



**Episode 425: Beyond Red States and Blue States: The Real America vs. the Televised America**

**Guest: Bill Kauffman**

**WOODS:** It is a thrill to talk to you. I will point out to people, I am talking to you – I'm doing Skype on my end; you're on a telephone on your end, and let me just say, Bill, if you and I had been high school classmates and we had been aware of this technology at the time, I would have voted you Most Likely Not to Have Skype. So when I looked on the notes for today, and it said, "No Skype," I thought, you know, Bill, I wouldn't have it any other way with you.

**KAUFFMAN:** Yeah, I know; I've heard I'm also one of the last of the cell phone holdouts, but –

**WOODS:** Oh, how about that?

**KAUFFMAN:** But we do have this rotary phone I'm using, Tom.

**WOODS:** (laughing) How about that? All right, look, I want to talk about your just wonderful new book, *Poetry Night at the Ballpark and Other Scenes from an Alternative America*. These are your writings from 1986 to 2014 – selected, carefully selected, perhaps capriciously selected. Idiosyncratically selected. But organized into wonderful categories. I mean, I just had – my wife can attest to this – I had an absolute thrill – it was an absolute thrill reading this thing. And there are so many topics to cover that, maybe I'll just have to have you back every three days or something.

But let's start off with the literary angle, because you have written on history; you've written on current events; you've written on politics. But you've also written on American authors, American writers who have been of interest to you, because of the themes and their values that they've expressed, and I jotted down a few names that I found interesting. But what I found interesting in particular is the Beat Generation, the people like Jack Kerouac – you pointed something to me about them that I hadn't realized at all, which is, what were his political leanings?

**KAUFFMAN:** (laughing) It's funny, and his biographers tend not to know what to make of it. I mean, Kerouac was the author, of course, of *On the Road*, which is the seminal work of the Beat Generation. He grew up – he was a French Canadian kid who grew up

in Lowell, Massachusetts. And in a sense, he spent his life always trying to get back to Lowell.

At the same time that he was this handsome, football-playing epact who was hanging around with Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, and these guys, he was always – politically – he was always a Taft Republican. And it's not a case of, well, he got old and cranky and yelled at the kids riding bikes on his lawn or anything like that. Even when he was a young man, there are fascinating letters between Kerouac and Ginsberg – Allen Ginsberg, probably the most prominent poet of the Beat Generation, who grew up essentially in a kind of very left-wing household. And you know, they're arguing in their letters in between talking about different kinds of dope they've discovered, about the 1948 or the '52 presidential campaigns. And it's funny, because Ginsberg is supporting Senator Paul Douglas, who was just the worst kind of centralizing economist, very much a "cold warrior," a man who believed that power should be exercised judiciously by a credentialed few at the top of the pyramid. And you have Kerouac who's a big supporter of Robert Taft, and who say, distrust big government, who tends to be sort of isolationist, uninterested in foreign wars and such. And so it turns everything on its head.

As you well know, the problem is to a large extent, American pop culture, when it views politics, it's always Team A, Team B. Red or blue. And there are so many colors in the spectrum, and palettes that – so they can't feel, they can't understand a person like Kerouac. And hits is reflected in his writings, where there's this duality, there's this romance with the open road. But there's always this longing for some kind of anchorage and home. And there's also just the celebration of the country and what Kerouac thought was being lost. And he said at one point, World War II kind of changed everything, because all of these great guys that I'd known before the war were dead or they were coming back home and they were entering the machine. And he just thought that there was a certain kind of free form, refractory, idiosyncratic America that was being suffocated by postwar conformity.

**WOODS:** Is that basically what the Beat Generation was all about, if you had to summarize it?

**KAUFFMAN:** I think so. I mean, obviously, it was multifarious, and eventually it became commodified, you know, like punk rock or any other interesting cultural development that springs from some sort of grassroots and eventually it gets packaged and sold. But yeah, the early beats were all like that. The most influential beat publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Books in San Francisco, which put out Alan Ginsberg's *Howl* and many other works – Ferlinghetti was an anarchist who was also an early and consistent critic of the National Endowment for the Arts, saying how can any self-respecting poet or artist beg for alms from the federal government? It's interesting, this was in the mid '60s, and I know we're jumping around here, but hey, our talks are always digressive –

**WOODS:** Yeah, sure, I want that.

**KAUFFMAN:** Yeah, in the mid '60s, the early debates over whether we should have this national arts bureaucracy, there were a lot of artists in the "no" camp. And they tended to be people like Ferlinghetti or, you know, unorthodox or avant-garde types who really worried that what was going to happen is that there'd be the development of this official state art, you know, where you get the imprimatur of Washington on art. And now today, you find – you know, when you have these occasional flare ups, debates over should government subsidize art, it's always sold as cultured, refined supporters of the NEA versus these troglodytic, knuckle-dragging morons, who if anything, maybe they think that tractor pulls should be subsidized. And in fact, it used to be way, way, way more complicated and complex than that. But again, nuance is always lost, or seems to be.

**WOODS:** Yeah, and that's what I love about this book, is that chapter after chapter consists of a new, either somebody I didn't know about or somebody whose details I didn't know. And it turns out that when you fill in those details, the person takes on rather a different texture. I find that the person is not just easily categorized. And in fact, so few of us are easily categorized. And yet, they try so darn hard to categorize us.

Let me just share if I may, though, before we move on, I love this little passage that you included from Jack Kerouac. He says – he's talking about Harry Truman; this is written in 1948 – "The war scare I think is just for the sake of squeeze-playing Congress into voting Universal Military Training and the Marshall Plan." So he's even against the Marshall Plan. That's awesome.

"It's a dirty administration with dirty tricks creating emergencies for its own political ends. I think we should just arm and dare anybody to attack, but I don't think we should be the aggressors, that wouldn't pan out." And then toward the end of your chapter on this, you have him saying, "Woe unto those who think that the Beat Generation means crime, delinquency, immorality...Woe unto those who spit on the Beat Generation, the wind'll blow it back." Again, not what you ordinarily get from all this.

And you know, I'm going to jump around myself, if I may. Hang on just a second, because I did initially want to talk about some of these writers, but this actually makes me want to think of another theme that you raise here, which is that the Left and Right categories are – they fascinate me. I don't think they're completely useless; I don't go to that extreme. There is such a thing as the Left; there is such a thing as the Right. But it's so interesting to see the way they can sometimes bleed into one another. And so I do want to say something about politics, if I may just for a minute.

**KAUFFMAN:** Sure.

**WOODS:** You have in here a chapter called, "Barry Goldwater, New Leftist," and I demand that you justify that statement.

**KAUFFMAN:** (laughing) Well, I'm borrowing from Karl Hess there. Hess was the great Goldwater speechwriter, who had this really interesting ideological journey from the '50s journalistic rights up through the Goldwater campaign, and then he became a member of the IWW, the radical anarchist, syndicalist labor union, and he kind of dressed like Fidel Castro, and later on he was kind of an off-the-grid type. And he was always a fascinating writer.

And he remained friends with Goldwater, even after the '64 campaign. And there's — I think the personal should always trump the political, and there's a beautiful story that was told, and I hope I get it right, because I don't have the chapter in front of me. But it was at one of the more radical protests, anti-war protests in maybe '68 or so, and even the anti-war congressmen didn't show up to this thing; it was in DC. And who shows up, but Barry Goldwater, who's walking through the crowd, saying, hey, where's Karl Hess? Where's Karl Hess? And Karl says — you know, the long hair and the Che Guevara look, and he sees his old boss, and they embrace in the middle of tear gas and everything else, and they talk about old times.

I love that story. In part, I suppose, it's because I have a real anarchist bent. And I think that politics should occupy a very small role in our lives. Obviously it doesn't, but ideally political disagreements with friends who'd be — like if one of you prefers Coke and the other Pepsi. I mean, okay, big deal. It ought not to cause ruptures or cleavages in friendships. And it sometimes does, unfortunately. But the Goldwater-Hess story, to me was kind of a shining example of what ought to be.

Actually, it reminds me of a story that's not in this book but that's also like — Eugene Debs, who was the great socialist leader of the early 20th century, and he was kind of an interesting guy again, who doesn't completely fit the Left-Right grid. Debs was from Terre Haute, Indiana, and he really loved Terre Haute, a great patriot of Terre Haute. He said he just liked to sit on his front porch. The Terre Haute newspaper was very conservative. It was Taft Republican, by which I don't mean the great Robert Taft; I mean his rather more phlegmatic Wall Street father, William Howard Taft. And yet the Terre Haute paper always endorsed Debs for president, because they said he was a good neighbor. I always thought, wow, to me that's the America that ought to be — and it sometimes is.

**WOODS:** This is not directly related, but I'm reminded of story that as always, with your books, I learn something on every page. I hadn't known very much about the friendship between Franklin Pierce and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

**KAUFFMAN:** Mm hmm.

**WOODS:** Pierce is one of these presidents nobody knows about, because he wasn't flashy and he vetoed unconstitutional bills and things like that, so nobody wants to talk about him —

**KAUFFMAN:** (laughing) He was a failure to the Schlesingers, right?

**WOODS:** He was a failure because he didn't launch the Civil War, so of course. So he was very much out of fashion by the early 1860s. And yet Hawthorne still wanted to dedicate a book to him apparently, and his publisher told him that could seriously damage the prospects of the book. And he came back with essentially that, if my friend's fortunes have fallen to the point where my dedicating a book to him would damage its prospects that badly, then maybe he needs the support of a friend more than ever.

**KAUFFMAN:** Yeah, yeah, isn't that beautiful? And how often does that happen today in literary and political worlds?

**WOODS:** Oh my gosh, never. You would be dropped like a bad habit. I mean, think about the way – do you remember the Lani Guinier Supreme Court nomination?

**KAUFFMAN:** Mm hmm.

**WOODS:** And as soon as – she was a friend of the Clintons or something. As soon as she ran into trouble because of her Calhounian views on some subjects, they treated her like she didn't even exist. I remember there was a story of Hilary Clinton walking down the hall, and there's Lani Guinier, and she just gives her this ice look, and says hello, like they don't even know each other. She's so past her, because it's doing damage to her.

**KAUFFMAN:** Yeah, yeah, that was great. And the funny thing about Guinier, I remember, one of the few pro-Guinier pieces I read at the time was by the Southern Agrarian historian, Clyde Wilson, who was editor of *The Calhoun Papers*, who loved Guinier.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that's right, because she wanted to talk about the concurrent majority.

**KAUFFMAN:** (laughing) Right, right.

**WOODS:** (laughing) Nobody's wanted to talk about this for a long time. So especially if you're the editor of *The Calhoun Papers*, you've got to get these ideas out there.

**KAUFFMAN:** (laughing) Yeah, Pierce had his problems; I mean he was a dough face, and he was – like a lot of the Democrats in the 1850s, he was kind of an expansionist, who wanted Cuba and such –

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**KAUFFMAN:** Lebensraum for slavery. So I'm not a big fan. But it's interesting that there was – novelists and filmmakers have paid so little attention to the American past, because he's an interesting guy. You know, as he and his family were traveling by train to D.C. for his inauguration, his son was killed in sort of a freak train accident – his little boy. And it just cast – as you can imagine – it cast this terrible pall over the

administration. And his wife, who was not really a hale and sound woman in the best of circumstances, ended up spending the next four years locked in her room, trying to communicate with the dead son, while Pierce wandered the hallways of the White House drunk. To me, it's just a really, vividly tragic story, and it's always blown me away that someone should write a novel about Pierce. But we get 12,000 novels about Lincoln, but nothing about Frankie.

**WOODS:** Yeah, it's crazy. I mean, again, this is why I like Bill Kauffman, because he'll talk about Franklin Pierce, and we've already heard all about Lincoln. I think we have our views of him at this point. But there are other people – other people did exist. There was an alternative way of thinking about the world.

So again, the book is *Poetry Night at the Ballpark and Other Scenes from an Alternative America*. You have a section in here, I already knew where it was going before I read it, but that's because I've read you before. The piece is called "George W. Bush, Anti-Family President." Run with that.

**KAUFFMAN:** Bush is – I think I wrote it in the aftermath of the Iraq War – Iraq War II. It always blew me away that the "family values Right," or at least its D.C. establishment incarnation, was wedded to the Republican Party, when the militaristic wing of the Republicans, led by Bush and Cheney and such, were in the process of tearing families apart.

There's a lot of literature going back to the Second World War about the effect of length deployments on marriage. Always increased divorce rates in a time of war. Also increased suicide rates from returning soldiers. Other displacements – people move. Part of it's forcible – the soldier. But part of it's family, maybe traveling to be with the soldier or near the soldier. And all of a sudden, you're uprooted from – you're detached from this community of support that you've always enjoyed, you know, the people that watch your kids and such, the grandmother, the aunts, the uncles.

And also, none other than Hilary Clinton has praised the Army's daycare system. I think she's called it – it's called the Total Army Family, something like that. It's some kind of Orwellian ringing title to it. In fact, it was the Army through the Lanham Act of the '40s was really a pioneer in government-subsidized daycare. And yet, the Bush Right is indifferent. They carve out this enormous exception for anything having to do with the national security state. And so in my view, the Bush administration was very anti-family.

The only candidate I remember making this point was actually Ralph Nader, another guy who kind of escapes the – in some ways, especially in recent years – escapes the Left-Right prism. But then we see, as 2016's gearing up, the idea of lip service to family values. But in fact, I don't see any dissent, except perhaps from Rand Paul, any dissent to this mobilized, bellicose, ready-for-war posture, which the GOP has become synonymous with in recent years.

**WOODS:** I actually had Ralph Nader on the show some time ago. I'll link to that on today's show notes page, [TomWoods.com/425](http://TomWoods.com/425). It was a very cordial and interesting conversation, as I'm sure you would expect that it would be.

**KAUFFMAN:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** I was very glad to be able to do it. In your subtitle here, you talk about an "alternative America." And that to me is what Bill Kauffman has been all about. Paint us a picture of what is this alternative America that you're capturing in some of these writings.

**KAUFFMAN:** Well, you know, I always thought there were two Americas. Actually, there are many, many Americas – when 1,000 flowers bloom and all that. But there's the televised America, that if you ask someone who gets his information only from the idiot box, you'd say, okay, there's this America that consists of The View and Dick Cheney and Katie Couric and Caitlyn Jenner – you know, there's that America.

But then there's the America that I experience just in everyday life. And it's an America you never see on television; it's an America of little churches and baseball and backyard gardens and such. It's a much more modest and I think humane and interconnected America. And to me, it's produced most of the good things we have in this country. And a lot of the interesting pieces of art and novels and literary traditions and political eruptions have come from this other America.

And so I've been lucky that for 30 years now, I've been able to write about these little pieces of it. And sometimes they might seem like footnotes or whatever, but to me the shunpikes, you know, the side roads, that's where you find the interesting stuff. You don't find it barreling down the interstate at a – you know, the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways – at 75 miles an hour. The interesting stuff is on the side roads, and that's where I've chosen to spend most of my career.

**WOODS:** And the people whom you find in this alternative America, so often at least in the past, have generally been of the "mind your own business" bent, when it comes to foreign policy. And this of course is dismissed sneeringly as isolationism. But what it seems to follow from is, I have plenty of my own concerns right here in my town. I have more than enough to keep me busy for the rest of my life, and worrying about voting rights in some country halfway around the world is not something that it would be responsible of me to be spending my time on.

**KAUFFMAN:** Yes, absolutely. And yet, we are hectored to pay attention to Baghdad instead of our own backyard. My overwhelming tendency, as well as those of most of the people I write about, is to pay attention to your backyard. There are impossibly vivid and colorful and flavorful things going on there, and that's where you can really make a difference.

Otherwise, what is – even engaging in national politics – and I'm not putting it down, and I always vote, and I support candidates and such – but really, you and I are

subjects, not citizens, of the American empire. If I'm upset about the war or some federal policy, what can I do? I write a letter and receive a computer-generated response back. But at the local level, I can actually make some kind of difference. And I think that the only way we're going to start any kind of American regeneration or halt this terrible slide we're on is by 10,000 of us paying attention to things in our own backyards.

**WOODS:** You know, it's funny, there's a book that Ron Paul wrote back in 2008, called *The Revolution: A Manifesto*, and when the Italian translation of that book came out, they titled it – because that title wouldn't mean anything to them – they title it, *The Third America*, which I thought was such an evocative title, because of course, they mean that, as versus Hilary Clinton and Mitt Romney's America, there's Ron Paul's America, that third America. And I thought, that – usually publishers, I find – well, I shouldn't say this, but they can be obtuse.

**KAUFFMAN:** (laughing) No –

**WOODS:** But this publisher really got to the heart of what Ron was all about. Now, can I just ask you something though? I totally admire your stance on these issues and your belief in regionalism and localism. I absolutely admire that, and I know you still live more or less where you grew up, and I think that's fantastic. But what about somebody who says, look, I grew up in an abusive household in a rotten town full of rednecks who are just the enemies of civilization, and from a Menckenesque standpoint, I've just got to get out of here. What do you say to that? Like, I need mobility; I can't be tied to my locality. I gotta get outta here.

**KAUFFMAN:** Oh yeah. No, I'm completely sympathetic. I mean, I've never argued that people should live in their hometowns. But I guess, what I like to – I like the old line of Booker T. Washington, who said, "Cast down your buckets where you are." And what he means by that is it might not be your hometown, your home place, but once you find a place where you're comfortable and which you think you can make a life, make a stand, immerse yourself in the local life.

And there are many ways of doing that, whether through church or coaching little league teams or politics or whatever. But pay attention to the things that are around you. Come to learn why do people love the place you live in. What's distinctive about it? What's its history? And history is good and bad and worse and all. So I think, no, you don't have to live where you were born, but you need to make yourself – to use a Wendell Berry line – "native to your place."

And I think, just anecdotally, I think more people are doing that. I think people really sense that we're way off track in this country; there's great dissatisfaction with the status quo. People are casting about for alternatives. And in little ways, you see them, I think, lighting upon this alternative. So you know, and partly because I'm a general optimist, there are signs of hope.

**WOODS:** Bill, before I let you go, the last time you were here, we talked about the film *Copperhead*, for which you wrote the screenplay, and that was one of my favorite episodes. I really enjoyed that conversation. But given that you have some experience in that and that you've written about movies and you have a section on movies in *Poetry Night at the Ballpark*, can we close with you giving us one or two examples of a film that really brings out some of the Bill Kauffman American themes?

**KAUFFMAN:** Yeah, I'll give you one. *Hoosiers*, one of the greatest sports movies ever made, which is actually written by an Indianan, Angelo Pizzo, and directed by an Indianan, David Anspaugh, starring a couple Midwesterners, Gene Hackman and Dennis Hopper. And it's about the story of Milan, Indiana, which won in the early '50s – I forget the year, '51, '52 – the Indiana State Basketball Championship. It was a very small school, and there were no classes, so in the state tournament they'd have to play schools, whether from Indianapolis or South Bend or Fort Wayne – the big cities.

But it's a lovely story, not so much about basketball, but about this little community coming together. And there's a strong David and Goliath element to it. And it's also about the importance of the centrality of little schools to a community. And it's a public school, as most little schools are. But that's sort of beside the point. The important thing is these people have grown up with each other; they know each other; they live in this far out of the way place, and no one gives them a chance. And yet it's a lovely, lovely story that I think dramatizes a lot of these points.

And actually I have a chapter about it in the book; I interviewed the author, Angelo Pizzo, several years ago. He and his wife moved back to Bloomington, Indiana, his hometown. He's also written this other very good sports movie, not quite as good as *Hoosiers*. It's called *Rudy*, about Notre Dame. So yeah, I guess *Hoosiers* is the one I would instance, apart from *Copperhead*, which I should say is available now on DVD and Blu-Ray.

**WOODS:** Well, in fact, why don't I link to that too? Link to that also.

**KAUFFMAN:** That would be terrific. Yes.

**WOODS:** So definitely, the clearinghouse for this episode, to help you get the most out of this episode, [TomWoods.com/425](http://TomWoods.com/425). We'll link to *Copperhead*, and we'll link to the book we've been talking about, *Poetry Night at the Ballpark and Other Scenes from an Alternative America*. We'll also link to your website, [BillKauffman.net](http://BillKauffman.net). We'll link to Front Porch Republic, where you write. And maybe we'll link to your *American Conservative* archive, if I can find that.

**KAUFFMAN:** Yeah, why not. Sure, it's a link-a-thon.

**WOODS:** Yeah, it's a link-a-thon. Is there anything I'm leaving out?

**KAUFFMAN:** No, I don't think I have a police record on the Internet, so I guess we're okay.

**WOODS:** Not yet, anyway. Well, Bill, I appreciate our conversation as always, and best of luck with the book. And I want to urge people to read it, because you'll learn things and you'll also learn how to write well, because Bill is one of maybe a half dozen people whose writing I genuinely envy. So when people say to me, how do I become a better writer, well, I would say, read Bill Kauffman. I still don't know – I would say probably every fourth or fifth page has a word I have never in my life seen.

**KAUFFMAN:** A lot of those I just make up Tom. Don't worry about it.

**WOODS:** (laughing) All right, that would explain it. But anyway, the writing's great; the content's great, and you're going to be learning a lot of interesting stuff and enjoying yourself in the process. That's about all you can ask of an author, and you've delivered. Thanks again, Bill.

**KAUFFMAN:** I had a great time, Tom, as always. Thanks.