover the bumps and blotches here; it accentuates them. I am struck by its slatternly reminders of mortality, of traumas that leave long scars. On the sidewalk: Young couples bickering, faces cracked and aging; shotguns, I'm told, enhanced a few romances. In the Laundromat: Town girls, now matrons, wear heavy eyeliner and scarves around curlered heads, thumb through romance novels, smoke cigarettes and snap gum while children whine beneath the tumble of the machines. In a bar: The old basketball coach finally scored with the former cheerleader, both of them now looking jowly and sad. A man and his youngest son sit together on the first holiday without their wife and mother, desolate, people avoiding them, knowing there's nothing they can say. A guy whose brother died in an accident is out drinking with the driver of the car, and I am amazed by the human capacity to forgive.

In the right light, even its venalities are holy. The town makes me privy to its soul. Knowing it well, I pick up on subtle clues. I can tell how much casual sex there's been on a Saturday night by the number of cars left scattered accusingly near the night spots on a Sunday morning, fender dust streaked by children on their way to church. No shame here. It's all worn right on the sleeve: carnality, cuckoldry, duplicity and petty intrigue. There are still a few secrets, though, that the town won't give up. Local justice leaves a lot of unanswered questions. How can that habitual thief be out on the streets again? (Rumors are he's a snitch for the police.) How does that little shop pay its rent? (Rumors are the owner makes book for gamblers.) As the saying goes, "Two plus two equals five here in Tunerville."

And, as ever, there's a supply of comic woe. I hear that a jukebox caught fire in one of the murkier watering holes and the patrons didn't notice until the fire brigade was through the door tapping them on the shoulders. A young wife gives her husband a night with her best friend as a birthday present and the two of them run off together, the town aghast and atitter. A rumor makes the rounds that the air-show casualty from years back is living in California without his wife. One of the local chowhounds impregnates a sniffish newcomer's prize Akita. A responsible fellow, the owner of the mutt extends an offer to pay for half the fixing fees, saying it's the thing any responsible gentleman would do. A noted B-girl sees a guy she's taken a fancy to out in a bar with another girl and promptly starts describing his "preferences," which involve ropes, to anyone within earshot.

I taste marrow these nights, closer to the secret, surrounded by a world more strongly hued than the ordinary, full of hard lusts, unfading shames and a generosity of heart. But I feel a nagging sense of estrangement too. Groping for memories, I picture myself as the village idiot the night I saw him in a bar trying to capture moths with his hands as they hovered near the dim light of a bare bulb. Who am I kidding? You can't go home again.

But even if I had stayed around, I wouldn't feel all that comfortable there anymore. The town itself is changing. As in other communities around the country similarly situated in suburbia's outer rings, a new wave of corporate relocations and commercial development is transforming Croton in ways that the prior encroachments of the Fifties and Sixties didn't. If all the plans currently before Croton's Village Board are approved, for instance, the town's population could increase by almost a third in five years, covering the last remaining marshlands and woods with condominiums and houses wedged into tiny lots. The rumble of earthmovers, the rapping of carpenters' hammers and the growl of chain saws sing doom for many landmarks—icons of the town mythology like the Ruins, the charred remains of a flapper-era country club haunted by ghosts and virginities lost. The intimacy, too, is waning in subtle yet significant ways. Croton used to be one of the few places in the Northeast where you could still make a local phone call by dialing only four digits. Anticipating growth, the town recently switched to a bigger system requiring seven. Ironically, a sizable earthquake followed the cutover by just a few hours; even the most unpoetic took notice.

No shame here. It's all worn right on the sleeve: carnality, cuckoldry, duplicity and petty intrigue.

Yet the issue isn't really increased size—the suburbs that ate my woods. What's really shredding the fabric of community is the skyrocketing cost of housing produced by the new development wave, which has put the town out of reach for all but the well-established corporate employees and affluent professionals.

On the surface, at least, they've made their presence distinctly felt. The kids in town seem blonder; many more of them are now attending private schools. There are more domestics waiting on street corners for out-of-town buses, and a lot of families have imported au pairs. Volvos and Mercedeses are much more conspicuous. Stubbornly unbeautiful Grand Street, with its ramshackle porches and peeling clapboard, now sports fern bars and chichi delis. Pug-ugly Brook Street might soon be transformed into shops and galleries courtesy of state preservation funds. "From Dogpatch to Greenwich Village in no time," cracks one boosterish realtor.

A lot of these upscale arrivals are hardly more than a name on a mailbox, however. Corporate relocation policies dictate that they'll be there for only a short time, so many don't put down roots in the community. Even those who do stay longer are strapped by high mortgage payments, which dictate two-career households. With both people so absorbed in the workplace, it's hard to find the time for getting involved.

Add to the lack of time a twofold lack of inclination. For one thing, there's a snob factor. Since a lot of town life takes place among an element that many newcomers find too different to understand, they're put off, not seeing possibilities for stretching their social horizons and recognizing common concerns. They also—being products of times that tell them personal fulfillment doesn't depend on forging bonds with a larger entity outside themselves—don't have the same consciousness of broad community that was second nature to a lot more people a generation ago. The language of commitment and mutual respect has been eclipsed by the preference to be with others of similar tastes, training and ambition. For them, community is something that enhances property values. Croton is a "good buy," a guaranteed 10 percent annual return on their "investment."

Thus does a community become a parcel of real estate. For its part, the old guard is being rapidly priced out. The average selling price for a house—even in the old section—tops $200,000, and reasonable rentals are vestiges of better days. Real estate is the town's prime industry now, not the railroad. Old-timers may gloat about the vast sums they've been offered for their houses, but the younger generation, just starting out, is

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grinding its teeth. Land values and social cachet may be rising, but the overall identity and spirit are declining in the process, threatening to turn Croton into a single-layer suburb that is homogenous and transient, with all the personality of a checkbook.

And so the group that used to be the spine of the town is fast becoming a dispirited rump, and will soon become a negligible presence altogether, draining the place of color, solidity and diversity—keys to true community. Going or gone already: the people who wrapped their hearts around the town and gave out of a reflexive sense of service. Unable to find leaders, the three once-vibrant Boy Scout troops have been reduced to one, a shell with ten members. Top-heavy with graybeards, but thin on the young people who actually bear the brunt of duty, the fire department, rescue squad and ambulance corps are okay for now, but will face manpower shortfalls soon. Village workers who live in town are either older people with their mortgages paid off or young people living with their parents and awaiting opportunity elsewhere. The fire chief, age 32, says he'll probably move soon to a nearby cheaper town, joining several of his men who already listen for emergency summonses by radios instead of horns in the night. Teachers and police commute, lessening dedication. The bowling alley, long a hub of townie social life, has closed for lack of patrons. The local newspaper has closed, too.

What's happening in Croton, however, resonates beyond the town line. While the ideal of living your whole life in your hometown is unrealistic for most people these days, another ideal—that of living in close contact with a broad cross section of people—shouldn't be. But it too is moving further away from possibility. More and more of us are living in life-style ghettos, restricted to knowing only those people who resemble ourselves. And we lose something for it: facets of life that only community can highlight, for ourselves as individuals and collectively as a society.

One of the last times I was in Croton this year, I stopped by an old deli that used to have the feel of a town general store, with gossip and grab-assing as much a staple as its overpriced six-packs. Getting on the end of a fairly long line, I soon noticed that nobody was talking to anybody else. In walks an old townie—a legendary wild man with a rangy stance and drill-bit eyes, hands covered with dirty calluses. A builder, he tells me he doesn't live in town anymore, but comes back occasionally to hunt for rocks and arrowheads, which he collects. He hands me a purplish-brown stone and tells me it's a garnet, explaining how a good gem cutter will turn it into a jewel. Rapt by his presence, I don't notice when it's my turn at the register, and the girl behind the counter, in ponytail and tennis outfit, holds out her hand impa-

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tiently while shooting my friend a nasty look. Outside, the guy gets into his truck and guns it down the street. Listening closely, I hear him wind through the gears, catching fourth on the highway out of town. ■

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The Death of Hip

(continued from page 240) sexual diseases are not, as some Fundamentalists might have it, the revenge of God upon the promiscuous or the homosexual, they have made us wary, even terrified. Risking illness or death for a certain kind of sexual freedom isn't wild or dangerous or Hip; it's stupid. And so we find ourselves more conservative by necessity.

Hip Turns to Gold: Anyone showing the faintest trace of cultural innovation is in immediate danger of becoming a commodity. And who can resist the pot of gold? Jack Kerouac probably did more for Levi Strauss stock than any fifteen marketing executives, but he couldn't cash in. The advertising vehicles weren't there yet. If he'd been able to do an ad or two, how long would he have remained Hip? He should have lived so long.

Madonna, with all her talent and trampy sexuality, was Hip for about five and one-half minutes. Then, before you could say *Desperately Seeking Susan*, there were 6-year-olds dressing up in torn stockings and there were helicopters flying around to get pictures of her wedding to Sean Penn.

There have always been gossip columnists and movie mags and all the rest, but the explosion in media outlets and the increasing obsession with celebrity have created a situation in which it takes an act of willful monasticism to avoid the glare. A couple of years ago I interviewed a young comic actress named Whoopi Goldberg. She was already halfway up the ladder in a one-woman show in New York, but there weren't many articles out yet. She could still joke around about going back home to Berkeley and "coolin' out." Fourteen seconds later, Mike Nichols and Steven Spielberg were at her door and now she's on *Entertainment Tonight* and she's joining Hands Across America, and she's no Hipper than Ricardo Montalban.

People magazine is the great homogenizer. A guy like Keith Haring causes his minisensation in the New York art world, but a week later he's in *People* (and delighted to be there) along with Joan Collins, Diane Brill, Jane Pauley's twins and Abu Nidal. So what is he now? Just another celebrity, a face you recognize, a caption. How can you be Hip when your picture is smiling up from the checkout counter at the Grand Union and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* is knocking at your door? Can there be any greater