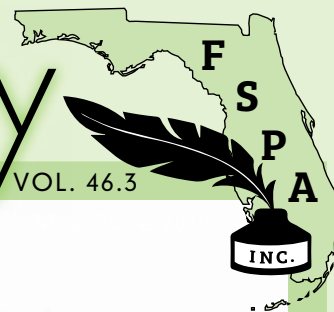


Of Poets & Poetry

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summer hill seven

Photograph by Akil DuPont

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Profiles in Poetry

SUMMER HILL SEVEN:

Actor, Author, Director, Educator...

There is a very long string of nouns one would need to use to be fully informed as to the skills and identity of Summer Hill Seven, but one word might sum it up—accomplished. The following questions, composed by Al Rocheleau, and responses in Summer's own words, allow us to peek into his richly-textured life.

Q: The Summer Hill Seven name is a memorable one. The story?

A: My great grandmother, whom I never met, raised my mother, who was orphaned by her parents. My great grandmother's name is Cora Summerhill and she is the seventh of 13 children fathered by Robert Summerhill. When my mother transitioned in 2004, I published my first book (*Notes of a Neurotic*) as Summer Hill Seven. When I completed my MFA in acting in 2007, I then chose Summer Hill Seven as my stage name. The idea is that when you see me (or read me), you see my mother, her mother and all the circumstances that lead to who and what I am.

Q: You've lived a long life, come a long way. What got you here?

A: I have come this far, by faith, as the gospel song says. Nothing else. By Faith, I am referring to the biblical definition—"the evidence of things unseen and the substance of things hoped for..."

Q: You're an attorney, an activist, an actor, a poet. How do those roles go together?

A: The common denominator is the persuasive use of language. From as long as I can remember, I chose to believe that the right word was the magic and often secret password to unlock the door to all of our desires.

Q: Is the actor a poet inside dramatic lines, the advocate a poet for his client and his cause?

A: That is a persuasive way to describe it, for sure; now that you put it like that, I will say, absolutely.

I never chose poetry as a path, poetry actually intimidates me in ways that few things have. Simon Callow, a British actor and writer said that the theatre benefits most from "actor-poets" which to me, meant actors who value above all the poetic possibilities of language. I relate to that and after I read that I began to explore it more deliberately in my own acting work. In fact, I intend my appearance at the Spring Fling to be my final public performance for my own poetry. I intend to confine my performance of poetry to film acting and the works of other poets. As far as, the advocate being a poet for his cause and client, in my first book, *Notes of a Neurotic*, I did include a letter that I wrote on behalf of a legal aid client prior to retiring from the practice of law because the rhythm of the words felt artful, if not poetic.

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2006—Professional theater training program, University of Delaware, Summer Hill Seven portraying Sir Anthony Absolute in the play *The Rivals* by Richard Sheridan. Photography by Paul Cerro

Q: Who were your personal life-models, beacons, famed and otherwise?

A: Naturally, my first super-hero was none other than Jesus Christ, the blue-eyed and blonde version, no less. After Jesus, I discovered the rock band—the Monkees, they were my first friends. I watched their tv show and sang and danced along with them. In puberty, I discovered what the idea of “Blackness” meant for a young man in America. It is important to add that by birth via Robert Summerhill and my Gramma the beliefs and traditions of the indigenous people of this land we call America were passed along to me in direct ways. Chiefly, I always understood that I was in “the world” but not “of the world”—that the material world was temporal, and of little consequence. So, by the time I encountered the story and legend of Malcolm X, I recognized my story in his. I also recognized the story of Jesus of Nazareth in Malcolm X’s story. I didn’t choose him as a life-model rather I saw Malcolm X as a beacon, as you say, a guide that could help me through the valley. In college, when some fraternities began to approach me about joining their organization, that is when I chose my first and perhaps last life-model, Paul Robeson. Now, I don’t see myself as anything more than a mere particle connected to all the other particles inside the ALL.

Q: Can you tell us about the Poemedy? One might assume the combination of “Comedy” and “Poetry,” but would that discount it? Is it more like Dante’s definition of Comedy, of our real Life Story?

A: Laurence Holder is one of America’s greatest writers and I enjoyed the distinct privilege of learning directly from him for several years. He wrote the play that brought Denzel Washington to the attention of New York theatre critics when Washington played the role of Malcolm X in Holder’s *When the Chickens Came Home to Roost*. I learned from him about the origin of the term Jazz. I had not yet written any books. I had started directing plays in New York City around the same time that I met Holder.

At the same time, Danny Hoch and his cohorts were starting to develop what they were calling “hip-hop theatre”—it was very exciting for young pigmented actors because theatre is very racially segregated and so, many of us felt like this new form would bring greater opportunities for us, the hip-hop generation, to express themselves on stage.

At the same time, David Lamb was writing novels in a new literary form that they were calling “hip-hop literature”—eventually after refusing many offers of other writers to adapt his novel for the stage, David decided to adapt it and produce it himself. Hoch, Holder and Lamb and I come from a philosophy that Elijah Muhammad, the teacher of Malcolm X, called Do For Self.

David Lamb, happened to be my roommate at Princeton and NYU School of Law. Eventually, he and his wife chose me to adapt the play version of his novel, which he wrote, for the stage. It was the first play I directed. I had begun writing *Notes of a Neurotic*. I understood that we were way off the beaten path with our efforts and if it was successful, we may want to retrace our steps to figure out how we arrived at this destination, and what would we call this destination. This is years before *In the Heights* would blow the world away. This is before Spoken Word would come to Broadway. We were out on a ledge poised to jump into an abyss. David and his wife asked me to direct the play. It was one of the greatest gambles that I had ever taken as an adult. I had no idea what I was doing but I had absolute faith that it could be done and that we could do it together.

During that time, I wrote and directed my first film about Summer Hill Seven, a fictional Spoken Word artist. In the film, a mockumentary,

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Above: Image from a reading at Miami Dade College, 2009

Below: Photography by Paul Cerro





Performane of Shakespeare N. Haarlem in Miami/Project Hip-Hop—2010. Photography by Tony Mahammad.

Summer Hill Seven is asked something like what would replace Hip-Hop after it is no longer popular and he responds: “Poemedy or would you prefer, cometry?”

After the film, the term Poemedy stuck with me and we began to listen for the distinction. Someone else, whom I have yet to know had written a book titled: Poemedy. For me, it allowed me to create without regard to fitting into externally imposed descriptions. Eventually, I started seeing poemedy everywhere...in George Carlin and Richard Pryor. When I learned about Dick Gregory, I immediately cast him as the Godfather of Poemedy. Yet, Amiri Baraka’s work was where I first saw an opportunity for poetry as advocacy. I started bundling it all under Poemedy. Poemedy eventually became my reason for being. Since, money was never a motivator, the only reason I kept doing anything was because I felt like the world would benefit from Poemedy. My job was to persuade them that it would give them life more abundantly.

Q: Where did the seven-syllable structure of your poetic lines come from?

A: Do you remember when I mentioned that I discovered Blackness in puberty? Well by the time I was in middle school, I began to reject most of the academic curriculum as an affront to my blackness, preferring instead to learn on my own or from the words of black thinkers. It was the spirit of the times. I was always an honor student, which often meant I was the only or one of a few pigmented students in class. I started skipping class whenever anyone mentioned that we would study Shakespeare. White Jesus and Shakespeare were the chief tools of colonialism. Consequently, I was very ignorant, and in some ways, remain very ignorant of the the western cannon.

So when I was given the opportunity to attend the University of Delaware’s Professional Theatre Training Program (PTTP) - the only MFA program in America at the time dedicate to performing, almost exclusively, the works from the Western Canon, I jumped at the chance. Primarily, because I was working and creating in New York City but I was without steady income and a place to live. But also because I saw Denzel Washington play Richard III and Jeffrey Wright play Mark Anthony in Julius Caesar and I had faith that I could stand on any stage in the world and perform any material like my personal life model—Paul Robeson—who played Othello.

Shakespeare was the next big challenge and to get paid to fail at it was an offer I simply would not refuse. And fail I did. It was painful for a nearly 40 year old (and here I will use the term Black) man to humiliate himself daily in front of a bunch of white people. I was the worst student of Shakespeare, certainly in my class, maybe ever. Everyday I had to fight with myself and smoke a joint just to go back to class for more humiliation.

My classmates were either confused by my presence, or some were openly hostile to my presence. I think some of them felt that I was taking a spot that they knew other people would do anything to have, especially since the chance to study with the PTTP only came around once every four years.

Well, I had already published my first book and since I did not know how long I would be there before they asked me to leave, I started thinking about what I was going to do next. Again, I was given the privilege of performing at the Tony Award winning Utah Shakespearean festival because after a year of absolute humiliation I managed to create 90 seconds of Shakespearean acting in an audition monologue. Talk about going from the frying pan (of whiteness) into the fire of whiteness - if there is some place whiter than Cedar City, Utah then I don’t want to know about it.

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2003—Poster for Shakespeare N. Haarlem stage play, NYC



2009—Summer Hill Seven portraying Boye from Jesse B. Semple Suite, Jazz at Lincoln Center.
Photography by Frank Stewart.



I turned 40 years old that summer. For my own sanity, I decided to write a follow-up to *Notes of a Neurotic*, dedicated to “all the Black men in America who had not and would not reach the age of 40”—men like Dr. King, Malcolm X, Tupac, Biggie, Emmett Till, and too many to list. In this book I decided to organize them around these seven-syllable statements of my personal beliefs I call perfect poemedyz—the first of which is—Life is a game—play to win.

Q: You are deeply involved with the work of grandmaster poets of the African American experience such as Langston Hughes, for which you developed an entire show. Do you identify with or perceive you are carrying on the work of the Harlem Renaissance, or equally of poets such as Tolson, Baraka, or contemporaries like Patricia Smith?

A: I think of Langston Hughes as my poetry mentor. His sense of humor reads so beautifully to me. It is his poetry that I have performed more than the words of any one person including my own. I have never appeared in any of his plays. I have performed Boyd in his Jesse B. Semple stories with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. He is so loved that when you say those magic words the world falls to your feet—it is intoxicating. In some ways, I think I both avoided poetry and attempted to emulate it with poemedy because of my envy for Langston Hughes’ gift with words. If Langston was poetry, I did not imagine, nor did I believe, nor did I have faith that such purity, and beauty could come from me—but I could tell my story of isolation in a way someone coming after me might feel less alone. It is the telling of the story of isolation that connects me with the Harlem Renaissance. This period was when an intellectual elite came together and said let us make art on that great void that signals to all living and yet unborn that they are not alone.

Q: You are a champion of poetry education. What have you been doing in this regard, and what do you see happening with our young people?

A: This is what my documentary film, the Poemedy Project is about, what works in education. The film led to the Poemedy Institute, where we offer private lessons, classes, workshops and events. We have taught the art of Poemedy to Alvin Ailey summer camp, Miami-Dade Public Schools, Leon County Schools—used the techniques to help executives become more persuasive leaders of their organizations. This past election cycle, the Big Bend Poets & Writers began engaging Leon County civic leaders in a dialogue about pragmatic uses of poetic rhetoric. The mission of the Poemedy Institute is to change the world by changing the words of the world; and to teach creativity and eloquence as an alternative to violence.

Q: What do you want to accomplish with your work moving into the future?

A: I’ll know it when I feel it. In this moment, I feel as if I have about a dozen film characters that I want to lend my voice to sharing, including Nate Love (also known as Deadwood Dick,) Othello, Lear, Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, Paul Robeson, Dick Gregory, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, maybe even Summer Hill Seven ;-)

I want to publish all my writings into a single anthology.

I have more energy I want to give to the Poemedy Institute which is dedicated to teaching, investigating and advancing eloquence, especially as an alternative to violence. I hope a future generation will continue to believe what my first hero is quoted as saying: “these things and greater, shall you do...”

Links to videos of Summer we think you will enjoy: [Link](#), [Link](#),

Image from a reading at Miami Dade College, 2009

TWO POEMS BY summer hill seven

April 15, 2004

(Excerpt from Hang Time: A poetic memoir)

What happens the day your mother dies?

"It ain't no Sunshine when she's gone
And she's always gone too long."

I remember my fifth Christmas
Without you because some
Southern cracker locked you
And daddy up for driving while black.

Too young to be sad
Too naive to be mad
Seeing you eventually
Made me glad; cuz we
Celebrated when you came back.

After 35, 36, 37 and 38?
I needed you more with every
Rotation of the earth around the sun.

Yet seeing your face staring at me
in the mirror
And hearing your audio track in my mind
Is warmer than the sun:

It's heart warming being your son
Not your first but your last son
Not your only
Not your special
Not your favorite
But your son
I remain your son.

"It ain't no Sunshine when she's gone
And she's always gone too long."

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Winter Water

Winter Water works its way down
my bedroom window.
The very same window - the only window
in the room where we first made love
For the very first time
On the first night
After that first kiss.

Winter Water waxes wondrously
About that first time.
Winter Water wonders when
Will be the next time.
You will baptize me again.

Wading Wallowing Wanting
Waiting for your Water
While you go away
Wet with possibility
Possibly wetter than ever
Possibly without you is the coldest
Winter whatever...

I don't want to think about
My reality without you
I'm staying here with
You in my imagination
While you spend the
Winter on the Water
While I wait here
by my bedroom window
Wondering about the
Winter Water
Wait, what, I'm not waiting
I'm foreseeing a
Moment when we will
Curl up together and
Listen together and
Love together the
Wonderful Waxing of Winter Water.

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