

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The New Lewis MacAdams Riverfront Park

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, March 28th, 2018

The Marsh Street River Park was recently rechristened the Lewis MacAdams Riverfront Park and a sculpture of MacAdams was installed in the park as well. Located where Frogtown aka Elysian Valley meets Atwater, just east of Fletcher Road close to where Interstate 5 meets the 2, this park is one of a series of small parks along the L.A. River that have emerged over the last decade. Bigger than a pocket, but not too big, there is an adjacent skate park, a few maps and a short circular trail with California native plants.



Born in 1944, Lewis MacAdams, is a poet, activist, conservationist and the founder of the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FOLAR). This renaming of the park and new sculpture are the culmination of MacAdams' three plus decades of river activism. I have written [much longer accounts about McAdams](#) in the past, but this latest development is especially significant because MacAdams had a stroke a few years ago and his energy is not what it once was when everyone first laughed at his efforts to revitalize the concrete river bed area with the Friends of the Los Angeles River that he founded in the mid-1980s.

The series of pocket parks that have emerged along the river recently and the new policies around the revitalization have been over 30 years in the making. This progress combined with MacAdams deteriorating health made the events of renaming the park and honoring him that much more meaningful.

“If it’s Not Impossible, I’m Not Interested.”

On Sunday March 18th Adolfo “Al” Nodal, the former head of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs organized a picnic in honor of Lewis MacAdams. A few days before, Lewis’s son, Torii MacAdams, invited me to attend. I met Lewis while I was in my early 20s. The first time I met him was in March 1999, at a special event at the Los Angeles River Center where Gary Snyder, Mike Davis and MacAdams were all featured speakers. Over the next several years, we did many poetry events together along with many other activities related to the Los Angeles River and the city of Los Angeles. I have known his son Torii almost as long and Torii even briefly interned at an independent record label I was working at in 2004-2005.

I’ve been to the park four times since December to see the new sculpture of MacAdams, and it was finally completely installed in early March. Created by Eugene Daub, the sculpture stands about six and a half feet tall and is a large rectangle near the north end of the park and just south of the

riverbed. The most pronounced part of the sculpture includes his face with his trademark hat and his quote, “If it’s Not Impossible, I’m Not Interested.” This quote is especially appropriate because nobody thought there was much possibility with the Los Angeles River back in the 1980s when MacAdams started his efforts.

By the time I arrived at the park on March 18th, just after 4pm, almost everybody was gone. MacAdams gets tired easily because of his health and he had just left before I came. I was disappointed to miss the event, but shortly after, Torii MacAdams gave me a recap.

“The event itself was exceedingly casual,” Torii says, “everyone brought their own vittles and reusable water bottles and sat quietly as old friends delivered almost funereal encomiums to my father. Mia Lehrer, Tom LaBonge (dressed in a highlighter yellow hoodie), Joe Edmiston, Andrea White-Kjoss, MK O’Connell, Gregg Gannon, David Ritz, and my older brother Ocean spoke.” Torii said he will remember David’s speech most fondly because, “David talked about their shared love of black culture and shared revulsion at suburban Dallas in the 1950’s.”

Torii was joined at this event by his sister Natalia. Torii and Natalia are his children from his second marriage. Torii, Natalia and Lewis’s two other sons Ocean and William have appeared in many of his poems. Over the last three decades, Lewis has written dozens of poems about the Los Angeles River. Three extended sections of these poems, culminating into a nearly 80-page manuscript called *The River: Books 1-3*, were published as a book by Blue Press in 2006. Partially inspired by William Carlos Williams’ *Patterson*, the book is in many ways, one long poem with many short segments. In Book 2, Section 8, of *The River*, MacAdams writes:

Natalia, pierced by fears of crawdads, screams. / Torii, picking up on her panic, yowls / along with her as the purple-red crustacean / waves its little pincer at the giant pre-schoolers / nearly paralyzed on the river bank’s cement lip. // Someday when they read this they’ll be / embarrassed. By the time they read this, / the river will have re-joined the sea, become vapor; / and Crawdad’ll be nothing but claws and crawl.

Much of MacAdams poetry combines ecology, personal memories and humor like these lines above. In 2011, the University of New Orleans Press published *Dear Oxygen: New & Selected Poems*. This collection includes *The River*, as well as close to 90 other poems dating back to 1966. Kevin Opstedal edited both *Dear Oxygen* and *The River*. Opstedal says, “Political, spiritual, mythic, and personal, the poems form a confluence propelled by a narrative lyric drive.”

MacAdams has always been skilled at verse that is colloquial, transcendental and self-deprecating simultaneously. A great example of this can be seen on the west side of the sculpture which quotes his archetypal short poem “Solitude Conundrum.” Here’s the poem in its entirety: “The cigarette smoke curls / around me in the one / bright light above my head. / If it is true / what the Buddhists say, / self-disgust / is the first step toward enlightenment / then I am on the road again. // Dear lord of language, / of gesture and of moves, / lead me on.”

The wry humor of this short poem is also accurate. Despite many hurdles over the years, the lords of language have led MacAdams forward. He kept on trucking and this park and the sculpture are a fitting tribute.



Poetry & Politics

In addition to Torii's testimony, I heard more about the picnic from Phoebe MacAdams Ozuna. Phoebe was Lewis's first wife. They met while he was at Princeton in New Jersey in 1965 and were married from 1967 until 1978. Though they both remarried, they have remained cordial over the years and Phoebe has been an accomplished poet over the last four decades as well. Before sharing Phoebe's account of the afternoon, she told me a great historical overview of how Lewis became an ecopoet and environmental activist.

"Lewis got involved in local politics while we were living in Bolinas in the late 60's and 70's," she says. "He was involved in the big cleanup in Bolinas after the massive oil spill in the Bay Area in 1971. That gave birth to a lot of environmental activity." During this time, Lewis was heavily involved in various issues of town politics and served on the Water Board, which was the town governing organization. "We fought back a plan by the county to put a sewage treatment plant in Bolinas," she remembers, "instead building a series of sewage treatment ponds. That kept massive development out of Bolinas, thank God. Since then he has been involved in poetry and local politics. His memoir is going to be *Poetry and Politics*! Bolinas was a community of poets and activists." Many of the New York School of poets had relocated to Bolinas during these years.

Obviously, the early work in Bolinas paved the way for what Lewis would do with FOLAR in the 1980s and beyond. Phoebe continued her own career as a poet and educator in Los Angeles. She cofounded Cahuenga Press in the late 1980s and taught High School English at Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights for 26 years before recently retiring. She shared her account of the recent picnic honoring Lewis.

"We all had blankets spread out on the grass, and food," Phoebe says. "Lewis sat in the front, along with his friend Sissy Boyd, and people got up as the spirit moved and gave little talks. There was nothing formal organized – a lot of praise and good feeling." More than anything, the day, she shares, "was basically a picnic commemorating the installation of the 4-sided monument. There is Lewis' face on one side, and his poems etched into the other three sides along with some critters—frogs and birds—from the river."

"After the eating and the speeches," Phoebe continues, "Lewis talked a bit about his vision of the river as a gathering place of people from all over – along with the creatures who live in and along the river." After Lewis spoke, they all gathered for a group photo in front of the monument.

Phoebe also notes that their son Will, who teaches at Hampshire College in Massachusetts could not attend but that their son Ocean from San Francisco came down with his wife and three kids. "Ocean is now on the board of FOLAR," she states, "which is a nice continuation of the family involvement."

Another continuation of the MacAdams family legacy is his youngest son Torii's Music Journalism. In addition to his poetry, Lewis wrote a lot of journalism including many *LA Weekly* cover stories and pieces for magazines like *Rolling Stone*. Now in his late 20s, Torii is carrying the torch writing about the future of West Coast Hip Hop. His forte includes profiles and record reviews of contemporary underground artists. Torii's inside knowledge, eloquence and panache with vernacular are akin to his father's lyrical prose. Here's [one of his most recent profiles](#).

Old Man of the River

One of my favorite sections in MacAdams's cycle of River poems is 20 from Book 1. It reads: "For years I thought I / was going to find the / Old Man of the River, / a guru who knew /

everything there was to know / about it. He was going to / draw me a map. / Then I'd know what to do / with the information / that was written in my soul. / I never found him until I / caught my reflection / in a puddle of rain water. // It was me all along, / bushy brows, / balding skull, / worried eyes / in awe of eight egrets / as they lift into the evening—”

There is no denying that the “Old Man of the River, the guru with the secret map,” really was Lewis MacAdams all along. Now that the park bears his name, and the sculpture stands, everyone else will know too. There remains much more work to do with the Los Angeles River, but the work started by Lewis MacAdams and FOLAR is a touchstone to a much larger movement around the world restoring local watersheds and taking back native ecologies from negligent federal agencies and out of touch policymakers.

Lewis MacAdams’ vision of the river’s future is more in line with Deep Ecology. “Deep Ecology,” according to John Seed, “is a philosophy of nature which sees the environmental crisis as a symptom of a psychological or spiritual ailment which afflicts modern humanity. We are enveloped by the illusion of separation from nature, by anthropocentrism of human centeredness.” For Lewis MacAdams and other deep ecologists, there is no separation from nature. Not only do we need to restore the river, we are the river.

One of Lewis’s mentors over the last 50 years is Gary Snyder. Snyder’s poetry book *Turtle Island* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 and he is considered one of the pioneers of Deep Ecology. Snyder writes: “The Los Angeles River has for years been [MacAdam’s] project and his Muse. *The River* employs all his skills with canny shifts, outrageous insight... He actually did what he said.”

As Snyder notes, MacAdams walked the walk and put theory into action. His eco-poetics jumpstarted the transformation of the Los Angeles River. The Lewis MacAdams Riverfront Park is a great meeting place for people to come together and honor his legacy. What’s more, it reminds us that change is indeed possible with the right combination of energy and action. My poem below is dedicated to his life’s work.



Lewis MacAdams is A Friend of Los Angeles

Lewis MacAdams is a friend of Los Angeles
 Educating Angelenos, poetry & politics
 Working in the field since 1966
 In the mix from Princeton, Buffalo & Bolinas
 Schooled by New York poets Berrigan, O’Hara & Olson

Meditating on deep ecology like Snyder & Creeley
 And obsessed with water (ask his sons Ocean & William)
 Crawdads, crustaceans and red-wing blackbirds
 Are the harbingers of Lew Eye’s prophecy
 Downstream they multiply with Natalia & Torii
 Angel river waters crack concrete, ask Phoebe
 MacAdams, methodical, musical,
 Singing the river, a 40-year artwork

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