

Maybe the People Don't Want to Live and Let Live

In memoriam, Arthur Lee (1945–2006)

André Naffis-Sahely

2018

Sun-drunk I roll
along the streets of Los Angeles
while the radio rewrites
the world as I know it: the Sahara,

it seems, is no longer a desert:
it is a graveyard, while the Mediterranean
they add, is no longer a sea—it too
is now a graveyard...strung out, I stare

at hummingbirds high on sugar
and switch over to Love. I try to picture you,
Arthur Lee, a jazz-talking child
of redlined south central. You were a prince

when vinyl was king, ditched the alleys of misery
to rule the hipster clubs on the Strip.
When the hippies spaced out, you tuned in,
glimpsed the core of the candy-coated dream:

church bombings, race riots, Vietnam—
you sang of the rape of the American continent
from the death of the Indian to the year of the Cadillac.
You worked hard, fucked the band out of bread,

and hid in the hills, where you tripped far removed
from the city's sirens to write your jingles:
*They're locking them up today, they're throwing away the key,
I wonder who it'll be tomorrow—you or me?*

You peaked at 22, recorded your last words
onto acetate, then laid down to die; but death
kept you waiting a little longer, just in case...
You bore the classic curse of the genius:

trippy before Floyd, funky before Funkadelic,
and punk before those posers in London—
Oop-ip-ip oop-ip-ip, yeah! Surrounded by darkness,
you grew obsessed with re-birth: the album names said it all:

Da Capo, False Start... Burnt out at thirty
you released *Vindicator*, but that fell flat too.
Doubling down, you shaved your head
and sang even harder: *I'm young and able,*
don't want to set the table. Nothing worked:
you were too white for the blacks and too black
for the whites. The '80s saw you staring into the mirror,
playing the odd gig, nursing your mother...your second act

was cut short by the reforms of the '90s: three strikes
and you're out! They gave you six years
at Pleasant Valley Penitentiary,
the kind of saccharine name you always hated...

Fame and flowers came late, as they always do,
and the strings lulled you to sleep on a high.
Alla God's Chilluns Gotta Have Dere Freedom
The radio buzzes. The West slowly raises its drawbridge.

Andre Naffis-Sahely is from Abu Dhabi. His nonfiction writing has appeared in *The Nation*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Paris Review Daily*, and other publications. His first collection of poetry is *The Promised Land: Poems from Itinerant Life* (Penguin, 2017).

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