

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Under the Influence of Michael C. Ford

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, July 19th, 2017

Women Under the Influence is the newest collection of poems from the iconic Los Angeles wordsmith Michael C. Ford. Author of 24 books, his best-known work *Emergency Exits* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. He's recorded a dozen Spoken Word recordings and received a Grammy nomination for his Spoken Word album *LANGUAGE COMMANDO*. Ford has lived 74 of his 77 years in Los Angeles and there is not a corner of the region his work has not mapped.



Published by Word Palace Press, the 71 poems in this new collection celebrate women associated with the arts, especially the femme-fatales from 1950s B movies like Rita Hayworth, Janet Leigh and Marie Windsor. Ford's poetic aim though does not stop with these actresses; he also sketches songbirds like Billie Holiday and Janis Joplin and literary lionesses from Emily Dickinson to the contemporary Los Angeles poets Laurel Ann Bogen and Gail Wronsky. Ford's poetic register frequently uses apostrophe addressing the figures and places within each piece. For example, "Boise, Idaho: you'd better be advised! / Penelope and I are ecologically balanced. / We have biodegradable tolerance."

These poems oscillate between formal, informal, conversational and playful employing closed forms like villanelles and pantoums to several free verse prose poems. Born in 1939, Ford knows 20th Century film, musical and all around cultural history intimately on the strength of his life experience. Many of the women in the book were figures he knew personally and most of the others are personalities that he witnessed in their glory years when their films or records were in the mix. Time travel is ever-present in these poetic polaroid's. In the poem, "Marie Windsor," celebrating the actress of the same name, Ford remembers: "I admired her most, when she essayed/ a rocket scientist from East St. Louis/ and convivially commiserating with/ *Cat Women on the Moon*/ And the sultry sound her lush voice/ makes is velvet stretched across/ a field of gravel."

One element that makes this book different from most poetry collections is that there are images next to almost every poem. Dozens of both black and white and color photos accompany the poems, assisting in giving the reader a visual picture of Dorothy Dandridge, Clara Bow, Judy Garland and Dinah Shore and all the others to illustrate the poems further. Ford delivers a history lesson on cinema and popular culture with both humor and pathos. Ford knows the backstory and where the bodies are buried. Simultaneously, the poems travel from Hollywood and Beverly Hills to the Central Coast, Flagstaff, Boise, Idaho, Chicago and beyond.

The book's title taken from a John Cassavetes film, fits the chronologically-arranged dream-like quality of the work. Ford laments these mostly long-gone icons and paints them all in broad, yet electric brushstrokes. In the piece, "In Honor of Chris Connor," Ford writes: "it was about saving your jazz/ bouquets from being nailed to a cross erected/ by the false gods of American music(.)" A few lines later he concludes, "Then, we know ironically, in order to find your/ songs again we might quite, simply, have to/ lose you." Thanks to these piercing poems, the subjects in each piece will not be forgotten. Ford remembers them all and wants us "to mix poetic imagination with the imagination of cinema."

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Now as a method of changing gears, is a poem I composed in December 2016 on Ford's 77th birthday and a surprise party held for him at Beyond Baroque one Friday night.

Language Commando

(For Michael C. Ford's Birthday 12/16/2016)

This one's for the Language Commando
 metaphorically born at the LA Jazz Concert Hall
 make an emergency exit at Jefferson & Crenshaw
 hail a cab with Rita Hayworth,
 make a date with Marie Windsor
 Join the West Coast Festival of Jazz and Poetry

There's a serious coffeehouse on PCH
 You had to ride a train car up the side of a cliff
 to get there

If you listen close yo
 u can hear

Atonal riff tunes to a tone-deaf border-guard
 Then there's a bridge to the Blue Uni
 corn

just above

Pandora's Box

Take a walk to the Sunset Palms Hotel
 there's an empty room
 at the Guerrilla Street Univers
 ity

Download a quick anthology of West Coast verse
 There were hundreds of small press poetry magazines
 Ford's voice is like smoke and honey
 Recorded on the freeway, he was nominated

for a Spoken Word Grammy
 According to Harry Northup
 it was Emersonian self-experience, physical reality
 and devotion to language that led to transcendence
 Ford found his voice at a benefit for Norman Mailer
 before that in a bungalow at UCLA's Film School
 mixing with Manzarek and Morrison juxtaposed with Jack Hirschman
 Long before the Long Beach Renaissance
 Wednesday nights at Beyond Baroque stoked a flame still underw
 ay
 Like Scott Wannberg says, "he was there man,
 bopping with all the big ones."
 Drumming a rhapsodic discography using a pen to open up a vein
 and bleed
 Sounds and images onto the page
 hear the jazz speak and step out onto the fire
 escape
 The World is suburb of Los Angeles and Ford caught a ride
 with a demented chauffeur
 Stop stuttering in the starlight
 and take a bite of his crosswalk casserole
 Who else do you know that had a burrito
 with Bukowski at Sunset & Alvarado?
 Peruse the shelves at Papa Bach's Bookstore
 find Ford giggling with S.A. Griffin, visiting Laurel Ann Bogen
 and joshing with John Harris
 Is there another poet who read Buddy Collette
 a birthday poem at the Catalina Bar & Grill?
 The audience lapped it up like puppies at the bowl
 A half century of poetic lore from Manual Arts High School
 to that strange funeral Jimbo.
 There are no more Black Rebel Motorcycle clubs
 There's only love for the word and an open letter to Duke
 The truth is a cartography of sheet music
 Find Ford watching a B Movie and solving crimes
 Double Nickels on a Dime, one of the greatest of all time
 Born in 1939 in Chicago, Ford caught a train to LA at three years ol
 d
 after Audubon Middle School
 Ford ran into Rexroth on Crenshaw
 under the influence of jazz players
 and offspring of Art Pepper and Chet Baker
 Ford cracked the code and pontificated patterns
 with Kenneth Patchen

A suggested catalogue of books
held the secrets of the universe

Let's look each other in the ears
and thank the lord above for blessing us
with the pioneering poet, spoken word recording artist,
playwright and teacher that we all adore,
happy birthday Michael C. Ford!

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