

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Jessica Ceballos & Billy Burgos on Maya Angelou

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With news of Maya Angelou's passing spreading globally, Cultural Weekly reached out to two poets, both Los Angeles natives, to share with us their thoughts on the event.

Jessica Ceballos, a poet, curator, and community activist, and Billy Burgos, a poet and painter, obliged, writing these moving personal stories.

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From Billy Burgos:



When I stumbled upon my first Maya Angelou collection of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie*, in a high school library, I was looking for something. I was 16 years old and like many creative-type teenagers I thought that my only means of getting my creative point across was through the crude pencil drawings I had been doing and calling myself an artist. I had always loved writing and thought poetry was "cool," but the language of the poetry I was reading at the time was not accessible to me.

The librarian used to place books to the side for the kids she knew liked to read but didn't want to be known as the reader type, because at that tender age, and in that kind of inner-city high school, it could have been dangerous for a teenage boy drawn to poetry. I remember her sliding this book with the bright cover across a long table like a drug dealer looking over both shoulders and whispering, "You'll like this one."

I waited for a while, sitting there studying the cover's color, the words written in a familiar vernacular, the silhouette of the crooked tree in the corner. The book had dog-eared pages and I instinctively opened to this poem:

The Gamut

Soft you day, be velvet soft,
My true love approaches,
Look you bright, you dusty sun,
Array your golden coaches.

Soft you wind, be soft as silk

My true love is speaking.
 Hold you birds, your silver throats,
 His golden voice I'm seeking.

Come you death, in haste, do come
 My shroud of black be weaving,
 Quiet my heart, be deathly quiet,
 My true love is leaving.

I read this poem multiple times as I sat there, realizing it was that “thing” I was looking for. I had always loved music and the lyrics, but I could never play an instrument or sing. What this poem showed me was that free-form poetry had the ability to be musical as well as poetic. I didn't find out until years later that Maya Angelou was a songwriter and a nightclub performer before she was a poet.

Maya Angelou helped make poetry accessible to me. I started (attempting) to write poetry not long after reading that book and I know that her poetry has helped to shape my poetic voice. I know there will be much said about her life as a playwright/activist/movie maker, but to me she is a poet first and I will always be thankful that her words spoke to me in a language I could interpret.

RIP Maya Angelou, you will be missed.

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From Jessica Ceballos:



“There is no greater agony, than bearing an untold story inside you.”

I was 9 years old, so really all I could remember was that her voice is what I absorbed at the time. That *voice*—I love that deep, graceful tone of a woman who knows exactly where she stands. At 7 years old, at 9 years, at 16 years old – I needed that Maya Angelou voice in my life, as many of us girls do. After all, they say that 1 in 5 girls is sexually abused between the ages of 7 and 13.

But at that age we didn't yet know that those songs she sang, songs that inspired us to look past what was in front of us, came from that place many of us knew too well, and forced ourselves to run from.

And I ran.

Mistakenly taken from a safe home and placed in the strange world of foster care at 7 years old, can wreak havoc to the innocence of a child. I began to question everything from identity to self worth. It became easy to lose myself in music, poetry, and dreams. And that's when I found “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”:

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind
 and floats downstream till the current ends
 and dips his wing in the orange suns rays and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage

can seldom see through his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

I knew that woman. I heard her voice on *Reading Rainbow*, I watched the Charlie Rose interview, and I paid attention. But I knew that woman in a way that I didn't know Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich or Anne Sexton.

Maya Angelou told our story. And she continued the story, inspiring caged birds to sing. But for years I put her words away, wrote them off as being confessional; I was still running, obviously.

And at 36 years old, I need the voice of a Maya Angelou in my life more than ever.

"Everything has rhythm, everything dances," Angelou once said. "For a long time, I would think of . . . my whole body, as an ear, and that I could just go into a room and I could just absorb sound. I never did find a voice I didn't find wonderful and beautiful."

About a year ago I secretly returned to her words for encouragement because, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." And I've finally realized, as I guess all writers eventually realize, that it's not about the writing—it's about the story, and letting that story free so that we can live.

Though Maya Angelou was more than a poet, she taught me that poetry is a necessary and inescapable journey.

And a peaceful forever is a fair destination for this divine savior who carried us, with her words, through this place we call Earth.

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