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FOLIO WEEKLY

NORTHEAST FLORIDA'S NEWS & OPINION MAGAZINE



Poetic Justiss

Alan Justiss has his own take on reality

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POETIC JUSTISS

BY DOUG MILNE JR.

Unable to ever go home I have reason coming back to my home town for a place to finally die.

Death.

That's as close to real living as Alan Justiss gets.

"But living," he says, "is murder."

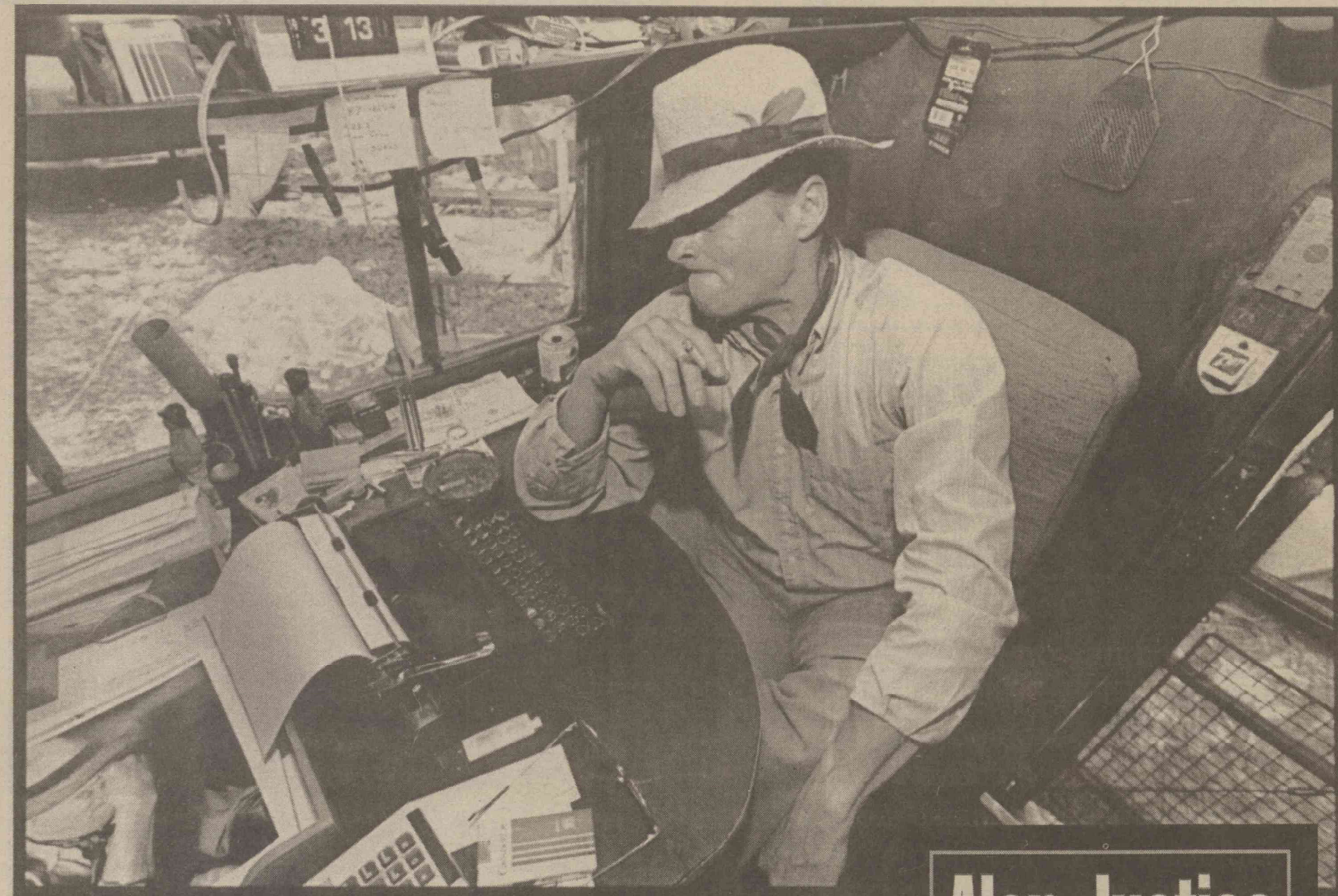
At 51 years old, Justiss' life has developed into a routine — a routine that involves a 1923 Royal typewriter, lots of paper, never-ending supplies of cigarettes and beer and a caustic disposition. "I write to stay alive as best I can," he says, gesturing toward a stack of his poem-filled pages numbering in the thousands.

The self-inflicted anguish and strain that encompass him is apparent — not just ver-

bally, but physically. His small-framed body is topped by a head of long, pony-tailed hair and a face that raises all kinds of questions. The sorrow in his eyes is often transformed into a piercing glare of hatred. But at what? At whom? His bitter attitude and blunt-edge indictments of total despair are occasionally contradicted by a smile or a warm comment, but his self-perception is overwhelmingly bleak.

His humbler than humble home parallels his needs. In fact, the decrepit 6-by-10-foot trailer wedged between two trees in the woods of Jacksonville's Westside is smaller than some families' shoe closet. Inside the place, old black and white photos and books by unknown authors lay about. Flyers featuring Justiss are tacked to the walls, and a small silver tape player squeezes out the gravel-throated drone of Tom Waits, which encapsulates the surroundings like nothing else could. His half-cot bed is nestled against the back wall — a perfect fit. The aroma of incense combats a stale smell of coffee, sweat and cigarettes. A broken screen door is his only protection from the outside world — or quite possibly the outside world's only protection from the inside of that trailer.

Shower? A hose.



Alan Justiss
didn't read
On the Road.
HE LIVED IT.

Bathroom? A 5-gallon tin drum in the woods.

A sink in which to brush teeth? "There isn't much need for that," he says with an exaggerated, toothless grin.

There are a few appliances Alan does hold sacred, including a small refrigerator filled with Schlitz beer.

But he's got to eat ...

"I do. It's in the refrigerator."

"So I've had to down-size a bit," he laughs, perfectly aware of my subtle shock. "But be careful ... each step rocks this cinder-blocked baby. We might even flip when you sit down."

Born in Dayton, Ohio, Justiss moved to Jacksonville as a newborn. Son of a proud mother and psychologist father, he attended Venetia Elementary and Lakeshore Junior High, followed by a shortlived stint at Lee High.

Life for Justiss began after that. The decision to swear off school was followed by years marked by time in the military, time in jail, five marriages, five divorces and four children. He spent many a day with Allen Ginsberg reading to graduate level classes in Gainesville and enjoying all kinds of chemicals and plants. He's been homeless, hungry and hung-over. He's sur-

vived a knife in the throat and three near drownings. He did time in a California drunk tank with the late cult-classic writer, Charles Bukowski, who once wrote "Some people never go insane ... what truly horrible lives they must lead." That was living — teetering on the edge of death to revel effectively in real life. Justiss was on the road that made Jack Kerouac famous, but he wasn't following Jack's tracks.

"I didn't read Kerouac or Burroughs until the '80s," he states matter-of-factly. "People always say I remind them of those guys, but I never read *On the Road* because I was on the road. I was doing it. I was hoppin' trains, living in burned-out cars, eating other peoples' garbage. I was trying too hard to survive to find time to read."

As years passed, Justiss' belief in hope passed away. So now he sits in his trailer, enigmatic and impervious to life.

"There are a few concepts I have a hard time with," he begins. "Hope. Try. Need. Want. I've lost all hope and therefore do not try. I have no needs so I want nothing. I've found all of those to be merely dead ends."

Depressing? Maybe.

" Sylvia Plath once noted 'The moment

we have expectations, we are guaranteed disappointment'. Not counting on anybody or anything keeps me strong. It's part of what drives me. Instead of trying, I do!"

So what — exactly — is Justiss doing?

Late last year, he placed a classified ad soliciting poetry and prose for a review that would be known as *Bar Fly*, a name Justiss borrowed from the film based on Bukowski's autobiography.

Although the quarterly publication would focus on Jacksonville writers, it is by no means limited to Jacksonville writers. Justiss has, in fact, received submissions from all over North and South America, Europe and Australia. The first issue will contain but one percent of the submissions. He refuses to put his own work in that one percent.

"I'm not doing this for me. This is for everyone but me."

The review's problem is financing. By trade, Justiss is a painter. For 20 years, he earned enough nickels and dimes to finance his lifestyle, but nothing more. At present, he works part-time at Chamblin Bookmine. Justiss is seeking grants and private contributions to publish *Bar Fly*. Should the opportunity for added work entice him, Justiss says he will fund his publication out of his own pocket.

"I have vision, man," he snarls. "I've

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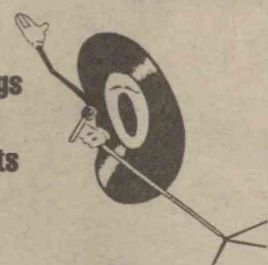


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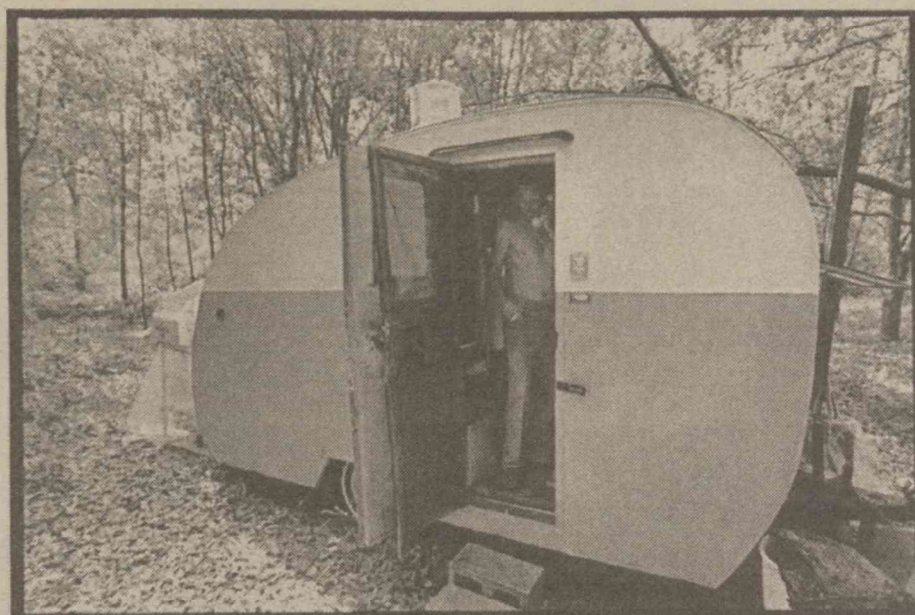


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Style is Essential



POETIC JUSTISS



Justiss says, "I have no needs so I want nothing." So his trailer home suits him fine.

come here for all of you ... so that you may make the impact."

Justiss is not new to Northeast Florida art circles. He's spent many an evening before area nightclub crowds, churning out words, depicting the depression of his invective. Heavily laced with a dreary introspection, Justiss is a street poet.

"I live to write and nothing else," he asserts.

Not everyone can deal with him, but he's never claimed to be for everyone. In fact, his very existence may be a fierce, painful slap in the face of the reality some people maintain. He may intimidate many, but he may also get through to a few.

"My door is always open to people. I'd love for people to visit me. Everyone's welcome here ... The only question is whether they'd ever come back."

Who exactly is the audience eager to sponge up this poetic Justiss?

"I was totally surprised. My crowds range from the ages of 15 to 70," he says. "Sometimes only 15 people show, but other times it's well in excess of 70. They really dig me, too. Isn't that sad?"

Among his venues: the J.A.B.A. Club, Ezells, Fusion Cafe, Heartworks, and Chamblin Bookmine.

Among the contributors to *Bar Fly* is local writer Robert Eskew.

"Alan is one of the few genuine poets this area has," Eskew states.

"There is a very surrealistic quality about him that makes people think. All the locals regard him as an eminent voice in the writer. The problem is his lack of exposure. If he published 1/16th of a second of his material, you'd have a mini-masterpiece."

"He is a dear, dear man," says the former journalism professor who started his career in California editing the likes of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Charles Bukowski circa 1955.

"As a human, he's superb. He cares about the right things. He continually keeps himself in the shadows to put others in the light. I cherish him as a friend and would even go as far as calling him a mentor."

Confronted with the question of just what he wants from this life, Justiss reiterates his disbelief in the term "want" with a shaking finger and sharp tongue.

"At the end of my road, what I find will be all that which I left behind."

Suddenly, he takes a deep, deep breath as if he were about to blow out a 15-foot snake rising in him. His attention is momentarily gone and miles away. He has slipped from — from wherever he had been. His eyes, glazed and squinted, exit into some oblivion. With locked jaws and heavy breathing,

he is now visibly squirming.

A moment later, he picks up precisely where he left off, almost as if there was never anything there. Maybe there wasn't.

"We are all islands, man," he whispers. "We are all alone. It's what we catch as driftwood that makes us lovely. We are the sole finder of those treasures and it's what we do with our islands, ourselves, that makes us unique."

A self-described survivor, Justiss is a kind, pleasant man, insightful in a world where most are unfamiliar. A friend who would give the shirt from his back is the man who fails in the ability to see any good in himself. It hurts him, he admits.

"I once confronted Alan and told him to take

a look at himself ... to see that all he was doing was sitting there writing and drinking himself to death," Eskew remembers.

"But Alan quickly snapped back, 'No, I'm sitting here drinking and writing myself to death.'"

"Why is it that all my life I work so hard for success but inches away from it, I fail or pull back," Justiss says with a soured face flooded by an ocean of emotion. "I always come from a point of despair."

Where he has not failed — at least not yet — is in the crafting of what could be a gem, *Bar Fly*.

"I truly hope it will become a reality," Eskew says. "There are some wonderful, wonderful writers out there and this would give them the showcase they deserve."

Would Justiss consider its publication a success?

"Oh absolutely! It would be a great success — yours." □

"We are all islands, man. We are all alone. It's what we catch as driftwood that makes us lovely."

THE PUSHING IS PULLED

All this baggage life books and stacks written pages taller than I am tons of regret to carry upon my broken back heart sore crippled stride twisted thoughts for the mind to iron out all of that not hidden inside out exposed. Everywhere I look, dust waits to cover.

Unable to die I live here one line at a time when my ending should be beginning & yet it will not stop or turn around: the pushing is pulled out off me as pain looking back if I dare gaze into the mirror & see no one there but me looking back not forward.

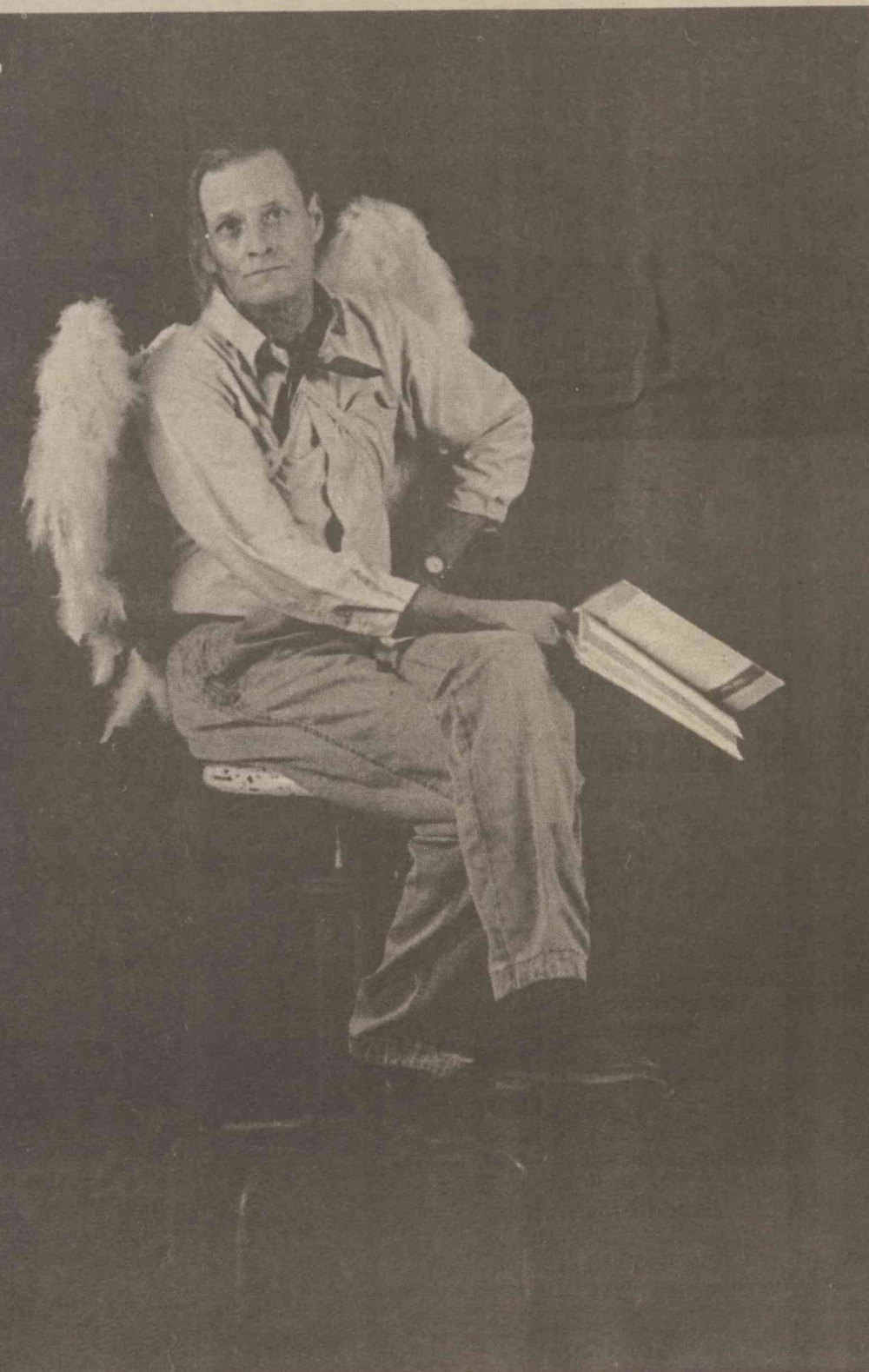


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