The New York Times
nytimes.com

September 29, 1996

From Rap's Rhythms, a Retooling of Poetry

By MICHEL MARRIOTT

Even before the slaying of Tupac Shakur this month, the generation inspired by rap had started an intense self-appraisal. Its soul-searching has led it, increasingly, to rap's precursor, street poetry, and has given rise to the ''spoken word'' movement, which has been quietly evolving for several years in clubs, cafes and workshops.

Under the spoken-word banner, young men and women have been retooling the use of the rhymes and rhythms that are the foundation of rap, discarding its violent imagery, drugs, misogyny and recording-studio gimmickry. And when these new poets use musical backgrounds, they are only backgrounds; they do not dominate the words, as in rap.

A slew of poets, including some older veterans, are pounding out gritty yet sophisticated meditations that examine issues of passion, pain and poverty. Their heroes are less likely to include the likes of Shakur and his fellow rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg, than literary figures like Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Last Poets, the Harlem-based group of poet-revolutionaries who first burst into popularity in the early 1970's and are now considered the village elders of rap and a living bridge to the new poetry.

''More people than ever are slowly but surely turning their ears toward poetry,'' said Saul Williams, a 24-year-old poet and a rising star of this world called spoken word. Mr. Williams, of Brooklyn, has performed in clubs and on college campuses in New York before young, predominantly black standing-room-only crowds that cheer at the mere mention of his first name.

Mr. Williams recently opened his ''Untimely Meditations'' with this:

The fiery sun of my passions

evaporates the love lakes of my soul

clouds my thoughts

and rains you into existence.

Such wordplay and Mr. Williams's cascading delivery and cosmic references -- without music -- are commonly found in the new poetry.

Poetry is a medium that has historically been part of urban America, but many of today's street poets believe that their success may well be rooted as firmly in the millions of words that rap has showered on its listeners, part of the hip-hop culture.

Since the days when rap was considered a fad and many people could not imagine rhyming chants with urban messages taking hold as a musical form, it has done just that. In 1992, industry executives estimated rap's annual sales at $400 million. Now Death Row, a record label created that year, is said to have had sales of more than $100 million alone.

Audiences are already conditioned to accept spoken-word performers because the new medium deviates from rap not so much in form as in content and attitude. Undeniably, the same show-business vein that marked rap runs through many spoken-word performances. Charismatic figures command audiences not only with their words but with their style: whirling dreadlocks, Afrocentric clothing and voices that rise, fall and crash in jazzy zigzags reminiscent of the saxophone of John Coltrane.

But at the core of contemporary urban poetry, especially when it describes the travails of struggling, impoverished

Americans, is an attempt to illuminate possible solutions, its proponents say. Just as in rap, there is anger, and sometimes alienation, but the poems are practically always delivered with an underlying optimism.

''We have gats and 40's in our poetry,'' said Jessica Care Moore, a 24-year-old native of Detroit who joined the New York poetry scene in 1994, using rap slang for guns and 40-ounce containers of malt liquor. ''But we also talk about ways to get around them. We just don't celebrate it.''

T'Kalla, a 28-year-old Brooklyn-based poet who was part of a hip-hop and poetry performance tour through Europe with the Vibe Khameleons, said: ''A few years ago there was a lot of black rage: 'Kill whitey,' 'The sister did me wrong.' But people are trying to get up and around all of that. We're just not going to wallow in what we think people have done wrong to us. We're trying to build a new home, instead of ranting somewhere.''

Mr. Baraka, a leading black poet who emerged in the 1960's, as well as a scholar and civil rights activist, said, ''In the 60's, we wanted poetry that was African-American in form and content, that was revolutionary, that was a continuation of the great works of the great black writers.''

He said he was gratified to see that the new poets were ''taking poetry out of the classrooms.''

Mr. Baraka, who regularly invites poets, playwrights and musicians to share their work in his home theater in Newark, called poetry ''the lifeline to the human heart.'' The new poets, including his 26-year-old son, Ras, help convince him that he did not waste his time, ''that I wasn't paddling my feet in the pool.''

Reg. E. Gaines, a pioneering artist of the new poetry who was a co-writer of the Tony Award-winning Broadway hit ''Bring In da Noise, Bring In da Funk,'' is finishing a documentary film called ''Underground Voices'' on the emerging poetry scene.

''People generally equate somebody running their mouth to bull, rhetoric, trash,'' said Mr. Gaines, who is in his 30's but refuses to give his age. ''Now you've got this spoken-word poetry, or whatever you want to call it, and you can go somewhere and be moved by something somebody has said.''

He said the growing willingness of people to read poetry aloud to strangers was energizing people who had previously considered themselves voiceless. ''Everybody is so used to looking at somebody else talking,'' Mr. Gaines said, that ''you've got a whole lot of people now who will get up in front of people who have never done that before.''

Mr. Gaines said it was not until he saw the poet Willie Perdomo in a reading at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in 1990 that he realized ''how voiceless I was.''

Today the urban poetry landscape is as colorful as a neon sign in New York clubs like Nuyorican, the Brooklyn Moon Cafe and S.O.B.'s, a misty mix of black nationalist and neo-beatnik sensibilities. In much the same way, the new poetry is alive in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Washington and Dayton, Ohio. Members of audiences tend to be respectful, occasionally shouting words of support. Many do not smoke and drink juice at performances.

Even on television, the title character in ''Moesha'' emerged as a spoken-word poet in a recent episode of the Tuesday night show on UPN (Channel 9 in New York). Hip-hop's answer to Gidget, Moesha is played by the pop singer Brandy.

Audio and video clips of urban poets can be downloaded from places like the Cafe los Negroes (http://www.losnegroes.com) site on the World Wide Web. And urban poets are increasingly producing books, most often self-published.

''People want something new, but don't know exactly what it is yet,'' said Sharrif Simmons, 27, a Brooklyn-based poet who has been performing since 1990. ''People are grasping onto something that will change them.''

Recognizing this, the musician and record producer Quincy Jones brought the new poetry to a mass audience with the release last year of a CD by D Knowledge entitled ''All That and a Bag of Words.'' This year, Mercury Records created a new label, Mouth Almighty Records, becoming the first major company to make a commitment to record and promote the new poets.

The new label's roster includes the Last Poets, who made a monumental impact on street poetry in its earliest days. Despite some personnel changes over the years, the group is returning to the forefront.

Early on, the group wrote and performed biting liberation poetry against a sonic backdrop of traditional African

drums. The group's works, with titles like ''Niggers Are Scared of Revolution'' and ''This Is Madness,'' were uncompromising and electrifying. The group's first album, ''The Last Poets,'' was an underground success when it was released in 1970.

Abiodun Oyewolfe, one of the group's founders, has said that he applauds young people who are turning away from the violent and lewd lyrics of some rap songs to the new poetry.
But an older poet, Layding Lumumba Kaliba, 48 and born in Harlem, had some advice for the new writers. Mr. Kaliba, who began writing poetry 27 years ago and finds himself both a part of and apart from the current resurgence in urban poetry, said that in those early days, ''we did more studying about our craft and were more inclined to go to workshops.'' Some members of the hip-hop generation believe that they can ''cuss out America, say something aggressive, and they are poets,'' he said.

The comparisons between many of these young street poets and rappers are inescapable, he said. The newer poets tend to ''have that rap staccato,'' said Mr. Kaliba, the poetry editor for African Voices, the New York black literary quarterly, and the co-producer of ''Underground Voices.'' ''They are doing rap without music, but calling it poetry,'' he said.

Some of the younger poets, like Ms. Moore, who this year became the first poet to win the Apollo Theater's amateur night, sometimes use hip-hop beats and tracks.

Rap has had a volatile history. At first a playful creation by New York black and Hispanic youth in the 1970's, rap turned increasingly hard-edged and misogynistic in the 1990's, celebrating the bravado of ''gangsta rap'' and generally becoming more profane than profound. As growing numbers of the rap industry packed guns, some were sent to jail, and some, like Mr. Shakur, went to their graves. Mr. Shakur died on Sept. 13 in Las Vegas, Nev., from wounds in a shooting six days earlier.

Perhaps, as a result, rap's share of the market has been shrinking.

''I hate being called a rapper,'' Mr. Williams said. The words he writes, he explained, are for people looking for something more constructive, more spiritual, than what is usually found in rap these days. Nonetheless, he said, he understands the links between the two word-heavy genres.

Ms. Moore agreed: ''I hear hip-hop artists who are like, 'Yo, Jessica, you should just flow, you should be a rapper.' I'm not trying to be a rapper.''

''It's poetry,'' she said. ''That's how I define it.''

A Fresh Crop Of Street Poets

Jessica Care Moore's ''BOX THIS!'' protests the idea of a multiracial census category:

Stretch this message

Across America's

New found interest in

Multi-culturalism

Mixed with hidden agendas

When the

Ulterior Motive

It's to kill more quotas

Someone lied

Cause we've always

had Apartheid

It's existed for years

Bi Tri or Multi

Cultural folks didn't just

get here

Fresh off the boat

''Breathe Already!!! (After reading 'Waiting to Exhale' by Terry McMillan)'' is by Layding Kaliba:

Black woman! Your black man

must stand on his own
Stop being the pyramid we
lean on.

refuse to be our crutch
If we can't stand up,

then face down in the mud is

where we belong

Stop being the backbone that

camouflages

our absence of spine

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company | Home | Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | XML | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Back to Top |