

Poetry night at 21 Club, Ground Zero for the arts

BY ED BOWERS

On Wednesday, July 8, 2009, on the corner of Taylor and Turk, the first official poetry reading took place, a regular offering to be held there the second Wednesday of each month, and the publisher of The Extra asked me to review it.

This poetry reading at the 21 Club was my idea. Jonathan Siegel, a poet from South of Market, backed me up by bringing in a sound system. Charlie Getter, a poet from South of Market, backed me up by bringing in other poets and reading his poetry. The Extra made this all possible by subsidizing a poetry reading where each of the first 15 poets to read gets \$5. Frank, the owner of the bar, gets total credit for allowing this idea to get off the ground in the first place, and I further contributed by reading poetry and agreeing to be the M.C.

Ten years ago I would have regarded anyone suggesting that I be an M.C. as terminally insane.

That was then, and now is now.

I would have to have the objectivity of a robot to review a poetry show that was my idea.

So let's pretend I'm not reviewing this. Let's pretend I'm some frustrated lonely man or woman wandering in off the street to a buy a drink at the 21 Club, the best bar in the United States of America that has been written up twice in Esquire magazine.

When this person enters the bar he observes a deranged M.C. who has ruined his life and owes the IRS money screaming at people to write poems on cocktail napkins. Now this lonely man or woman is suddenly being offered the opportunity not only to drink beer, but to get paid \$5 to read a poem, and make a statement that he can communicate and pass on as a small part of his life to others and feel less lonely.

His review would probably be this: "I really had fun that night. And I did something, too. I turned my

small talk to the guy sitting next to me into a poem that became larger when I wrote it down and read it out loud."

And that's a good review. It doesn't get any better than that.

This is an open mike. There is no political or social agenda except to express yourself in a few words in front of a friendly audience who will listen to you. Some people are scared to do anything but talk to their friends and remain silent. Getting up in front of an audience is scary. But everything is scary, so what's the difference?

I had to practically squeeze the following poem out of a woman who really wanted to write one but thought she didn't. It goes like this:

By Lizzie

When I was 12
I was made of plastic.

Plastic toys,
plastic trees,
plastic people.

Southern California is the land of
plastic weather.

Plastic surgery
and fake wars
own high schools everywhere.

And that is absolutely why I'm here.

That's why I'm here, too. Lizzie's poem sticks in the mind and has wisdom.

So, if you want a beer, need to get out and see people other than your miserable self, hear poetry that sticks in your mind, and maybe write one yourself, make \$5, and express yourself while having fun, I would encourage you to come to the 21 Club the second Wednesday of each month.

Or just go to another bar the second Wednesday of every month and cry in your beer and feel sorry for yourself.

It's your choice. ■

The Third Coming of Living in the Land of the Dead

BY ED BOWERS

LIVING in the Land of the Dead is an anthology of poetry whose subject matter is directed at life in the Tenderloin and the citizens occupying this zone.

This is the third edition of the anthology and it is obviously a survivor. I was its first editor. My idea was to utilize the now-defunct Faithful Fools Copy Shop as an instrument to create a publishing company that could create a book of poetry and literature that would give expression to those who are disrespected, ignored and written off in the major media as losers living in a mythological ground zero for violence and depravity.

The Faithful Fools followed up on this idea and made it work.

This anthology gives people living in The Land of the Dead an intelligent voice, one that, rather than screaming and scaring people away, articulates the multiple-universe minds of those living not only in the Tenderloin, but in the world.

The poems in this book carry a rarely seen light that glows brightly on the printed page. Possibly they are the Last Words of a Last Chance Saloon in America.

The Tenderloin is full of life, but it will not be here forever. The real estate is too valuable, the location too coveted. Living in the Land of the Dead is destined to be a valuable piece of history. And it is published now.

At the moment, publishing is in an emergency situation. Its house is burning down.

The ability to hold a book or newspaper in your hand and slowly read its contents in a coffee house, subway, or bar, and actually own it and think about it, is becoming increasingly rare due to economic contingencies. There is the Internet, but it is an

ocean of egos.

People evolved from the ocean. People are fish with feet. But now, apparently, they are returning to the ocean and the ocean is big. But the ocean can bury you faster than any Tenderloin hotel.

This small publication, however, is so full of beautiful poetry that you can hold it your hand, and

essentially the world could change for the best, and perhaps evolve for another 10,000 years. I can be an optimist when I'm not busy getting pissed off at something.

As for the individual poems, I'm going to let them be a mystery to you until you read them in Living in the Dead Part Three. I am not putting words into your heads.

I'm a poet and I do not critique other poets.

The painting on the cover is by Charles Blackwell whose excellent work I have reviewed in Central City Extra.

On the back of the anthology are four photographic images taken by rA mu Aki whose work I've also reviewed for The Extra. Aki is one of the most imaginative and sensitive photographers in America. Nobody photographs faces with the sensitivity of Mr. Aki, unless Dianne Arbus is still alive, which she is not.

Most of the poets at the Faithful Fools' reception for this book were almost as old or older than me. I'm 60, but my mind is functioning more effectively now than when I was 30.

But where are the young people? Are bohemian poets becoming geriatric dinosaurs?

Possibly poetry is going the way of all newspapers.

Possibly a personal intimate connection with the written word is going the way of all things. We're in a New Age of

iPods and pop star divas.

Possibly I'll be dead before finishing this article, or before newspapers and poets die, and before the Tenderloin is torn down and zoned off for Very Important People.

Anything is possible. I'm an optimist!

So go to 226 Hyde and pick up a copy of this anthology. It will entertain you while exposing your mind to some ancient wisdom.

Use it. ■



CHARLES CURTIS BLACKWELL

"Musical Purification," cover image of Tenderloin poetry anthology's third edition.

read the poems at leisure, and transform their words in your mind with the words in this book into something that will combine into a thought or idea that might help you get through your life, if only for a few minutes longer than you would have otherwise.

Later, the words will be placed in the archives. But now, in this moment, they are still alive.

If even 10 people read the insightful poems in this book, and think deeply about them, then expo-