



# Younger Than That Now: A Shared Passage from the Sixties

*Jeff Durstewitz, Ruth Williams*

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He was a rabble-rousing New York high school senior. She was a fiercely proud daughter of the Deep South. In 1969 these two strangers exchanged angry letters, igniting a lifetime friendship and an extraordinary personal chronicle of our times.

She was a conservative Mississippi girl. He was a self-styled firebrand from New York. In 1969, in an America torn apart by differences, two very dissimilar teens put their hearts on paper and began a friendship that would span thirty years. Now, in this collaborative memoir, they tell an unforgettable story that is a testament to who we were yesterday... and who we are now.

It began when a group of bored Long Island high school newspaper reporters wrote, for a lark, an obnoxious note to Ruth Tuttle, the editor of a Deep South school paper. The New York teens included a future documentary filmmaker, a concert violinist, and the founders of Ben & Jerry's ice cream--but in those days they were typical high school seniors, quick to imagine they knew all about a girl they'd never met.

The ringleader, Jeff Durstewitz, impulsively dropped the letter into a mailbox, never suspecting that within a few days he'd receive an electrifying response. In the following flurry of letters, genteelly Southern Ruth and brash Jeff explored their feelings--sometimes heatedly--about God, race, sex, and life. Within a month of receiving Ruth's first letter, Jeff was planning a Yankee invasion of Yazoo City, Mississippi.

Spring break brought a wild drive from New York to Yazoo City with his two friends in a psychedelic VW Bug, a "Heat of the Night" encounter between a cop and these three headstrong teens, and a culture clash in Ruth's living room that neither she nor her proper parents would ever forget. It was a night that shattered stereotypes--and their hopes for a romance.

But it didn't derail the long-distance friendship that would sustain them both through thirty years of love affairs, heartbreaking disappointments, social change, divorce, and the loss of a cherished friend as they negotiated the passages from youth to middle age. And with each move, the packet of precious letters traveled, too.

These letters form the heart of a wonderful memoir that captures not just the hopes of a generation and the soul of the South on the brink of inexorable change, but the experience of being young, bright, and passionate.

**Younger Than That Now** is as achingly expressive as Janis Joplin singing "Me and Bobby McGee," as revealing of youth's wild yearnings as a Woodstock documentary. It is sharp, funny, and true, a mirror for a generation--both then and now.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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