

*Birdman*, by Joe Light

Art selection and comment by [Lil Copan](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue



COURTESY OF GORDON GALLERY (NASHVILLE)

Joe Light was a towering, often disturbing figure in his Memphis community. He aligned himself with the prophets and considered himself a kind of Moses. Before he became an artist, he was incarcerated. In prison in 1960, he heard a preacher explore the Old Testament, and he returned to his cell with the sound of a voice in his head. Commenting on the experience later, he said that he thought he was losing his mind. He tested the voice: "If you are God, prove it.' 'Step up to the cell door,' the voice answered, 'and I'm going to let a bird land on that window sill . . . Tell it what to do, and it will do it.' And sure enough the bird landed on it . . . That

bird on that man's head is like the spirit of God. I felt the presence of God following me regularly." While various versions of the birdman exist, this image remains Light's signature piece. Light was a bit of a loose cannon, said Kevin Gordon, owner of Gordon Gallery in Nashville, "but he was also a man whose personal beliefs were strong, and who wasn't the least bit afraid to share them with anyone, no matter the consequences."