



Minding the South

John Shelton Reed

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You're in the American South now, a proud region with a distinctive history and culture. A place that echoes with names like Thomas Jefferson and Robert E. Lee, Scarlett O'Hara and Uncle Remus, Martin Luther King and William Faulkner, Billy Graham, Mahalia Jackson, Muhammad Ali, Elvis Presley. Home of the country blues and country music, bluegrass and Dixieland jazz, gospel music and rock and roll. Where menus offer both down-home biscuits and gravy and uptown shrimp and grits. Where churches preach against "cigarettes, whiskey, and wild, wild women" (all Southern products) and where American football is a religion.

For more than thirty years John Shelton Reed has been "minding" the South—watching over it, providing commentary upon it. He is the author or editor of thirteen books about the South, and despite his disclaimer regarding formal study of Southern history, Reed has read widely and in depth about the South. His primary focus is upon Southerners' present-day culture and consciousness, but he knows that one must approach the South historically in order to understand the place and its people.

Why is the South so different from the rest of the country? Rupert Vance, Reed's predecessor in sociology at Chapel Hill, once observed that the very existence of the South is a triumph of history over geography and economics. The South has resisted being assimilated by the larger United States and has kept a personality that is distinctly its own.

That is why Reed celebrates the South. His essays cover everything from great thinkers about the South—Eugene D. Genovese, C. Vann Woodward, M. E. Bradford—to the uniqueness of a region that was once a hotbed of racism, but has recently attracted hundreds of thousands of blacks transplanted from the North. There are even a few chapters about Southerners who have devoted their talents to different subjects altogether, from politics or soft drinks to rock and roll or the design of silver jewelry. Reed writes with wit and Southern charm, never afraid to speak his mind, even when it comes to taking his beloved South to task. While readers may not share all his opinions, most will agree that John Shelton Reed is one of the best "South watchers" there is.

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