



Al Young, Laureate

An intimate profile of Al Young, California's new poet laureate, from Morton Marcus' literary memoir, 'Striking Through the Masks'

By Morton Marcus

It is official. Al Young has been named poet laureate of California, and the former Palo Alto resident and one-time lecturer at Stanford and UC-Santa Cruz is the perfect choice for the job, not only because his literary works have received international acclaim, but because he brings to the position a persona that loves people and, in turn, is loved by them.

I make such a statement because I've known Al for almost 40 years and seen him in many situations, both public and private. But let me tell you a few things about him, and you decide ...

I kept bumping into Al at one literary event or another in San Francisco during the turbulent '60s and early '70s. There were several meetings at readings and parties in the Haight, where we chatted and exchanged writers' small talk, and we were two of more than 40 poets who read in support of the Native American takeover of Alcatraz in 1969.

We got to know each other better when he was master of ceremonies at the Kenneth Patchen Memorial Reading at the City Lights Poetry Theater in 1972, an event Al organized almost single-handedly. He had chosen me to be one of the dozen participants in the reading, which featured Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan, Ishmael Reed and seven others.

Al and I and several of the other poets were verbally badgered by a drunken, drugged-out member of the packed audience who intermittently would shout, "I'm the bastard son of Kenneth Patchen! Why aren't I reading!" and lapse into glum silence, raising his objections to one poem or another as his stupor or alcohol-warped perceptions allowed.

Throughout the evening, Al handled these intrusions with the gracefulness of a bullfighter. The upshot of the episode was that Al and I commiserated with each other after the reading and were drawn closer by the heckler's tauntings. Later that year, Al and I wandered out of a party at Ray Carver's house in Palo Alto. That was before Ray had become a household name as the new Ernest Hemingway. Al and I stood by our cars, looking at the distant bay lying like smoked glass in the moonlight, as we reminisced about the Patchen incident, exchanged our most recent books and vowed to see each other more often.

We also talked about my first book and his, *Dancing*, both of which had come out in 1969. *Dancing* had impressed me quite a bit with its musical voice rhythms. I felt a great kinship with the book, which celebrated the small joys of being alive as a series of "dances" that pictured the persona, who I imagined was Al, as poor and lonely and on his own in the depths of the larger society. One poem depicted him dancing alone in a Laundromat. It

was a book of youth, full of carefree innocence from which Al's enthusiastic yet quiet wonder at life joyously radiated--a celebratory quality his work has never lost.

By then we had realized we had several friends in common. Not only Ray, but Santa Cruz novelist Jim Houston, who had been on a Stegner fellowship with Al at Stanford in 1966, and novelist Peter Beagle, who lived a mile or so down the road from me in the Santa Cruz Mountains and had introduced Jim and Al in 1964.

From then on, we would see each other at Jim's house or at Peter's, and we talked more extensively at each meeting. There was something about Al that inspired good feelings the moment you met him. I observed that phenomenon with everyone he was introduced to, and I came to believe that it had to do with how comfortable everyone was in his presence, which, in turn, had to do with how comfortable Al seemed to be with himself: how relaxed he was in his body, how his voice was a series of smooth glissandos and how at ease he was with whoever he talked to.

I've always thought that putting people at ease when one initially meets them is more than a talent. It's a statement made by one's body, an attitude born of the decision that one will enter a room of strangers, or approach the person coming toward him on the street, without fear, suspicion or resentment. It's the kind of decision made by fools or saints.

I quickly realized that Al was too self-confident and too intelligent to be a fool and too street-smart to be a saint. He was a person who years before had decided to live life on his own terms by going through the world of warring neighbors, muggers and hysterical madmen with trust and good will because, his smile seemed to say, life isn't worth living if you have to do it any other way.

That attitude is all the more astonishing when one takes into account that Al is an African American, a black man prone to be the target for all the hatred, slurs, clichés and racial violence that these United States are heir to. It is a hatred not only directed at blacks by guilt-ridden, frightened whites, but at whites by

humiliated, angry blacks, who were a belligerent segment of the arts scene in the 1960s and '70s after an emotionally freeing decade of civil rights actions and the "black is beautiful" movement.

Many critics and fellow writers have commented on the lack of racial anger and defensiveness in Al's writings. But he looks at it in a different way.

"I think it's just a sense of wonder that makes me the way I am," he said to me once.

"I have never gotten over the fact that we are here in this event called life, whatever it is, illusory or not. As a kid I used to wonder where it all comes from, where it's all flowing to, what's happened to all the things that happened yesterday, and I've just never gotten over that. And as I learned about people all over the country and all over the world, and met people from different backgrounds, I realized we all have more in common than we have that makes us different from one another. So I made peace with the race issue fairly early."

Who knows what demons and scars lie hidden in the psyche of anyone. What is clear is that a person can choose the face he wants the world to see, and hopefully he can become the person he imagines he is. Al chose to be kind, gregarious and generous. I never saw him act any other way.

In the Moment

A slim, loose-limbed 6 feet tall, Al always talks about being in the moment. "Poetry," he once wrote, "keeps teaching me that the only time there is is now"--and maybe that is his secret: He is never remote or condescending, but fully engaged in whatever he is doing and with whom he is doing it.

He isn't "cool" as much as he is "mellow"--relaxed, good-humored, approachable. Or at least that is the image he projects whenever I am in his company. Unlike most of the men I have known, Al hasn't suppressed his emotions or become self-protective, but is always open and emotionally present, and those last traits appeal to my Slavic soul.

In fact, for all his mellowness, Al is always getting excited about one thing or another, whether it is music, politics, poetry, computer technology or the weather. We have long phone conversations about the state of the country and the world in general, and I remember one day he said, "I'm aware of all the injustices and oppression, and the misuse and disuse of human beings by other human beings, but I like to think that one person operating in a private life, interacting with other people, is having an effect on the totality as well."

Although he never ignores the brutalities and tragedies of life, Al's attitude of quiet wonder and gregariousness permeates his writing with a clearly optimistic, even cheerful, quality and is traceable, he always says, to his early years in Mississippi before his father moved the family to Detroit.

He has told me many times about the closeness of his family, and about his grandmother, father and uncles engaged in "front-porch storytelling," in which the way his relatives spoke was as fascinating to him as the stories themselves, and made him love language.

He particularly remembers his uncle Billy who, he once told me, "as a pullman porter would meet people and they would tell him their stories and he would memorize what they said and then tell us. His recitations took hours. He would tell each story using the person's voice and point of view, and recount major events and scenes. He would even re-enact scenes with dialogue and sound effects. So when I write a novel I hear voices, I hear someone telling a story. To go back to voice, I think, is the most important thing in literature."

Al is a great storyteller himself, and when he describes incidents that have happened to him in Berkeley and Palo Alto and in such faraway places as Yugoslavia and India, like Uncle Billy he imitates the characters involved with faultless accents.

His ear for speech patterns is pitch perfect, and one of the joys of reading his novels is the dialogue. So I wasn't surprised when he told me one day that his two favorites among his

novels are *Sitting Pretty* and *Seduction by Light*, in which he employs first-person narrators who speak with a vernacular immediacy that grabs the reader by the ears and hauls him or her into the world of the books.

Not that Al wanted to be a writer all his life, even though he demonstrated a surfeit of literary talents early, learning to read by the age of 3, and publishing poems, stories and articles in magazines and local Detroit newspapers while still in his teens. During those formative years, Al was a disc jockey as well as a guitarist and lead singer for a small jazz/folk song ensemble, and wanted to be a musician more than a writer.

His decision to devote himself to writing rather than his other talents came while he was pursuing a career as a musician in New York City. He told me in an interview that "from the age of 17 to 24, I made a partial living singing and playing guitar in coffeehouses and clubs, doing other gigs too, such as weddings. What I didn't like about it was the same thing my dad didn't--the drunks, the smoke and what happened to his friends, many of whom died very young because of that life. I didn't like to go to the gig and have to put up with people I couldn't stand, obnoxious people. What I always liked about writing was that you could do it anywhere, mail it in and get an answer back through the mails. I always found that very appealing."

Al decided to dedicate his energies to writing in 1960. He was 22 and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area where he wrote furiously while working as a medical photographer, warehouseman, clerk typist, yard clerk for the Southern Pacific Railroad, interviewer for the California Department of Employment, laboratory aide and industrial-films narrator. By 1969, he had graduated with honors from UC Berkeley, *Dancing* had come out, and his first novel, *Sitting Pretty*, was about to be published.

After that, he (as writer/reader/performer and lecturer) and his work were in demand all over the world. His poetry, fiction and essays have won numerous awards and have been translated into a dozen languages as diverse as

Swedish, Chinese, Italian and Serbo-Croatian. He taught as guest lecturer and writer-in-residence at dozens of universities across the country, and toured Asia and Europe a number of times as a visiting writer for the United States government, most recently to India this past winter. In 1982 he was given the key to the city of Detroit.

Al is as great a public reader as he is a storyteller. Over the years, he and I have given a number of readings together, and more than once I witnessed how he mesmerized audiences. Sometimes he will unexpectedly break into song in the middle of a poem.

His voice is soft and melodious. Once I asked if he had any regrets about giving up music. He answered without hesitation. "Actually, I didn't give up anything, since I always saw writing as music."

The paradox that has become increasingly apparent to me as the years pass is that Al, the black man who found his way to an Olympian vision beyond race, writes primarily of his racial experience. Such ironies, of course, are unavoidable, since a writer brings the influences and fascinations of his youth to the writing table.

Al is truly a man of belles-lettres, one of the few contemporary American writers I would identify by that title. Not the least of his works--actually among his best--is what he calls his "musical memoirs," a series of essays as varied as jazz reviews, record jacket introductions, personal reminiscences of his travels and thoughts and responses to music and events of all kinds. The memoirs were collected and published in several volumes over the years, titled *Bodies and Soul*, *Kinds of Blue*, *Things Ain't What They Used to Be* and *Drowning in the Sea of Love*.

Al's generosity is well known in the literary world. He has helped me and many others get readings, and he is responsible for having one of my books published. In 1997, he invited me to the University of Arkansas as guest poet. It was a wonderful week, but what is most memorable about it for me is how Al, who was frantically busy, continually went out of his

way to make sure I was not only taken care of but wanted for nothing.

He even arranged to switch my housing assignment from an out-of-the-way funky motel to the best hotel in town. And he never forgets to phone his other friends and me on our birthdays and anniversaries!

When I wrote a series of literary profiles for *Metro* in the early 1990s, I chose Al to be one of my first subjects. The occasion was the publication of his collected poems, *Heaven*, but the article turned out to be a minibiography, complete with an examination of his poems and novels. I focused much of my literary comment on his novel *Seduction by Light*, which I still think is the best piece of fiction ever written about Hollywood--and that includes Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished *The Last Tycoon*.

Seduction by Light is an ingeniously conceived, multidimensional, half-comic look at the fringes of the film world as seen through the eyes of an African American housekeeper who for a time was a film starlet and tells her story in a dazzling vernacular.

Since *Seduction by Light* came out 17 years ago, Al has published more than a half-dozen books and edited several besides, and he has been a writer-in-residence at more than a dozen universities and conferences, including his annual stint at the Squaw Valley Writers Conference and the Prague Summer program.

He is so much in demand that he seems to be constantly traveling, and most of our communication is in endless phone calls from Pennsylvania, North Carolina or Michigan. The subjects are always the same: yes, the literary world and what's happening in it, but more important, the political and economic scene and the world situation in general. Al's never been an ivory tower poet: he's one of the people you brush shoulders with on the street every day.

And that's Al Young--the man, the writer and the first bona fide California poet laureate of the 21st century.

Morton Marcus was the 1999 Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year. Author of 10 books, he is a film critic as well as a poet and novelist. This selection is from 'Striking Through the Masks,' his literary memoir in progress. Click [here](#) for another interview with Al Young.

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