

# Mercy Mercy Mercy

*by* John Riley

When I was young and self-born in religion my aunts, uninterested in being washed in the Blood of Christ, called me Preacher Boy. I didn't pay them any attention. It was fine by me, I said, if they wanted to sit around and paint their toenails and listen to the hi-fi while I tended to my everlasting soul.

Come Sunday mornings I'd rise at six, dress in my white shirt, clip on navy-blue tie, penny loafers shined the night before, press my hair back with a ten-cent black comb and set-off alone down the stone-studded county dirt road.

In my memory it's always cold fall when I made those walks. The dew would be gone by that time of year and replaced by a sparkle of frost. If I didn't step on the sharp rocks they'd stay shiny until the sun turned them black. At the end of the road I'd practice my weekly verses while I watched for the bus to the Providence Primitive Baptist Church.

For a year I strapped myself to the Word. When the hymns were sung I stood and swayed and held my hands up and waved to the Savior who lived above my head. Twice I walked the altar call. Blessed I felt, blessed I was to know death was a warm wool glove and when my time came it'd slip right over me.

Then came the Sunday afternoon my aunt, the one with the bouncing curls, dropped an album on the turntable.

"Listen," she said in her liquid voice, "'it's called 'Mercy Mercy Mercy.'"

When she spun the volume up and that slow beat rolled out of the speakers I felt the heat begin in my knees and climb right up

through me. My insides floated out of my chest and wandered beneath the ceiling beams.

My aunt with the curls turned slowly from the hi-fi and reached out her arms. Her hand on my shoulder was light as a whisper and we began swaying across the parlor, on through the vestibule and down the hall past the closed bedroom doors.

We were not alone. The dark aunt closed her eyes and hummed. Her cigarette lingered before her lips. The curtains were open, windows raised. Outside, the sun headed for the trees.

