

Verneice Turner and Cliff Bernier have collaborated to present dynamic spoken word performances of their powerful poetry. Their readings combine song and dance with or without a jazz accompaniment. It was exciting to see them in action in Friendship Heights, Maryland on July 20, 2006 at the Café Muse Poetry Series sponsored by Word Works, Inc., of Washington, D.C.

The opportunity to see them here doesn't come too often because Turner hails from Buffalo, New York and Bernier lives in Virginia where he hosts the Poesis Poetry Series at Greenberry's Café in Arlington.

Cliff Bernier and Verniece Turner met at a poetry workshop a few years ago and found that when they performed their poems in tandem they created a synergy and back and forth bravado that enhanced the spirit of their pieces. Their poems are from their own experiences; they have their own rhythms, subject matter and point of view, but when fused together they create a harmonic whole that is both satisfying and eye-opening.

Bernier wore a black, open collared shirt with grey slacks. Of medium height, he has a salt and pepper beard and warm, hazel-brown eyes. Turner wore a scooped-neck black leotard over a dancer's black jazz skirt. Short black dreads bounced over her bright, smiling eyes.

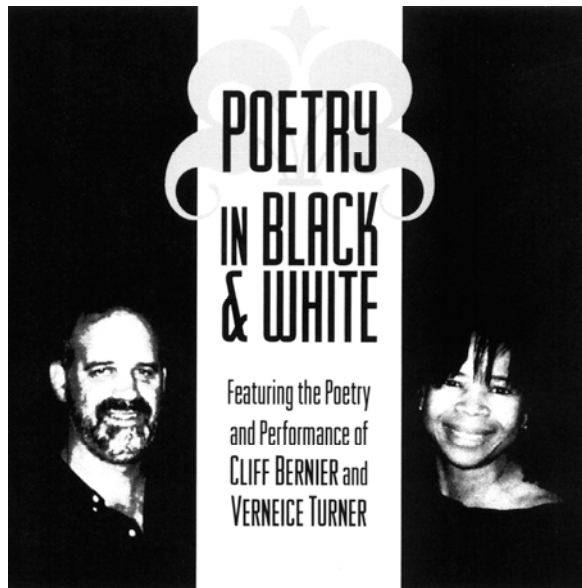
Their first poem spoken together informed us that the word "poem" comes from the Greek, "to make." In a fast-clipped sequence, their voices alternating lines, they urge us all "to make" poems and we see how they make poetry come alive with their dramatic presentation.

The second piece was Cliff Bernier's *Coltrane*, a jazz poem that evokes the Love Supreme. Turner echoed the word "love," its repeated rhythm resonating behind the blues phrasing: "John Coltrane blew the blues and in his blues he blew Johnnie Hodges and Dexter Gordon live at the Village Vanguard." Through "pentatonic penetrations" and "pentacostal punctuations," we were taken where "beyond the limit of form is love, in the limit of form is love, the Love Supreme."

While Cliff's voice is languid and mellifluous, his rhythmic repetitions taking on the qualities of backbeat bass and trumpet melody, Verneice delivers her stark pronouncements in a clipped, staccato cadence that challenges and rebukes. Where Cliff only hints at the personal in *Birdcry*, "like the insistent cawing of regret" and in a poem about dining with his Japanese wife at the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok, "our belongings back at the four dollar guest house that smelled of piss and vomit," Turner is ready to shout it out. Her signature poem, *Outta Da Box*, tells us just where she's at.

"Ready to scream . . . go and fight for the dream. Move beyond the boundaries of Michigan and Jefferson, North and Main."

Many of her poems argue for the freedom to go beyond the Black experience. "You thought I got carried away with the dream, when you saw me falling in love with someone our folks would have considered the enemy." Proclaiming her



right to go to Gigi's Restaurant or Kleinhan's Music Hall, Turner is yet rooted in the exhortatory speech of a preacher's profound belief and call for uplift. In a poem called *Power*, she argues, "If it is opera you wish to sing instead of R&B, who has the right to stop you? . . . It is all to pursue the life that is ours."

Turner reaches back to Africa and sings a lilting folk song to introduce her poem titled simply, *Me*. It is about her warrior ancestors, some of whom trafficked in slavery. Bernier has an answering poem that traces how Africans, "plucked like the strings of the ambanza," were "packed into ships, bound like cargo" on a journey that leads to the music of Congo Square, New

Orleans, the birthplace of the jazz he extols. As he recounts the suffering and triumphs of the African diaspora, Verneice provides particularity, "I was stolen from the fields of Benin . . . My husband was hunting for food for the village . . . My mother was mending my dress . . . in Gambia, Senegal, Mandingo."

And then Turner brings us back home with her wonderful takes on *Peaches and Buns*, regretfully seen as "a distraction to our goals to be accepted as equals, so we all must look like poles" and a rumination on nipples, neglected "like a plant placed in the dark," they must "walk forth in joy and upright." But my favorite was the one about the *Smell Good Man*. We all know him, right? The man with "nails meticulously cleaned and trimmed, the importance of small details he understands." This man is not a player, out to impress the ladies. For Turner, good grooming is a metaphor for nurturing the soul, "shower time is his time to sort through his thoughts." She praises the "spirit body mind" of the *Smell Good Man*.

Their collaboration ends with Cliff Bernier's tour de force, *Dreamtime*, a mesmerizing incantation of the creation myths of the Australian aborigine. Again, Bernier uses the names of indigenous plants and animals as if the words themselves held magical powers. "The honeysuckle opening in the billabong . . . the cry of a didgeridoo, crow snatching the fire-stick to slay the snake in the bloodwood tree."

"And if it were another life," the refrain goes, "if it were another life, a traveler's voice would sing my dreams." Perhaps it is Bernier who is the traveler now singing those dreams.

The poems of Verneice Turner and Cliff Bernier travel from Africa to Asia and Australia, from the Congo to Congo Square, New Orleans, from Paris boulevards to North and Main, along the routes of jazz and the pathways of AIDS. The weaving of words and their speaking voices in and through each other's poems creates a tapestry of myriad perspectives from the personal to the political, from the earliest walkabouts of man to the here and now, shared by a woman and a man, African and Caucasian. The mixture of two consciousnesses blending in harmonious give and take creates a vision more welcoming and inclusive by their collaboration.

—Simki Ghebremichael, DC Area poet