

# 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 77<sup>th</sup> 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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