

THE CHICAGO LITERARY HALL OF FAME  
in co-sponsorship with the POETRY FOUNDATION



HOME OF THE BLUES  
7-DAYS LIVE ENTERTAINMENT-  
CHECKER BOARD LOUNGE  
423

Presents

The Fuller Award  
for lifetime achievement to

**Sterling  
Plumpp**

The Poetry Foundation  
61 West Superior  
Chicago, Illinois

Thursday, September 19, 2019

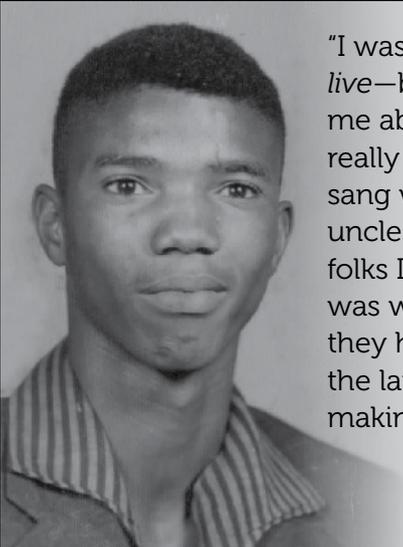
CEREMONY: 7:00 P.M.  
DOORS OPEN AT 6:30 P.M.  
RECEPTION TO FOLLOW  
The event is free and open to the public



# Tonight's Program

Stephen Young .....	Welcome to the Poetry Foundation
Randy Albers.....	About the Fuller Award
Ronne Hartfield .....	<i>Signs of Life: Regarding Sterling Plump</i> , Poet
Reginald Gibbons .....	<i>Poetic Voice</i>
Ginger Mance.....	Reading, "The Moonsong Sings"
Abdul Alkalimat .....	<i>Black Experience Poet</i>
Duriel E. Harris .....	<i>In Callings' Unquiet Borders</i>
Billy Branch.....	<i>The Blues and the Muse</i>
Tyehimba Jess .....	<i>Respect</i>
Donald G. Evans .....	Presenting the Fuller Award for lifetime achievement
Sterling Plump .....	Acceptance Speech

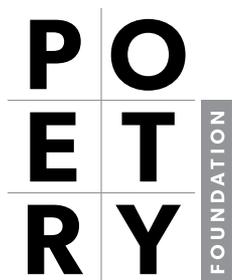
Program cover by Denise Billups



"I was here permanently—I was here to live—by 1962. And the thing that struck me about blues singers, that I had never really articulated before, was that they sang with the same kind of pain [as] my uncles, my grandfathers, and the men folks I knew on the farms—that that was where they had come from, that they had not done anything to *change* the language; they had found a way of making *art* out of it."

Interview with Reginald Gibbons,  
*Tri-Quarterly*, 2003

# The Poetry Foundation



The Poetry Foundation works to create and encourage a vigorous presence for poetry through *Poetry*, free public programming offered in our building in Chicago, programs created with partners throughout the United States and abroad, and a website that hosts more than 3 million visits each month. The Foundation increasingly supports programs that intertwine poetry and other art forms: music, dance, theater, and visual arts.

Founded in Chicago by Harriet Monroe in 1912, *Poetry* is the oldest monthly devoted to verse in the English-speaking world. The work of Chicago poets such as Margaret Walker, Carl Sandburg, Erika L. Sánchez, Ed Roberson, Nate Marshall, Eve L. Ewing, Kevin Coval, and Fatimah Asghar has been published in *Poetry*. Harriet Monroe’s “Open Door” policy, set forth in volume 1 of the magazine, lives on in the Foundation’s mission and programming.

From 2017’s year-long celebration of Gwendolyn Brooks’ centennial to this year’s fourth annual Poetry Block Party, the Foundation is committed to the poetry of Chicago and communities that make that poetry possible. Learn more about our programming at [PoetryFoundation.org](http://PoetryFoundation.org).



# The Fuller Award

By Valya Dudycz Lupescu

“The Fuller” is awarded by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame to a Chicago author who has made an outstanding lifetime contribution to literature. The first seven Fuller Awards were presented to Gene Wolfe (2012), Harry Mark Petrakis (2014), Haki Madhubuti (2015), Rosellen Brown (2016), Angela Jackson (2018), Stuart Dybek (2018), and Sara Paretsky (2019).



## The Fuller Legacy:

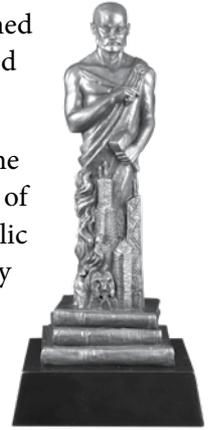
### A Quick Look at a Literary Pioneer

The award was inspired by the literary contribution of Henry Blake Fuller, one of Chicago’s earliest novelists and author of *The Cliff-Dwellers* and *With the Procession*. Both novels use the rapidly developing city of Chicago as their setting and are considered by many to be the earliest examples of American realism. Theodore Dreiser called *With the Procession* the first piece of American realism that he had encountered and considered it the best of the school, even during the days of his own prominence. There are additional layers of meaning to the word “fuller.” A fuller is also a tool used to form metal when it’s hot, an

important part of building and a nice metaphor for Chicago, home to the “First Chicago School” of architecture that rose up from the ashes of the Chicago Fire of 1871. Between 1872 and 1879, more than ten thousand construction permits were issued. Chicago emerged as a resilient city that took risks and made bold decisions—using iron and steel to frame its buildings, giving rise to the world’s first skyscraper. The fuller was one such tool that made it happen, a symbol of possibility and perseverance. Inspired by the sleek lines and art deco style of Chicago sculptor John Bradley Storrs, whose sculpture Ceres is on top of the Board of Trade building, the award statue for the Fuller was based on Hephaestus, the Greek god of the blacksmith’s fire and patron of all craftsmen. According to legend, Hephaestus was the only god who worked, and he was honored for having taught mankind that work is noble and one should excel at

his or her craft. The patron of artists and craftsmen, he seemed a fitting symbol to capture the spirit of excellence embodied by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's Fuller Award.

Ron Swanson, Jr., who created the Fuller Award statue, is the founder and owner of R.E. Sculpture, Inc. Over the course of his career, Ron has worked on large sculptures, including public figures as part of an artist group at Friends of Community Public Art in Joliet. He has also worked on many original toy prototypes and various licensed character sculpts.



[www.resculpture.net](http://www.resculpture.net)

## Chicago Literary Hall of Fame



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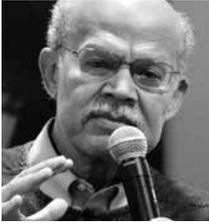
Barry Benson

Floyd Sullivan

The Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (CLHOF) honors, celebrates, preserves, and promotes the development of Chicago's great literary heritage—past, present, and future. CLHOF seeks to realize this purpose by annual inductions of selected great writers from the past; ceremonies honoring living writers whose lifetime contributions to the literary arts warrant the highest recognition; literary awards to young people; classes, panels, and other literary endeavors designed to encourage the development of writers at all ages. CLHOF also creates written materials that record the lives and works of Chicago's most important literary figures and presents these and other materials on its website, in exhibits, author events, public art installations, literary tours, and programming relevant to the organization's goal of promoting Chicago's vibrant literary tradition and culture. CLHOF formed as a project of the Chicago Writers Association in 2010, and splintered into its own nonprofit 501 c(3) entity in 2014.

**Visit us at [ChicagoLiteraryHOF.org](http://ChicagoLiteraryHOF.org)**

# Participants



**Abdul Alkalimat** is Emeritus Professor of African American Studies and Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois. An activist in Black Liberation and Socialist organizing, Alkalimat is Founding Chairperson of OBAC, the Organization of Black American Culture. He has been a colleague, comrade and friend of Sterling Plumpp for over 50 years.



**Billy Branch** was discovered by Willie Dixon, the “father of modern Chicago Blues,” while Billy was in college and already blowing a mean blues harmonica. After graduation, Billy skipped law school and toured with Dixon’s Chicago Blues All-Stars. In 1977, he formed Billy Branch and the Sons of Blues. The band celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary by headlining the 2017 Chicago Blues Festival. Among his many awards, Billy has won multiple W.C. Handy Awards from the Blues Foundation and an Emmy Award, as well as receiving three Grammy nominations. Billy is a Blues education pioneer, teaching his “Blues in Schools” program to thousands of children around the world since 1978.



**Reginald Gibbons’** most recent books are *Last Lake* (poems, University of Chicago Press 2016), *An Orchard in the Street* (very short fiction, BOA Editions 2017), and *How Poems Think* (criticism, University of Chicago Press 2015)-a book for readers and poets. His new book of poems will be published in early 2021 by Four Way Books, and he is currently at work on a novel and translations of poetry. He has just completed a co-translation, with Russian poet Ilya Kutik, of a volume of selected poems by Boris Pasternak. Gibbons is the director of the new Litowitz Graduate Program in Creative Writing (MFA+MA) at Northwestern University, where he is the Frances Hooper Professor of Arts and Humanities.



Poet, sound artist, and scholar, **Duriel E. Harris** is the author of *Drag* (2003); *Amnesiac: Poems* (2010); and *No Dictionary of a Living Tongue* (2017), winner of the Nightboat Poetry Prize and Publishing Triangle Audre Lorde Award finalist. Harris’ multi-genre works include *Speleology* (a collaboration with videographer Scott Rankin), the conceptual project *Blood Labyrinth*, and the one-woman theatrical performance *Thingification*. She has received grants from Cave Canem, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Illinois Arts Council and her work has

been featured in numerous venues including *The New York Times*, *Best American Experimental Writing*, *Letters to the Future: Black WOMEN/Radical WRITING*, *PEN America*, and Poets.org. Cofounder of The Black Took Collective, Harris is Editor of *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora* and teaches at Illinois State University.



**Ronne Hartfield's** memoir of her family, *Another Way Home: The Tangled Roots of Race in One Chicago Family* (University of Chicago Press), was published to critical acclaim in 2004. Hartfield is an author, essayist, and international museum consultant. She was formerly a senior executive at The Art Institute of Chicago and Executive Director of Urban Gateways: The Center for Arts in Education. Hartfield

earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Chicago in history, theology and literature, and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters by DePaul University. Her many awards include a Rockefeller Foundation residential fellowship in Bellagio, Italy.



**Tyehimba Jess** is the author of two books of poetry, *Leadbelly* and *Olio*. *Leadbelly* was a winner of the 2004 National Poetry Series. *Olio* won a plethora of awards, including the 2017 Pulitzer Prize, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and the Society of Midland Authors Award in Poetry. Among other honors, Jess received a Guggenheim fellowship in 2018. His fiction and poetry have appeared in

many journals and anthologies, including *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*. Jess is a professor of English at the College of Staten Island.



**Ginger Mance** is the author of several books of poetry: *An Ancient Fire Burns* (GEM Publications, Inc. 1994); *I Say a Prayer For You Black Men*, an epic poem tribute to Black Men and the Million Man March (Third World Press 1995); and *Rebirth in Light: Poems for the First Family* (GEM Publications, Inc. 2009). Her most recent work is a novella, *Up on a Midnight Sun: A Poodle's Adoption Story* (GEM

World Press Foundation, Inc. 2019). Mance is also an attorney, an administrative law judge, and an abstract visual artist who has presented her works nationally and internationally, including the City of Chicago's inaugural celebration honoring Martin Luther King's birthday as a national holiday. She has been a member of OBAC and the International Black Writers Conference.

# Awards & Honors

1975 Illinois Arts Council Literary Award for “Clinton”

1975 Third World Press’s Tenth Anniversary Builder’s Award

1976 Broadside Press Publisher’s Award, the first, for *Clinton*

1976 The Silver Circle Award for Excellence in Teaching

1979 Illinois Arts Council Literary Award for “Fractured Dreams”

1980 Illinois Arts Council Literary Award, for “The Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go”

1982 University of Mississippi Library archives The Sterling Plumpp Collection

1983 Carl Sandburg Literary Prize for Poetry, for *The Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go*

1983 DuSable Museum of African American History’s Creative Writing Award for Excellence in Poetry

1996 Poetry included in *The Best American Poetry 1996*, *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth-Century African-American Poetry* (Harper Perennial), and *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African American Poetry* (Signet)

1997 Biography included in *The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*

1999 Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award from the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration, for *Blues Narratives*

2000 Inducted into International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent, Chicago State University.

2001 Symposium hosted by the University of Illinois at Chicago to celebrate the distinguished career of Sterling Plumpp

2002 Retires as Professor Emeritus of English and African-American Studies

2004 Poetry included in *African American Literature* (Penguin Academics) and *Furious Flower* (University of Virginia Press)

2004 Keeping the Blues Alive Award, from the Blues Foundation

2005 Special panel on Sterling Plumpp held at the Delta Blues Symposium XI, Arkansas State University

2005 Special section of *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* devoted to Sterling Plumpp

2005 River Road Lifetime Achievement Award, from the Mississippi Valley Blues Society

2006 Poetry included in *The Oxford Anthology of African American Literature*

2007 Biography included in *Encyclopedia of African American Literature*

2009 Special issue of *Valley Voices: A Literary Review* focuses on Sterling Plumpp’s poetry

2010 Invited poet of the Lyceum Lecture Series at Mississippi Valley State University

2011 Biography included in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*

2013 Guild Literary Complex tribute

2013 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Workshops at Mississippi Valley State University devotes two-day session to Plumpp’s poetry and aesthetics

2014 American Book Award for *Home/Bass*

2014 Illinois Arts Council Agency Literary Award for “Mississippi Suite”

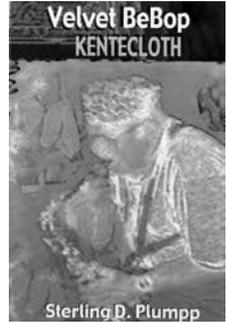
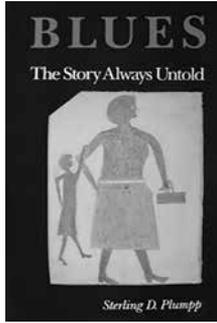
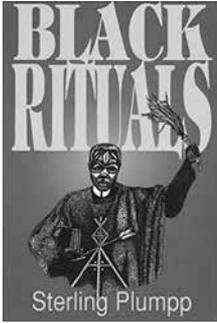
2015 University of Illinois at Chicago’s Lifetime Achievement Award

2015 Writer-in-Residence at Mississippi Valley State University

2019 Chicago Literary Hall of Fame’s Fuller Award for lifetime achievement



# Bibliography



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## Author

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*Portable Soul*, Third World Press, 1969; revised edition, 1974.

*Half Black, Half Blacker*, Third World Press, 1970.

*Muslim Men*, Broadside Press, 1972.

*Black Rituals*, Third World Press, 1972.

*Steps to Break the Circle*, Third World Press, 1974.

*Clinton* (poems), Broadside Press, 1976.

*The Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go* (poems), Thunder's Mouth Press, 1982.

*Blues: The Story Always Untold* (poems), Another Chicago Press, 1989.

*Johannesburg & Other Poems*, Another Chicago Press, 1993.

*Hornman*, Third World Press, 1996.

*Harriet Tubman* (Adjoa J. Burrowes, illustrator), Third World Press, 1996.

*Ornate With Smoke*, Third World Press, 1997.

*Paul Robeson* (a children's book; Adjoa J. Burrowes, illustrator), Third World Press, 1999.

*Blues Narratives*, Tia Chucha Press, 1999.

*Velvet BeBop Kente Cloth*, Third World Press, 2003.

*Home/Bass*, Third World Press, 2013.

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## Contributor

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*To Gwen with Love*, (Contributor) Patricia L. Brown, Don L. Lee, and Francis Ward (eds), Johnson, 1971.

*The Otherwise Room*, Joyce Jones, Mary McTaggart and Maria Mootry (eds), The Poetry Factory Press, 1981.

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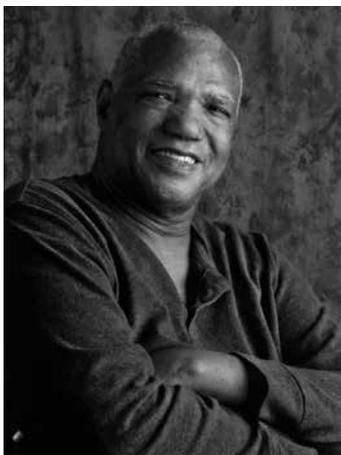
## Editor

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*Somehow We Survive: An Anthology of South African Writing* (illustrations by Dumile Feni), Thunder's Mouth Press, 1981.

# *Sterling's Blues*

by Donald G. Evans



He's a fixture, there as much as five nights a week. In the once smoky now sweaty air of the Chicago blues clubs--Kingston Mines, Blues Chicago, Rosa's, Buddy Guy's Legends—the big, aging professor interprets the whole scene through a lens that goes back hundreds of years. Used to be, it was a South Side concern, but the blues scene there ghosted out decades ago, reviving in places north with a new crowd, including the suburban and tourist sets alert for the kind of authentic atmosphere they'd already missed. Even the names of those old places titillated with the tongue-rolling, urban character of a

noir novel. Checkerboard Lounge. Mother's. New Raven. Pepper's. The Quiet Night. Sylvio's. Theresa's. Florence's.

Musicians, including a host of living blues legends, own these joints, if not literally, then in spirit. It's their world.

Sterling Plump is not a musician. Never picked up a slide guitar or a harmonica, never churned a mournful lyric, never wailed out in the garage or buddied up a band. Yet there he is, a constant presence. At a little more than six-foot-one and with a chiseled jawline, Sterling strikes an imposing figure. But in the deep blues club nights, he blends with the crowd, nursing a cognac and milk, maybe two, as he scribbles lyrics and ideas and connections into his always-present notebook. If you know Sterling more than a little, you've no doubt been invited to join him at one club or another.

"For years, we [Sons of Blues] used to play five to seven nights a week, and Sterling would be there five to seven nights a week," says Billy Branch. "He'd sit there unobtrusively with his pencil or pen and his notepad. Over the years, he became a part of the blues landscape. People know him. He knows the musicians. You can see him nodding his head, he's into the music. He's a blues lover as well as a jazz lover as well as other musical passions. You can see him smile and see him light up when he's hearing something he likes."

No, Sterling is not a musician. What he is is possibly the greatest blues poet of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, an erudite scholar descended from slaves, raised to do a sharecropper's chores, learned in religion, mythology, African American history, politics, and various other sub-academic disciplines; a longtime teacher, a lottery winner, and a man determined to carry on a tradition he sees as vital to his people's past.

"I'm more concerned with blues as an expression of African American culture, at the root level," Sterling says. "That has been my preoccupation as a writer. We come on slave ships. We come to the new world. Speaking some thirty-three thousand languages. The process of slavery. In some societies you can retain more African American culture than others. What we have in terms of African continuity are Negro spirituals; after that, you have the secular aspect of the blues; somewhere around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you get the sophistication of folk blues instrumentals and Louis Armstrong--they call it jazz, which is more sophisticated, more literate, but the same music. Looking at the second half of twentieth century, you get gospel then the blues."

Indeed, calling Sterling a blues poet is perhaps inexact, since his poetic career has also taken turns infiltrating jazz and BeBop. Themes as much as form factor into the definition of the literary term "blues poetry," and quintessential practitioners like Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, and James Weldon Johnson set high standards for the genre. Sterling believes blues and jazz and BeBop are on the same continuum, borne of the same spirit. More so, he believes his ancestry and upbringing dictate his sensibility as *blues*, and even when he writes derivations of the genre he figures it comes from a deeply imbedded place, a birthright, that can only be considered that.

Sterling's approach defies conventional blues poetry form--his rhyme schemes don't always adhere to the common definition. More, he approaches music as a passage into the bigger realms of life and history, particularly the African American experience. He internalizes the music—FEELS the music—and then he at once replicates and expands upon it in words, creating explosive and deeply felt poems that get at truths buried in the human condition.

"I consider him the Poet Laureate of Chicago blues," says Matthew Skoller, a front man and harmonica player. "He has informed me really profoundly in the history of the music and the history of the people that gave us this music, which are obviously African American people. His use of language, his poetic sensibility, is unique and acute and profound. He has informed my sense of

where this music was born and where it has gone. He has a great ear; knows authenticity when he hears and sees it.”

Sterling was always serious about his spiritual and intellectual studies. A graduate of the mourner’s bench and Catholic conversion, he considered entering the seminary until around his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. But all kinds of other reading and listening and absorbing were already filtering through and starting to change his course.

Sterling struggled with the moral implications of *Prometheus Bound* and *Oedipus Rex*, dutifully finished the *Iliad* and *Paradise Lost*, studied the Bible, devoured Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the works of Langston Hughes, read everything put before him and so much more. But it was James Baldwin, particularly his short story “Sonny’s Blues,” that triggered an epiphany. The narrator tells the story of his younger brother Sonny’s intertwined heroin addiction and musical genius. When Sonny regains the stage after a prison stint, the narrator observes, “I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do. And a piano is just a piano. It’s made out of so much wood and wire and little hammers and big ones, and ivory. While there’s only so much you can do with it, the only way to find this out is to try; to try and make it do everything.”

Professor Newman at St. Benedict’s College in Atchison, KS steered Sterling toward the Baldwin story, and, as has been Sterling’s lifelong habit, he took it from there. Sterling went straight from the classroom to a used bookstore to purchase all available Baldwin books, including *Giovanni’s Room*, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and *Nobody Knows My Name*. He found a biographical tidbit that told of how Baldwin listened to Bessie Smith because it recalled for him the cadence of his pickaninny days.

“I was both elated and perplexed,” says Sterling, who was the only black student at St. Benedict’s other than one football player. “I did not know you could make art out of ordinary Black life. I was surprised that the character was a dope addict that had been to prison. It also taught me who I was. Hell, I’m not Sonny, here I am, somebody with a pen in my hand, who has to develop a way of reflecting Sonny’s experience.”

When circumstances changed and the finances no longer fit, Sterling left Kansas for Chicago, where his aunt, Mattie Dixon, and brother, Ward Dell,

already resided. He shared an apartment with Ward at 5816 S. Parkway (now King Drive), began work as a substitute distribution clerk in the main post office, and took his first courses at Roosevelt University.

Back home in Mississippi as a youth, Sterling had received a baptism in the blues. His Aunt Carrie and Uncle Aaron, with whom he lived, ran a juke joint called The Big House, where Sterling heard popular musicians like Little Walter. The teenage Sterling washed dishes and studied the grown-ups dance and shake and move to the beats.

But Chicago opened new vistas for Sterling.

He moved fairly frequently in those first decades in Chicago. Sterling--with an uncannily precise gift for recall--rattles off the moves to 3430 W. Flournoy, 4820 W. Quincy, 5525 W. Washington Boulevard, 7258 S. East End, the Twin Towers in the middle of Garfield Park, 6921 S. Ogilvie Ave., 1212 S. Michigan Ave., 645 N. Central Ave., and so on. Somewhere in there came a two-year stint in the army.

Right away after arriving in Chicago, Sterling found out that Muddy Waters was playing at Curley's, about four blocks from home. He went. "He came there to *play*, you know what I mean?" Sterling recalls. "It was magical." A week later, he went back to hear Lightnin' Hopkins. Then he got news of a West Side place called Sylvio's, around Lake Street and Kedzie--his post office co-workers, many highly literate black men denied other opportunities, were often a source--and chased down Howlin' Wolf there. He would go back every Friday and Saturday night, for years, to hear the great man play.

"I'm 22 years old, I'm gainfully employed, there's all kinds of entertainment, all kinds of clubs," Sterling says. "I'm reading James Baldwin and seeing as much blues as I can."

The possibilities then were expansive, everything from the should-be-condemned dives to the fancy hotels, where somebody like Brook Benton might appear. Sterling gravitated toward what he calls "deep blues" and along with his club visits he collected LPs, especially in the army when he spent most of his money on albums, some one hundred of them.

Throughout the 60s and early 70s, as Sterling built a career for himself, he went to the clubs. And read. And wrote.

Over the years, he witnessed (most, many times) just about every great blues

and jazz musician—everyone already mentioned, Junior Wells, Alfred King, Nina Simone, Betty Carter, Son Seals, Lonnie Brooks, Lefty Dizz, and more. He befriended and wrote about many of the greats, heralded and not. Musicians like Willie Dixon took Sterling to gigs at various venues, even getting him backstage at an early Blues Festival. And in turn, especially in later years, Sterling took others, including students like Tyehimba Jess and Jeffrey Allen Renard.

He read voraciously, each book necessitating more books (“You can’t read Baldwin without reading [Richard] Wright”), until his foundational knowledge reigned superior to most everyone around him.

*Negro Digest* published “Black Hands” in 1968, the same year Sterling earned his B.A. in psychology. A year later, Third World Press published his first book, *Portable Soul*, and Sterling joined the Organization of Black American Culture.

“Chicago is that social space that gave me the opportunity to witness all of this great art, because it’s a forum,” says Sterling. “I discovered the blues in 1962. I also discovered Isaac Stern, the great violinist with the Chicago Symphony, and I also discovered the Chicago museums, a vast variety of people I can relate to. For the first time in my life I was in a space with a legitimate black intelligentsia with a history. I could go out on Sundays and listen to African American scholars discuss history or art. I could go to a restaurant and meet Lerone Bennett Jr. The city created a space for the writer. Such a space did not exist in Mississippi. It didn’t have the forum where you could on the same night go see Leontyne Price and after that you could go out and see Howlin’ Wolf. You don’t have that diverse excellence. That’s daily in your life.”

With his degree in hand, Sterling left the post office behind, as did Richard Wright before him, and moved from counselor to assistant editor to book reviewer, all the time racking up hours toward his graduate degree, work which he abandoned in 1971 because he’d determined it added no substantive value to his future teaching career. He soon joined the faculty in the English Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and within two years became a core, or what amounted to a founding, teacher in the new Black Studies Program. He continued sculpting his vision of who he was as a poet, and what he wanted to share.

“Writing is every day,” says Sterling. “I always have an envelope, something to write on, and a pen. If a thought hits me before I get to the corner, I stop and jot down some notes. It’s these notes that I pull together. Trying to get a draft.

Creative writing is a process of editing and revisiting until you think you have a final draft. You're searching for something when you're writing. It's a question of language, originality, metaphor—I happen to think if you're a poet you have to hear language."

As Sterling carved out a distinguished career as a professor and poet, the blues scene was ingrained not only in his existence but his work. Whether Sterling lived in Lawndale, Austin or the South Loop, nearly every night he would hop a bus or hail a cab to a different venue. He would be there.

For the first decade or so, Sterling would note each song that was performed. He recorded each verse he heard in his notebook. Later, his notetaking would be more occasional, but for a long time it was prolific. And exact. Baldwin and Wright and Ellison swirled around his thinking—through their writing Sterling understood intuitively that there was a relationship between blues and the possibility of his succeeding as a creative writer.

"I was not going out there just to listen to the blues," he says. "*What is the meaning of this*, right? Before I could decode the meaning, *what is this culturally?* I am finding some vehicle to shape the experiences linguistically. You almost have to be a participant observer. I don't try to be a musician; I try to be a poet. There is something about the kind of feeling you see exemplified in blues and the African American church, that was the highest expression. I wanted my work not to state that but aspire to that."

As the years went on and Sterling rose through the ranks to tenured professor, he had the luxury of teaching three days a week, sometimes just two, ever mindful that the construction workers, the plumbers, the secretaries, his former colleagues at the post office, none of them were afforded the lifestyle to pursue such ambition. Sterling's work grew and changed, veered this way and that. He insinuated the rhythm of the blues, as well as jazz and bebop, into the language of his poetry. He put out blues poems and books, but also produced poetic treatments of jazz greats like Von Freeman and Fred Anderson, and a book-length poetry collection of BeBop. "He does with words what BeBop does with music," says Reginald Gibbons. "He's a BeBop poet and he's a blues poet. He uses musical surprises and improvisational moves."

Reg once met Sterling at Blues Chicago. When he arrived, Sterling was already seated at the table nearest the stage. Reg could feel the music inside his body as he made his way over. Sterling had his notebook out, writing, the savagely loud music practically blowing him backward. Reg slid into the chair nobody

else really wanted because it was TOO close to the stage, maybe six feet from the lead singer, Willie Kent. When the band finished the number, there was a moment of quiet. Reg said to Sterling, “I think I just got something about you, Sterling. This is your Paris café.”

Sterling agreed; “Right.”

“He understands *worlds*,” says Reg. “He is a person who can read whatever room he is in. He can read blues clubs, he can read jazz clubs, honkey tonks; he can talk to revolutionaries, people in Apartheid South Africa; the army. He is at home in the classroom, and he is at home in the blues club. It’s in his work: it’s all there.”

Accolades and awards piled up, along with his publications as a poet, editor, and contributor, including a major work on South African writers. Sterling’s writing career became celebrated, and eventually studied. His pace for writing and for music did not slow, at least not much. For Sterling, music is personal. He has witnessed as much jazz as blues, but goes back to his formative years, hearing Negro spirituals in a peasant household raised by grandparents with only a few years grade school education. His early life pulsed with the kind of dirt road poverty that at least once left his family on the street, but it also moved to the beat of these masons and sharecroppers and extended family members singing loud the salvation in which they believed. In Chicago, his relatives were day laborers working in factories, living in places like Lawndale, or on Madison Street. His lifestyle forever remains connected to the South and a Chicago pregnant with influences of the Southern church.

“Ultimately what I’m driving at, I’m trying to celebrate these slaves, these second-class citizens, forced into lives in which they had to do menial labor,” says Sterling. “The souls match anything culturally that has come out of America. There is nothing [more significant] in the last 100 years that has happened in the black culture than what is happening in the blues clubs every night. You learn to transform that into your experience.”

# Plumpp's Poetry Class: A Response Essay

by Arthur Ade Amaker

His hands hum  
Rich clean lines  
In twelve string verses

Haints holla from voice  
Giving us words  
Splashed in bebop blue  
Gettin us to rumblin and tumblin  
Sanded toes walking out a royal boogie  
Between holy cross of  
Holly Springs and Sebastopol  
Rome and Ife

Kings fishes and cats  
Slide in sleek circles to off rhyme  
And broken time cuttin up on  
Velvet floors embroidered with  
Sapphire blood shine and  
Shotgun shell

We bow down to brightness to make these stories swing  
We dig deep for root notes that sparkle  
We come up for air beneath red dirt and crystal  
We moan moonlight and speak in gilded mud tongues

This is how we breathe in shallow water  
This is how we sing to thunder and wave

Chicago State University  
9/9/19

# *All of His Shared Journeys*

by Ed Roberson

I'm Ed Roberson, one of the many poets here to honor Sterling Plumpp on receiving the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame Fuller Award. All of us are happy to talk about his work, but I'm not going to talk about Sterling and poetry. There are poets here I think you are more anxious to hear on that than me. I wanted to be here bringing to focus on the breadth of Sterling Plumpp's influence on the thinking of others. People are here to testify to how great a classroom teacher he is, most forcefully by their own achievements after his tutelage.

There is another level of influence. For example in the case of the American Declaration of Independence, most people only recognize the names of a few big signers, the John Hancocks. People know the names of the people who wrote it up, the secretaries in a manner of speaking. But it was the deliberation, the discussion that is the essence of the document, those who chose to be present and make those ideas what they became. I bring up the Declaration's signers as a way of pointing out that many of the most critical events of our time display in some corner, on some line, some list of participants the name of Sterling Plumpp.

Here is my example. I was interested in finding a history of the development of the curriculum of African American Studies; because years ago when I first started I couldn't find a fully developed course or textbook. I had to piece together with friends what we collectively knew and list readings and locations. Then years later, in an obscure local black book store, I found a used paper copy of the fabled "Introduction to Afro-American Studies: A Peoples College Primer", edited by Abdul Alkalimat and Associates, 1974-86. There, on the acknowledgments page, in a special recognition to the scholars who participated, was the name of my friend Sterling Plumpp. He had mentioned editing a major first anthology of South African poets, he had mentioned being at a few critical moments in South Africa's fight against apartheid – but he had never mentioned this. This is the Sterling I know and am here to commend, the mysterious one who astonishingly appears in something important, then disappears because he never mentioned in talking about these events that he was anywhere around.

Sometimes when dealing with things outside your language, beyond your experience, you have to go along until it makes itself clear. Sometimes talking to Sterling you can't figure out what the hell he's talking about. But he is pulling

together far more experience and perspective than you can imagine in a line of conversation, a vast amount that sometimes takes days later once you've had to figure it out – you say, – that's genius!

Sterling Plumpp is not some poet lost in a mass well of bones in a field, sleeping in the shade of an obscure olive tree. Sterling stole away home, brought back the results, and spread them around. He is not one of the survivors, those participants who came back and made a name on the lecture circuit, in front of the cameras either. But he was there. And he is here. And I am come to commend the distance he has travelled and all he has brought back – to record our astonishment and thanks for the breadth, for the coverage of that distance, for the quality of the person who carried us – through himself – that journey. Sterling Plumpp.

Each night.  
I play. I go somewhere  
else, come here and gone to yonder times.  
Bringing ways to see  
with my tones. I was born  
in nineteen switchblade night.

Excerpt from *Horn Man*



The poetry of Sterling Plumpp sinews up from a beautiful and cruel Mississippi earth and experience and travels space and freedom aspirations to a hard headed but fertile West Side of Chicago. Sterling has mastered the pain and rugged joy and victory of blues and jazz in his unpredictable music and intelligent lyrics. His work is suffused with the wisdom of the people who holler and shout and sing and whisper in his words. Sometimes 'ornate in smoke' his poems are fit to last as long as Chicago does.

Angela Jackson

"...I was first published in 1968. The event stemmed from a poem I wrote after marching to Cicero, Illinois, in 1966. A black youth had been beaten to death in Cicero, and Bob Lucas, head of the Chicago chapter of CORE, led a march to protest it. This was the period when Black Power became prominent and shortly thereafter the Black Arts Movement emerged. Here in this cultural and historical malaise, I began my writing and publishing career. The black experience has always been my work."

From John Zheng interview, 2014



# after Ornate With Smoke

by avery r. young

dream baba plumpp & myself standin in line at de sink  
in de bafroom at de velvet lounge we behin(d) baba  
baldwin washin **WHITE** approval off him  
penmanship a *homie* a long way(s) from mama(s)  
landlord in de co(r)ner *motownin*  
somethin all god(s) horn-men can swing to  
dream it be me & baba plumpp in line  
waitin on baba baldwin who be stuc(k)  
in *homie(s)* song & jussa flingin him hand(s)  
dry baba plumpp tell(s) baba baldwin him already done ran  
all de hot wattah outta dis joint & den him ax him  
how long do we have to stan(d)  
in dis bafroom watchin him fling  
de air wet den baba plumpp look(s) bac(k) & down at me  
peep(s) de *muddy logic* in my penmanship  
tell(s) me *i do not need to sign an agreement of unity*  
*with a foreign language in order to speak*  
*my mother-tongue* dream me standin behin(d) baba  
plumpp lissenin to *homie motownin* & waitin  
on baba baldwin to get unstuck(k) &/or finish  
flingin him hand(s) i hum a blue(s)  
note long(r) den de line outside of de velvet lounge  
stretchin all de way down indiana avenue  
to clinton mississippi  
to de ivory coas(t)  
star(s)

# RESPECT

## A Poem for Sterling Plumpp

by Ronne Hartfield

I have more respect  
for my grandfather  
than for William Faulkner,  
is what you said.  
You are a poem, Sterling,  
is what I said.

Faulkner bleeds,  
his great talent brooding,  
black ink on white paper  
staining the edges of a thousand  
thousand Mississippi messages  
singing out the terror of our mutual history.  
Your grandfather bleeds,  
his sharecropper's silence staining  
sad white cotton hours of history  
scarlet with his own blood,  
his stigmata manifest  
without miracle,  
unless maybe survival is that.

The terrible and beautiful colours  
of your grandfather's fading flesh  
and yours and mine  
are ground from chain-gang rust  
and the black soil of Mississippi  
from long days labor,  
no clocks for starting  
or stopping  
just the rising  
and setting  
of the unremitting sun.

You are a poem, Sterling,  
an aggregate of hot suns  
and survivals,  
of spirituals and blues songs,  
of moanings and mouth harps  
and time without markers.  
The syncopations of your poet-words  
call up the blues-singer ghosts,  
those unsung ones who sang  
the truth of all of it.

You are a hundred poems, Sterling,  
or maybe a thousand.  
or really just one long tall poem,  
Black, precise,  
economy in the sinew.  
You swim your hundred miles  
and swim back.  
The Mississippi River is cold,  
and quiet for a moment.  
Never absent the imminence of terror  
It is beautiful still  
A blues song  
Your tale to tell.



# Our Continuous Conversation

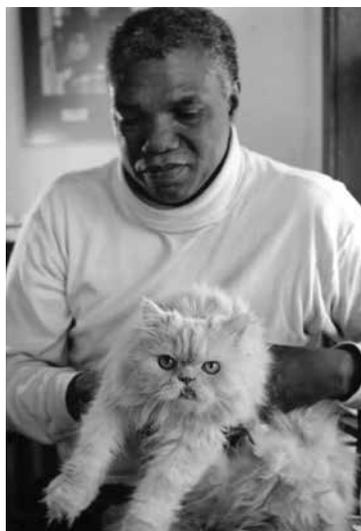
By Michael Anania

Sterling and I have been engaged for nearly forty years in one long, though frequently interrupted, conversation. It has involved poetry, South Africa, Mississippi, basketball, the Obasi Workshop, Australia, Harriet, boxing, jazz, the Blues, Haki, Grace Holt, Leon Forrest, Cyrus Colter, Gwendolyn Brooks, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, John Wideman, Tom McGrath, Billy Branch, Willie Kent, Von Freeman, Miles, Dizzy and a host of others. One of the unique features of this conversation has been that however long the hiatus—days, weeks and recently years—we always seem to take up exactly where we left off.

In the spring, inevitably, basketball would be the first subject. Sterling's riffs on basketball are always about individual players, and his favorite word to describe a player's approach to perfection has always been "touch." At the end of a rushing drive that has the defender one step too far back, the pull up jump shot has as its crucial last instant the brush of four fingers along the ball as it leaves for the basket. *Touch*. After the layup's long strides, the great jump, legs and arms outstretched, the soft roll of the ball across the player's index finger. *Touch*. After the jostle and crunch under the boards, the deft, almost magical clockwise spin given to the ball by three fingers and the thumb. *Touch*. The hand's arch at the end of the free throw. *Touch*.

Sterling's career can, I think, be characterized by bold, forward gestures that finally work because of the deftness of touch. More than forty years ago he made a large move toward questions of culture and cultural conditioning in *Black Rituals*, a prose exploration of both African and African-American rituals in which he raised subtle questions about skepticism and belief. *Touch*.

In an early book, *Clinton*, there is a turn backward to Mississippi and his childhood, but seen in sharply drawn, economical imagery. It is his most rigorously modernist book, in which the disciplines of the visual



and concrete hold that rich past in place. *Touch*.

Sterling wrote an entire manuscript of blues lyrics and a blues novel, then folded those labors into the complex brilliance of *The Mojo Hands*, where the call of the blues to the self, to the poet's name, his Mississippi past and Chicago present, creates a kind of poise between sorrow and delight or sorrow in delight or delight in sorrow. "The Mojo Hands call," to finish the sentence, "and I must go," into their relentless exploration of self. *Touch*.

In the opening section of *Johannesburg and Other Poems*, called "Metamorphosis," the *touch* of the blues changes the way the poems work, the way they move. In quick, swing lines with internal breaks, Sterling returns to Mississippi and family. The concrete landscape from *Clinton* is there but paired with a freedom of reference and an extraordinary fusion of self and place:

“Red/clay fertility be/hind  
tall grass. Red/clay blues/leaping  
from skin. . . .  
Red/clay blues/time  
And silence wound in my days.”

That's "Blues from the Bloodseed," at once inherited and earned. It is a personal engagement, a new and distinctive *touch*.

“They say blues is a feeling  
troubled like a rising tide.  
  
I believe it's my little song  
I pull from a hundred miles inside.”

And in the poem "Johannesburg":

“I ask  
if music has hands  
for something touched me  
last night.”

Music is the *touch* here that reaches across oceans and centuries of exile, a quintet. This astonishing poem begins and ends in song—"Swing, swing low sweet," not "sweet chariot," but from Miriam Makeba, "pata pata," which means "touch touch."

In *Horn Man*, the book-length poem sequence celebrating Von Freeman,

Sterling takes on a new and quicker touch, Bebop, which he calls “precise clumsiness.” *Johannesburg* began with a consolation, which experience would sorely test but confirm: “Every breath you take/is a lyric.” But Bebop is an “awkward lyricism,” “intoxicated,” “diagonal,” “magic.” Touch here is in the sax player’s quick fingers and the curious freedom of reference invention allows. “Lexicons of his fingers shout/before a congregation of head nods”—wonderful and Leon Forrest-like in its fusion of essential matters, language, play, the holler, the preacher, all bound together by the image of nodding heads that suits night club, tabernacle and shooting gallery.

In *Ornate With Smoke* this quickness is in flight everywhere. The poem can move suddenly, can angle out of any connection and collision of language, reference or punning. The “invented language of jazz. . .” Sterling says, begs improvisations, re-definitions in terms of moods and rhythms. Like the saxophonist, then, for the poet, sound and touch are one.

My  
task is to solve my voice’s finger  
tips’ extensions  
for its daily languages

Our task is to wonder at it all—voice, fingertip, language, song and *touch*. It’s an honor to help celebrate my friend Sterling Plump.



“It was actually in the army and the death of my father in 1965 that unlocked in me the precise articulation of what I felt so that I could write. One of the first complete poems that I wrote was about him, seeing his face dead and feeling the cold body, and going down this tenant road to St. Paul’s Church and going across the road and burying him. That experience stayed with me, and I tried to write.”

From interview with  
Jerry W. Ward, Jr., 1984

# The Moonsong Sings for Sterling Plumpp

by Ginger Mance

Crystal ain't  
always clear  
sad eyes don't  
always cry

I hear the moonsong  
It is  
the blues

It is  
the young whore  
lying in the night  
cryin' in the night  
her pimp dun  
KICKED  
her ass

It is the dope  
runnin track in veins  
bills pilin up  
top empty refrigerators  
drunks on Skid Row  
no blankets  
for concrete beds  
no pillows  
for hangover heads

The moonsong sings  
it is  
the blues

It is the brother  
with a broken heart  
nobody but GOD  
can fix

the sister  
with no man  
or somebody else's

I hear cries  
of empty dreams  
yells of hell noes  
the sound of doors  
slammin in a people's face  
I know why the pigpen stinks  
there is filth here  
SIN  
all caught up  
in my nose  
I know why  
there are funky toes  
food stamps  
don't buy  
SOAP

The moonsong sings  
it is  
the blues  
the Ten O'clock news don't  
tell about  
the blues

Yesterday  
is but an occasion  
of what tomorrow  
could be  
locked out dreams  
DYING  
in heads of those who

cannot become  
because they  
THINK  
they can't

In the middle of the night  
I roam tears through  
would-be-dreams  
find myself clingin  
to my own soul  
I hold

The Mockingbird  
makes no noise  
it cannot sing  
the moonsong  
cannot sing  
the blues

A people gotta  
know how ta  
    MOAN  
    sometimes  
clean out the cellar  
the soul

Sterling does  
he sings  
sings moonsongs  
listens to tears  
of eyes  
eyes too tired  
to cry for themselves  
sings moonsongs  
for eyes  
that know not the other side of  
pain

Moonsongs

for eyes  
eyes that hear  
eyes that stay up late at night  
to hear  
MOONSONGS  
lookin for a sun  
they don't see shining in the day  
lookin for the sun  
to rise at night

The moonsong sings  
it is  
the blues

The crooked road  
MUST  
be made straight

Life is an unseen circumstance  
we know will occur  
the roads are winding  
too many  
crisscross  
in the wrong places of life  
people don't know  
their own names  
The moonsong sings

it is  
the blues

Scare the nightmare away  
paint my life  
on a paper bag  
wear it for Halloween  
I am  
The Mask  
The moonsong sings

Pick me up  
dig me out 'da garbage  
ain't I more than tin cans

Cut my umbilical cord  
take me away from sin  
shame

Investigate  
into my soul's longings  
I do have dreams  
    dreams can't feed me  
ain't got no job  
can't pay my rent

Cut this pain  
with the doctor's cancer knife  
put radiation in me  
cure me  
with disinfectant words

Call up the Holy Ghost  
to come upon me  
I need  
    bleed  
tears dun dried up  
long ago

The moonsong sings  
It is  
the blues

Help me creep  
out of the cracks and crevices  
of a life that should not be  
worse  
than hell

The moonsong sings

I just might learn  
to hate my life  
enough to  
MAKE it change

The moonsong sings  
I love the Lord  
but sometimes I wonder  
if He  
knows my name  
Wonder  
If I knows how to pull Him out  
the dungeon  
of myself  
how to resurrect Him  
from this ol' tomb

They say He don't live  
where sin is  
yet I hear He is everywhere  
one day  
I guess I'll understand

The moonsong sings  
there are poems in me  
Tears  
that cannot cry

You turn tears  
into moonsongs

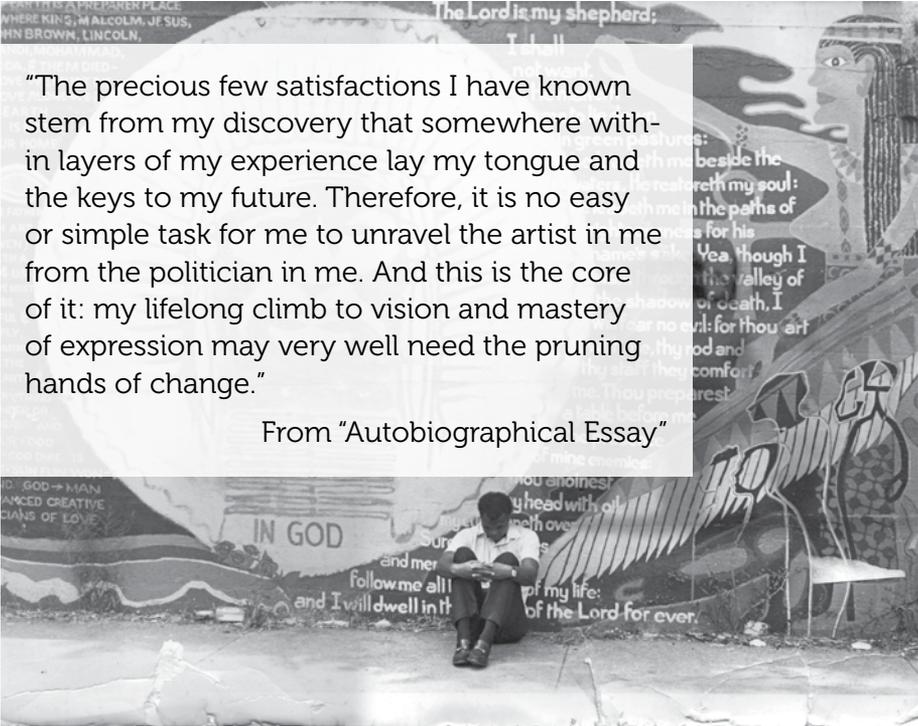
One day  
I just might learn  
    who I am

The moonsong sings  
keep on pushin  
Sterling  
play that pen

I pray  
one day my children  
my children's children  
will see  
hear  
one word  
that will set them free  
from this  
Moonsong  
I knows

The moonsong sings  
moonsong sings and sings  
It is  
The Bluuuuuuuuues

©1994 Ginger Mance



"The precious few satisfactions I have known stem from my discovery that somewhere within layers of my experience lay my tongue and the keys to my future. Therefore, it is no easy or simple task for me to unravel the artist in me from the politician in me. And this is the core of it: my lifelong climb to vision and mastery of expression may very well need the pruning hands of change."

From "Autobiographical Essay"

# To Know the Blues

By Michael Antonucci

The opportunity to celebrate a poet in his city and his time is a rare gift. It's one that can't be anticipated and is certainly not promised. Even so, it's probably fair to say that we shouldn't be surprised that Sterling D. Plumpp and his poetry have convened such an occasion: Informed by the power and possibilities of the blues, his verse works to extend expectation, moving audiences and the artist toward sites and figurations that are as unlikely as they are unpredictable.



Professor Plumpp's poetry bears witness to the endurance that is a requirement in the city called Chicago. His body of work is a full strength, long playing jam session with embodied traditions, lived experiences, and vernacular sounds that comprise his city. Somewhere it needs to be said: "*To understand Chicago, get to know the blues. To know the blues read Sterling Plumpp.*"

All that steel and smoke. All that electricity. Yes: know Chicago: know the blues. Read Sterling Plumpp: *Blues: The Story Always Untold. Blues Narratives, Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go*. Read Sterling Plumpp and follow him down into the groove where African-American life and American culture, writ large, ebb and flow. Touch *Home/Bass*. Unfurl *Vevet Bebop Kente Cloth*. Hear *Hornman*.

Sterling Plumpp served as the respondent for a panel that I was presenting on at the Delta Blues Symposium held at Penn State University, organized by Clyde Woods. I had just completed my doctoral program and while I was aware of Professor Plumpp's work, I had not come to know its gravity. I hold two impressions of this initial encounter: Firstly, I remain uplifted by the idea that, somehow, my paper struck Professor Plumpp favorably. I had decided to work with verse from Larry Neal's *Hoodoo Hollerin Bebop Ghosts* and he praised this choice lavishly in his response. I also recall purchasing a copy of *Blues Narratives* from Professor Plumpp, between sessions in the afternoon. He signed the volume, wished me luck, and while handing the book to me looked me directly in the eye and said, "I hope you like it."

About two weeks later, I was offered a position as a lecturer in the English

Department at University of Illinois at Chicago. When the semester started, Professor Plumpp, remembering me and my work with Larry Neal and blues poetry, made himself available and helped me gain a sense of Chicago, as well as campus culture at UIC. He made a pointed effort to introduce me to a poet whose work he held in high regard, named Duriel E.Harris. He invited my spouse and me to a blues club pushed up beneath the Green Line to celebrate the submission of Dr. Harris's dissertation project. Lurrie Bell and Billy Branch were the headliners. The music was fabulous.

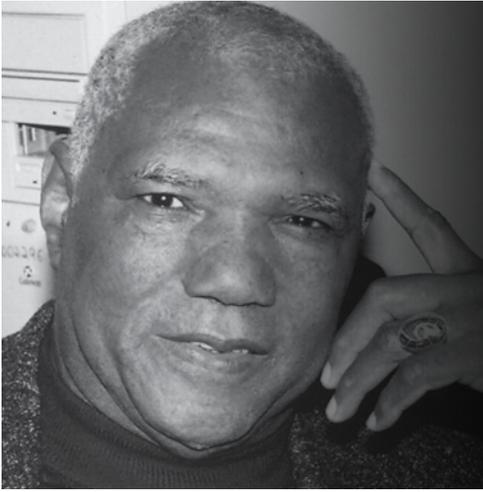
The opportunity to celebrate a poet in his city and his time also demands evidence of high praise. Sterling has earned that over the course of his career. For example, Tony Bolden, writing on avant-garde aesthetics and cultural resistance in the *Cambridge History of African American Literature*, observes that Sterling's "singular achievement has been his ability to treat blues and jazz music as prisms of philosophical thought, while capturing the verve of the music on the printed page." Similarly, Hermine Pinson, in her essay "Telling the Geography of His Horn," describes Sterling's verse as being derived "from a modal perspective that negotiates the dynamic relationship between ritual and improvisation." Yes, high praise, indeed.

Continuing to celebrate his work and its greatness, there is always more to say about Sterling. This is especially so when it comes time to speak of the tremendous generosity, spirit, and gracious capacity to share his time and thoughts. I remain grateful for his patience, and his willingness to listen and offer advice in an extended conversation has continued in so many different ways: through the phone and into my living room, kitchen, various office

spaces, train cars and automobile; over coffee at the White Hen Pantry on Van Buren; while watching the Lakers in the Holiday Inn Jonesboro, Arkansas; behind beers listening to music, in a Missouri Truck Stop; across breakfast, at the Canadian boarder in Quebec, out on Highway 61 and near Leland, as he read the inscription of that headstone aloud: "Give me beefsteak when I'm hungry, whiskey when I'm dry; pretty women when I'm living, heaven when I die."

To understand Chicago, get to know the blues. To know the blues, read Sterling Plumpp.





Plumpp's courage as a writer always stands out to me. He opines on black culture and reality but also on language itself—which he prods and pushes to do the work of telling, and perhaps more importantly, the work of making compelling art with words.

Romi Crawford

Sterling Plumpp has created a poetic style that combines brilliant use of our language, dazzling wordplay and syntax-play, blues rhythms and a high energy of the poetic line. His work is unique not only artistically in its form and manner and materials, but also because it is informed by the tremendous range of his historical knowledge of African American life, which he has gained from both his own lived experience and research. And which he has held in his prodigious memory. His primary iconic spaces in America are Mississippi and Chicago, linked by migration and by music. He also has drawn deeply on his experiences in South Africa and his first-hand knowledge of the years of resistance to apartheid. Sterling's insight into both rural and urban life is powerful, his grounding in the music and lyrics of the blues is profound, and his heart for the suffering and achievement of African Americans is compassionate and truth-telling. His political intelligence is deep. By any measure, he should be considered one of the most innovative and important of American poets, and the Fuller Award is a beautiful and just acknowledgment and celebration of this. Sterling is a living inspiration because of his own life story as a poet and thinker and his artistic achievement. His poetic art is formidable and utterly original. And he has also been a great and generous teacher both professionally at the University of Illinois at Chicago and personally with friends and acquaintances. I know that as both a poet and a person I have learned from him in every conversation we have ever had.

Reginald Gibbons

# ***The Generosities of Sterling Plumpp***

By Corey Taylor

“How did you hear about me?”

Those were the first words Sterling Plumpp, shaking my hand and smiling, said to me on a mid-December morning in 2015. I was in Chicago at the offices of Third World Press to interview him. I replied with a brief recap of my recent sabbatical working with his archival material. We continued chatting and sat down in the press’s first-floor library to begin the interview. Before starting, Sterling slid a small stack of papers across the table: typescripts of three poems.

“Here,” he said. “Take a look at these. Keep them.”

Sterling and I—joined by Duriel E. Harris—spoke for nearly four hours that day, and I felt we could have continued for at least four more. Sterling was engaging and insightful, thoughtful and detailed. I quickly understood why he twice won a distinguished teaching award while at UIC. As I drove home that afternoon, I realized I had been given a gift, other than the unpublished poems and lengthy interview. It was a sense that Sterling had freely shared his tremendous talent and intellect—and his personal history—with someone he had just met. Interacting with Sterling deepened my understanding of something I had observed (and still observe) in his writings: an animating sense of generosity.

The longer answer to Sterling’s question is that I first heard of him in 2013, while considering sabbatical options. I was intrigued by the University of Mississippi’s Blues Archive, and while looking at its holdings I noticed the Department of Archives and Special Collections also had something called the Sterling Plumpp Collection. I dug a little deeper and then read *Horn Man*, Sterling’s book-length meditation on Von Freeman’s bebop/post-bop explorations. I was hooked by the short lines with rapid-fire enjambments that simultaneously flowed and highlighted his wordplay. There was a sustained vision to the book. I hadn’t read poetry that sounded or looked exactly like Sterling’s, even though it was clearly part of the longstanding tradition of blues and jazz literature.

I spent spring 2015 on sabbatical in Oxford working with Sterling’s archive, which he began donating to the university’s Center for the Study of Southern

Culture in the early 1980s. The collection further exemplifies Sterling's generosity. I perused notebooks, letters, teaching materials, and unpublished writings: standalone poems and essays, complete manuscripts, and early drafts of *Clinton* (originally much longer) and *Blues: The Story Always Untold* (entirely different). Sterling's archive demonstrates the immense amount of work he did to hone his craft as a poet, professor, and activist—roles with significant overlap. It is also a fascinating chronicle of the times in which he's lived.

After I interviewed Sterling, we kept in touch: He called me around Christmas to wish me and my family a happy holiday. We emailed occasionally about music we were listening to. During one email exchange I mentioned that I had been invited to return to Oxford in February 2016 to present on my sabbatical. Not only did Sterling attend my lecture, but he stayed long after it was over to talk with audience members. That day, he added to his archive a complete draft manuscript of his three-volume epic poem *Mfua's Song*, the genesis of which dates to the late 1970s.

Of course, Sterling's most generous gift is his work. "Prolific" is an oft-used word when talking about writers with noteworthy output, but in Sterling's case it's an apt descriptor—51 years and counting as a published author. Sterling's poetry has remained focused on major themes while expanding its formal parameters. To paraphrase Etheridge Knight, Sterling's poetry centers on ideas of ancestry articulated through the language of the blues and jazz, and more broadly in the tradition of African American music and folk culture. "I perceive my ancestors invented and reinvented many languages in order to spread literacy among embattled souls: Negro Spirituals, Folktales, Sermons, Blues, Jazz, Gospel, Soul, Do-wop, Rap," he wrote in his preface to *Ornate With Smoke*. "As a poet, I see these linguistic inventions as launching pads [...] for an appropriate language to get me through another day."

Although rooted in the past—his own, his family's, the collective African American journey from the Middle Passage to the Great Migration and beyond—Sterling's poetry always strikes me as of the present because of its inimitable musicality and formal innovations. Readers can see the earliest iterations of Sterling's fusion of content, sound, and form in *Half Black, Half Blacker* and *Steps to Break the Circle*, but with *The Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go* Sterling began to write in what he termed his "mature poetic voice." Afterward he evolved rapidly in style, voice, and form, from his examination of how ancestries and the blues entwine in *Blues: The Story Always Untold* to his homage to the bluesman Willie Kent and Maxwell Street's blues clubs in *Home/*

Bass. His language achieves a spiritual synergy with bebop, as seen in a passage from *Velvet BeBop Kente Cloth's* "Twenty-One":

Holy/Riffed fire  
repeating/It  
self/Inventing it  
self/Re-Inventing it  
self

This is Poetic Law/All  
over the worlds/I invent.



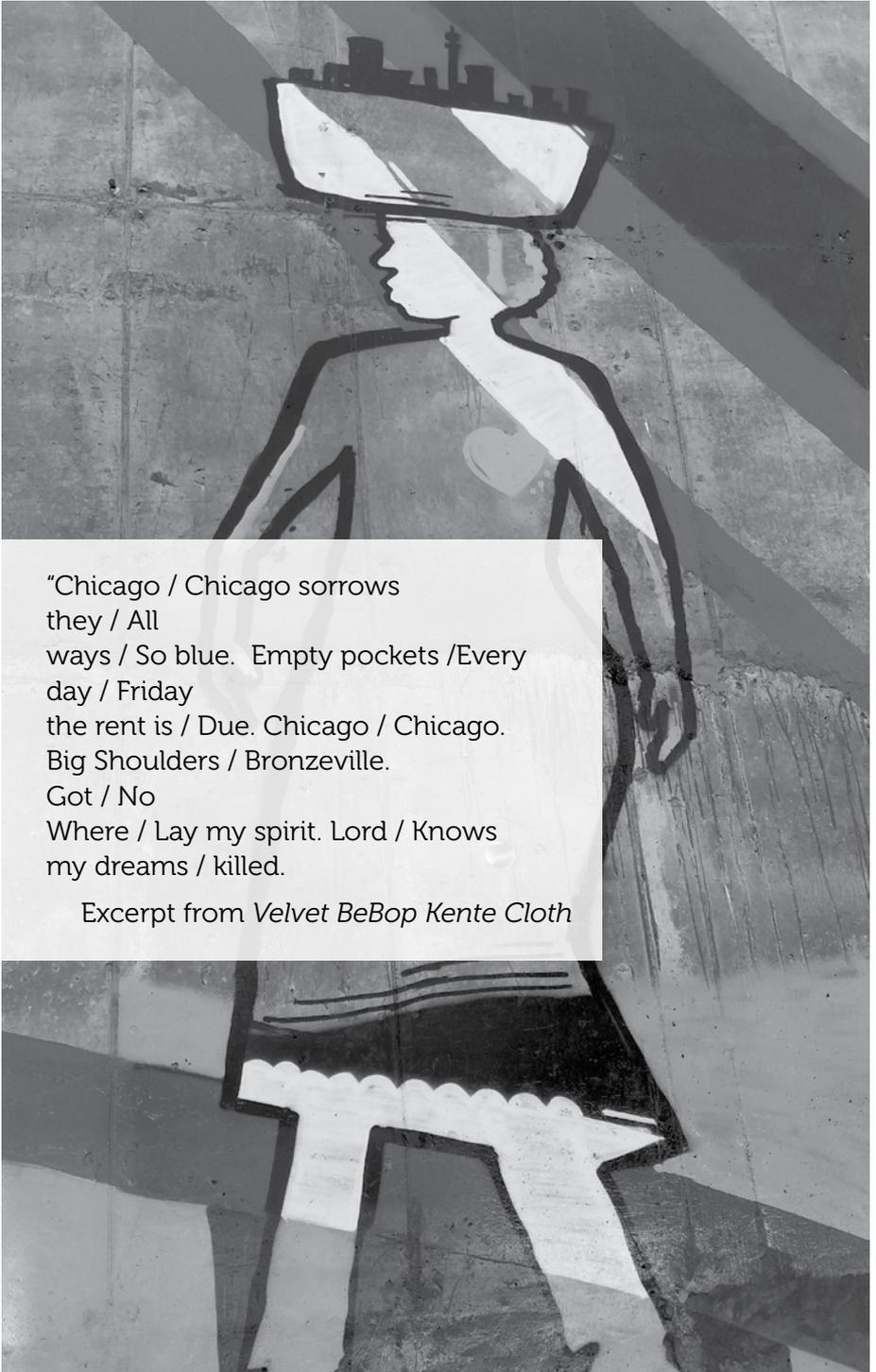
Sterling Plump has given dozens of interviews, taught hundreds (if not thousands) of students, mentored a generation of poets, preserved the voices and stories of his familial and cultural ancestors, and written indelible poems. Personal, intellectual, and poetic generosity are Sterling's gifts to us. I am fortunate to be one of many who have benefitted from them. Sterling's abiding kindness and nobility of spirit are on the page and in the person.

As a prolific poet, memoirist, and social activist, mentor and friend to so many, including myself, Sterling Plump is an innovator whose experiments in jazz and blues poetry have expanded the discipline and influenced a new generation of award-winning poets, musicians, playwrights, and scholars. He has been, since the beginning of his career as a poet and teacher, an activist for social justice in Mississippi, Chicago, and South Africa.

During his long and prolific career, Plump's poetry has immeasurably enriched Mississippi's cultural legacy, through his fearless interrogation of its history, social practices, but also its beauty and potential. Plump has said of his poetry, "I write poetry to make sense to my ear." And it's true that his language is deeply inflected by black southern vernacular, the quicksilver metaphors that don't lie there on the page or wait for you to fully digest them before the poet gifts the listener/ reader with another one, affecting the contrapuntal rhythms of the preacher, the hollerer, the blues singer, the avant-garde saxophones, the piano of Thelonious Monk, the shout, the prayers of generations of the folk. Plump's poetry educates and enriches the reader, while also enriching the spirit.

Ase, Sterling Plump! and congratulations to you on this well deserved honor.

Hermine Pinson



"Chicago / Chicago sorrows  
they / All  
ways / So blue. Empty pockets /Every  
day / Friday  
the rent is / Due. Chicago / Chicago.  
Big Shoulders / Bronzeville.  
Got / No  
Where / Lay my spirit. Lord / Knows  
my dreams / killed.

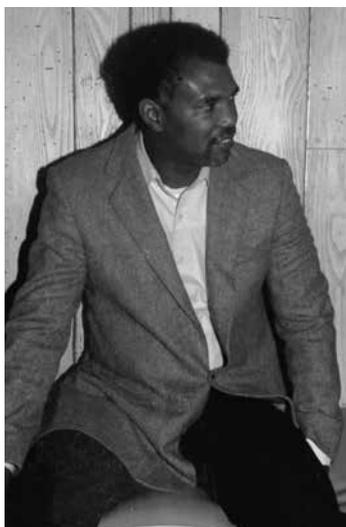
Excerpt from *Velvet BeBop Kente Cloth*

# Sterling Plump: A Literary Life

by Jeffery Renard Allen

I first met Sterling Plump well over three decades ago, back in 1982 when I was a twenty-year old undergraduate and would-be fiction writer at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). I decided to take one of Sterling's Black Studies courses, which was focused on some aspect of Black American literature. As memory serves me, I'd never heard of Sterling when I registered for the course. I took it simply because I wanted to learn more about black writers and at the time the English Department at UIC did not have a single black person on faculty or offer any courses in Black American literature.

I'm probably changing the facts here. I might have heard about Sterling through other students or through a professor. Might have even seen him on campus. Be that as it may, once in the class I was struck by Sterling's unusual teaching style. He would begin each class with some point about the assigned text, then would move on to something concrete and immediate involving black people. That topic would lead into another. Each class session was largely a monologue with Sterling pontificating about whatever was on his mind that day in the national or local news or in sports or politics, with him circling back to the text to draw connections, then spinning out of the text again to draw some historical comparison, paint the big picture.



Suffice it to say that all the students in the class were black like me and that they were largely uninterested in what Sterling had to say, an indifference I would later experience and suffer through when I began to teach. The unfortunate truth is that black students often feel they are experts on blackness and have nothing new to learn, so they tune out and expect an "A" at the end of the semester. But in that course, I listened to all Sterling had to say, and I gave it all great thought. Here was someone like no other person I knew, someone radical, interesting, and insightful. So I took another course with him, then another, and still another.

Sterling often had an unusual visitor sitting in the classroom, a little girl up in the front row with a book or some other object of interest. By such means I learned that Sterling had a daughter, Harriet Nzinga.

At some point I also learned that he was a poet, a discovery that changed our professor-student relationship. I entered grad school determined to be a writer, and I was also determined to learn as much as I could about the craft from Sterling, a published author. Again, I'm probably fabricating on the facts, rewriting the past through hindsight. I doubt if I was that conscious and calculating. Here is what I know.

I took Sterling's course on the Black Arts Movement and had my mind blown. Sterling made me completely rethink what I was trying to do as a writer. Many years later, I was to learn that Sterling had a host of reservations about the Black Arts Movement for both aesthetic and personal reasons, but he never revealed those reservations at the time. Indeed, what I took most from the course was this idea that a black writer could achieve much through exploring the unique idioms of our culture. Sterling fully believed this idea, was fully committed to it. I began to spend a lot of time with Sterling outside the classroom, discussing this idea and discussing how Sterling approached it in his poetry, picking his brains.

Sterling did me one better. In 1989, he published his collection *Blues: The Story Always Untold*, a book that had a tremendous impact on me. I read it again and again and wrote an essay about the book. I still return to it for ideas and inspiration. In this volume Sterling reimagines the blues poem, reinvents the form, no small achievement. He could do so because he lived the blues.

Sterling went to the blues clubs in Chicago every night of the week—no exaggeration—and I hung out with him as much as I could. Between glasses of cognac with milk, he would talk about the music and the musicians, talk about what he called the “iconography” of the blues, and jot down lines for new poems. As a transplanted Southerner, he felt that the blues held the answer for understanding who he was, who his ancestors were, and for understanding this place he had come from, Mississippi.

He would say to me, “Jeff, you're from the North, so jazz is your music.” He suggested books and poets I should read.

The discussions were serious, but we also had a good time. I remember Sterling saying, “The Bible is a great book. I wish I had written it.”

I remember him talking about how well fellow Mississippian William Faulkner understood black people and black culture. “He can write,” Sterling would say. “Faulkner was the best black writer of his generation.” A joke that I stole and would later use to torment my own students.

Sterling pointed out that people often overlook that the blues is funny. He would sing the lines, “*Baby, if you go walk on my heart, please take off yo shoes.*” In those days, I didn’t have any blues jokes of my own, so I would tell Sterling comic anecdotes from my life. “Sterling, when I was in eighth grade, my teacher Mr. Bishop embarrassed me before the entire class. For some reason my teacher, he started yelling at me, ‘Jeffery, you’re either going to be a poet or a gigolo.’ I yelled back, ‘I ain’t gon be no poet.’ I had no idea what a gigolo was.”

In time, Sterling moved from blues poems to jazz poems and starting frequenting jazz clubs each night. Sterling admired saxophonist Von Freeman almost as much as he admired Muddy Waters. Clubs are Sterling’s woodshed, immersion in the music the necessary preparation for making. Place is important for Sterling. He situates himself in music to write from there. And he uses music as a lens to write about place—Mississippi or Chicago or South Africa. Listening.

After I left Chicago for a teaching job in New York, I remained in touch with Sterling by phone and would often hear him talk about his efforts to capture bebop phrasing in the poetic line. Listening.

That said, Sterling’s work uses music in a search for excellence. Sterling is fond of quoting a line from another great Chicago writer, Leon Forrest: “You have to throw your hat in the ring with champions!” Like a Muddy Waters or a Von Freeman, a writer must give her/his all.

In recent years, Sterling has spent considerable time in his native Mississippi. As I understand it, he is working on his first book of prose, a memoir that will use Mississippi as a frame for understanding his life, a story so far untold. His current project offers further proof that his verse has long been in conversation with Faulkner. As Faulkner said, “The past is not dead. The past is not even past.”

I think it fitting to end my tribute to Sterling by encouraging him to finish the memoir, to write his past which is not past. We need this book. The world needs it.

*June 6, 2019*

Johannesburg, South Africa



*"History is an island that one drags as one negotiates one's way through life."  
From interview with Michael Antonucci, 2001*

# Tribute to Sterling D. Plumpp: My Always Neighbor

By Thadious M. Davis

I always think of the brilliant, multi-talented Sterling D. Plumpp as my neighbor. No, I never actually lived next door or even in any of his neighborhoods. In fact, we have only met face to face a few times. Yet, as a native New Orleanean for whom Mississippi was “north,” I felt that Plumpp, whether in Clinton or Jackson or anywhere in his boyhood Mississippi, was my neighbor, a fellow black Southerner identifying with all that meant in the 1950s and 1960s. It is not a relational, family kinship or even a play relative, as we often claim in the black South; it is more of a community thing, the just-next-door or right-down-the-street thing. The slightly older person you see and recognize, but such an accomplished well-known person you could never actually associate with or spend time in his literal presence.

But oh, the figurative presence, that access to words, deeds, thoughts that arrive with access to the written word. That’s where I knew Sterling Plumpp and claimed/relished him as neighbor, the always there ahead of time, the always knowledgeable about recognizable spatial and social geography, the always seeing the total landscape in the ‘hood for what it was, is, or can be.

His move to Chicago in the 1960s marked the beginning of his becoming a writer, and his early publications in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s marked my discovery of my northern-most neighbor, his genius for words, and his talent for keeping me and many others of us abreast of cultural, political, and intellectual developments in the larger black neighborhood. He became the neighborhood griot, as I named him, though of course, he never heard

those words, but for me they linked him to everything striving and becoming in an interconnected world that increasingly aimed to add beauty, in all of its aesthetic meanings and social resonances, to black.



*Portable Soul* in 1969 was just the beginning of Sterling Plumpp’s long and distinguished career as a writer—a poet, especially—but also a cultural observer, a social historian, a proponent of African solidarity, an editor,

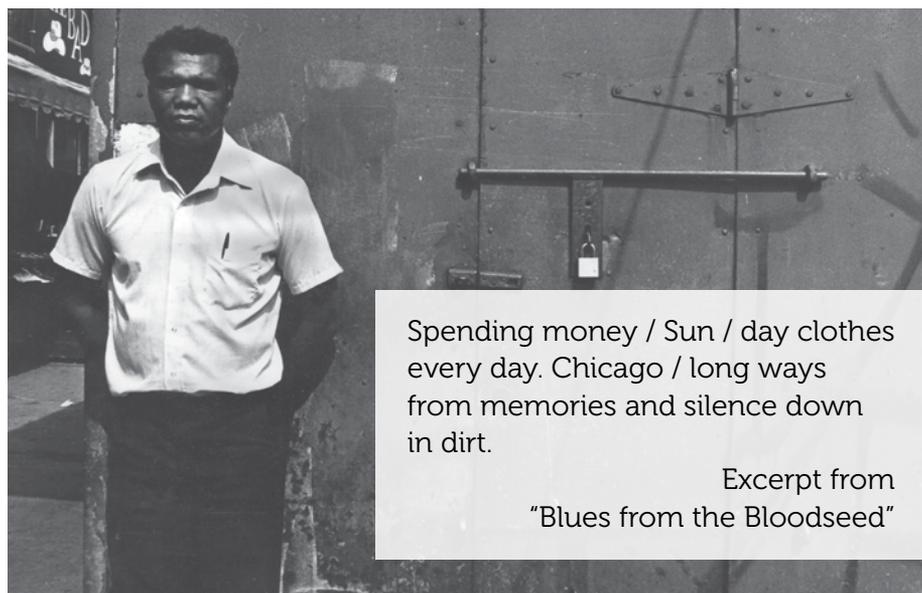
and a teacher. His biography with a list of some sixteen book publications is readily available, so I will not recount it here, even though I must say about his prolific production that throughout the tumultuous last decades of the twentieth century and into these first decades of the twenty-first, Sterling Plumpp has had a steady hand, the kind of mojo hand Lightnin' Hopkins sang about, a hand continuing to write and reason, to think and envision, to craft and compose the indelible music of his mind and eye. And, much like the old-time preachers lining their sermons for ultimate intelligibility, he has made his poetry available and accessible without being simplistic. It's not by accident that he entitled his 1982 collection *The Mojo Hand Calls, I Must Go*, for that title speaks to the compelling motion of his lucky calling to the necessary but complex work of writing poetry that matters.

Rather than revisit his many accomplishments and his individual productions, I would like instead to add to the praise, appreciation, and appraisals celebrating a man and his outsized achievement. Throughout his vital career, Sterling Plumpp has understood the ethics of the blues and the aesthetics of the bluesman. Within a sophisticated poetics derived from that blues-based formidable ethics and nuanced aesthetics, he has crafted works that are controlled and contained yet always expansive and explosive. He has detected and then deployed the endless variations in tone and tempo, in vocal and instrumental inflections that fuse pleasure and pain in messages cognizant of suffering and death but hell-bent on survival and life. Molding understanding, form, and creativity with cultural wisdom and vernacular savvy, he has embraced an old, well-worked genre and way of being in the world that came out of dark places but with brilliant streaks of light. In that extraordinary embrace, he has made repeatedly powerful and provocative responses to an all too human condition whether in rural semblances or urban guises. While unequivocally gender and race specific, his poetic landscape stretches far beyond those binary boundaries and seeks the limitless frontiers where all human beings attempt to reach out to freedom of thought, mind, heart, and soul.

His practice and his process with their urgent connections to a politics of location reminds me of Audre Lorde's declaration "poetry is not a luxury," in her essay bearing that title. Lorde explains that poetry "is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into ideas, then into more tangible action." Sterling Plumpp well understands Lorde's conception of "the places of possibility within," because inevitably his work forwards the recognition that change is possible within the context

of the poem, the vision, the language, the truth-telling, and the form itself. That prospect of change so palpable in so much of his writing illuminates and elevates the lives we live and charts the way forward into the lives we might ultimately experience and realize. What he has produced in a broad range of innovative writing allows for that which Lorde aptly names “the quality of light within” to shine through, to break through the darkness in order to provide an access route to make dreams and hopes not merely translucent but attainable.

In the 1980s, Sterling Plump and I shared duties as poetry editors for *Black American Literature Forum* (now *African American Review*). I was then living in North Carolina and he in Illinois, so we never shared the same space. For me, however, it was once again being in the same neighborhood with the brilliant poet who had remained an inspiration. He, of course, never knew that for me a working collaboration with my neighbor from my part of the South--one who had so successfully migrated through spaces from Mississippi to Chicago and through times from Black Arts and beyond, all the while carrying with him memory from the known past and light into the beckoning future--was the cementing, the actualizing perhaps, of being in the neighborhood for all those years with my much respected and long admired neighbor. In this moment of celebrating and honoring Sterling Plump, I link my neighbor and his practice and poetics to the message Toni Morrison offered in her vision of a writer today, “an unblinking witness to the light and shade of the world we live in.” How fortunate for all of us that Sterling Plump embodies precisely that.



Spending money / Sun / day clothes  
every day. Chicago / long ways  
from memories and silence down  
in dirt.

Excerpt from  
“Blues from the Bloodseed”

# Sterling Plumpp: Colleague, Comrade, and Friend

by Abdul Alkalimat

As we all grow older it is imperative that we speak about our lives, the lessons we have learned, and most importantly the people we have shared life with and made sense of the craziness of it all. This is why I so much enjoy the challenge of speaking about my relationship with Sterling Plumpp. I am very pleased that he is being honored with this award of recognition. I will make six points: our origins, our cultural activism, our work in Black Studies, our shared political activism, our shared Pan-Africanism, and our shared friendship.

**Origin:** Sterling was born in Clinton, Mississippi in 1940, while I was born in Chicago in 1942. He was nurtured in the cauldron of Mississippi cotton picking, church praying/singing, and the wisdom of a grandfather's teaching. His epistemological journey was blues born, and the path of his future. I was born into the industrial working class based in the Cabrini Projects at 530 W. Chestnut. I navigated this multi-national context under the leadership of my steel worker father, and my mother playing BeBop on 78 records. What is interesting is that while we came at our situation from different origins we ended up sharing the journey of consciousness rooted in our common generation.

**Cultural Activism:** The Black Arts Movement was a generational explosion of creativity, on a national basis but especially strong in Chicago. Black music has always been foundational for Black culture in Chicago: gospel, blues, R & B, and jazz. This continued with the creation of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians). We also formed an organization to capture the creative forces in the literary and visual arts, OBAC (the Organization of Black American Culture). I was one of three founders, with Hoyt Fuller and Conrad Kent Rivers. Sterling joined and became one of the prolific poets and cultural activists. He wrote, "I see the blues." He wrote, "I went down to malcolmland, me come back a man." Sterling was deep into the search for the Black aesthetic—not in the fantasy of the rising middle class aspirants, but in a deep dive into the organic culture of the people,

as Amiri called them “the blues people.” He was an important voice in OBAC. Our mutual respect developed first in OBAC.

In the 1960s, many people wrote poetry, but some stayed the course, developed their craft, and became poets. Sterling was one of those. He produced, and by doing so developed a distinctive voice that earned him the respect of many major writers of the period. He became a poet respected by his peers, publishing in many Black arts journals, and even the mainstream as well. Further, as an inductee into the Chicago Blues Hall of Fame, he won respect from Blues musicians as well. This is demonstrated by the mutual respect he shares with his former student, the Blues musician Billy Branch.

**Academic Colleagues:** For many of us our spontaneous movement activism wasn’t going to pay our bills, so our best job searches landed us in college teaching. I had a PhD and was a natural fit, Sterling had an MA and a strong productive record of artistic achievement. At one point we both landed in positions at the University of Illinois (Chicago campus) in Black Studies under the departmental leadership of Grace Holt. We were joined by our colleague Marcyliena Morgan in discussion about how we could take Black Studies into a sustainable future. What I remember most about Sterling’s pedagogical tendency was his combination of using the Socratic method to force the students to think for themselves, and the instruction to immerse oneself in the actual cultural production of the community to experience what one is studying. Apparently, it worked as his students continue to demonstrate achievement at high levels.

**Political Comrades:** But, of course, we were more than teachers about Blackness and Black liberation, as our views required us to engage in the practice of mobilizing people to change the world. In my case, I was



active in an organization called People’s College. One of our projects was to extend Carter G Woodson’s Negro History Week to Black Liberation Month. We put out a calendar and for each day of February we cited a historical event, and on that

Sterling provided a poetic reflection on the theme “Common Hands.” For Black History Month he wrote:

It takes more than seven days  
to expose cores of acts  
fighters are making  
because liberation has overtaken  
black history  
and the week’s sprint  
is now  
a long distance run

And, for February first when the sit-in movement began in 1960:

They got up  
from intimidation  
and sat in defiance  
four students  
lit torches to rake brilliance  
on new phases of their hands  
the refracted echo  
shot militance into a generation  
sit-iners bluffed jim crows  
from existence  
and people walked forward

Sterling saw the unity we needed in our common hands of struggle.

**Pan-Africanism:** Our generation was part of the final push to end de jure colonialism in the fight for the independence of African countries. The organizational path we took was in an organization called the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC). On May 14, 1978 we planned a unity event we called African Liberation Sunday to be held at Tabernacle Baptist Church, under the leadership of Rev. Louis Rawls. Central to the service was a call and response reading written by Sterling Plumpp. Here is an excerpt:

Speaker: Let a generation of men and women rise and take control  
Congreg: Stand up, fight for your rights! Stand up and fight!  
Speaker: Come out to the picket line!

Congreg: Stand up, fight for your rights! Stand up and fight!

Speaker: Come out to the testing line!

Congreg: Just like Martin! Just like Martin!

Speaker: Come out to the struggle line!

Congreg: Just like Malcolm! Just like Malcolm!

Four years later Sterling published his anthology *Somehow We Survive: An Anthology of South African Writing* (1982). In the introduction he wrote:

“In *Somehow We Survive*, South Africans are shown surviving somehow under the barbarity of inhuman conditions. Their collective voice is determined to end the nightmare of Apartheid through whatever efforts are necessary at whatever cost demanded in the ‘Year of the Spear.’ Amandla!”

Nelson Mandela was freed from prison in 1990.

**Friendship:** These functional relationships point to our human connection that helped us survive differences, silences, and the polemics of a people trying to find their way out of the darkness. Sterling and I have been friends, open to honest forthright discussion in which we dared to be wrong, and sometimes even able to admit it. We have shared more lunches together than I can count. We have sought advice from each other, shared bibliography, candid assessments of others, and even a secret or two.

Sterling has maintained his Southern roots in his easy style of talking and walking, and his taste for food. He has an amazing memory for details of sports history, always overwhelming me with factual detail.

We often talk on the phone and whenever possible meet for lunch. Every conversation we have covers Black literature, music, sports, and radical politics in the US, Africa, and throughout the African Diaspora. Sterling often expresses the view that the historical development required for the next stage of struggle by Black people is literacy, the desire and ability to process information and produce rational thought.

We have each networked far out into our generation so we have knowledge and our own subjective views that cover lots of ground. I eagerly await his memoir.

# His Honor, and Ours

By John Zheng

I met Sterling Plumpp in April 2005 at the Delta Blues Symposium held at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. There was a featured panel on him with Hermine Pinson, Duriel E. Harris, and Kathryn Takara. I have known Sterling Plumpp for a decade and half.

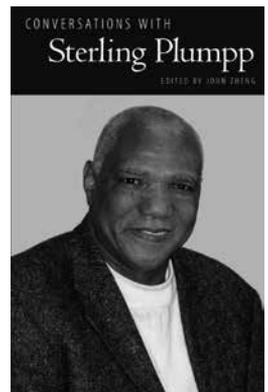
I tip my Delta Devils cap to Sterling for this prestigious award. He surely deserves it. My tribute is a list of things I have done for Sterling and I feel he would be happy to reminisce about these olde timey things fading out of memories:

In 2009, I invited Hermine Pinson to co-edit, with Duriel E Harris, a special issue of *Valley Voices: A Literary Review* on Sterling Plumpp, a great issue that gave attention to Sterling's poetry with contributors like John Edgar Wideman, Tyehimba Jess, Garin Cycholl, Mankwe Ndosi, George Gruntz, and Michael Antonucci. The feature of this great poet drew national and international attention.

In April 2010, I invited him to the MVSU Lyceum Programs to give lectures and poetry performance accompanied by the Pittsburgh jazz musician Kenny Blake.

In 2013, Sterling was invited to join us at the faculty summer institute funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities award I'd received. This two-day workshop was solely on Sterling Plumpp as a symbol of Mississippi heritage.

In the spring semester of 2015, I invited Sterling to serve as the visiting writer-in-residence at MVSU, where he stayed for three semesters until May 2016. During his sojourn, I drove him around the Delta to see numerous once-in-a-lifetime sites or markers, such as the 1927 flood marker by Highway 1; the three churchyard stones of Robert Johnson; the Richard Wright marker and house in Natchez; the abandoned iron bridge in the middle of



nowhere; the ghost house by the country road, the Ground Zero to bite bluesburger, etc. Sterling wrote some beautiful blues poems during his stay and published in *Valley Voices*. He also did some radio or TV interviews with local channels and Mississippi Arts Commission.

In April 2015, I organized a poetry reading by Sterling at our Zelma T. Howard Lecture Series in Honor of National Poetry Month. His reading was accompanied by our music faculty duo, Dr. Alphonso Sanders, saxophonist, and Dr. Ben Arnold, percussionist.

In 2016, I published *Conversations with Sterling Plumpp* with the notable University Press of Mississippi, and in 2019 the press published a paperback of the book as well.

What's more, I made presentations, like "Sterling Plumpp: The Dichotomy of His Blues Poetry," moderated a Mississippi Philological Association Annual Conference panel, "Sterling Plumpp: A Blues Poet Who Represents Cultural Heritage," and did four interviews with him, though the last one was incomplete. I remember we did the second interview while we waited outside the museum of the Grand Village of Natchez Indians for my two visiting Fulbright Scholars.

In all, Sterling is GOOD. He deserved all what I have done for him. Congratulations on his induction into the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. It's his honor, and his friends' too.

With its folk rhythms, modern syntax, social commitment and Afrocentric vision, Plumpp's oeuvre constitutes a unique contribution to the blues aesthetic in which the complexity and richness of Black Life comes alive.

Julio Finn and Barnetta M. Crawford



# *Most Importantly, My Friend*

By Billy Branch



Sterling and I are not sure if I was in his very first group of students when he began teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle campus, or “Circle,” as it was known at that time. Suffice it to say that our paths crossed approximately a half century ago and led to an enduring friendship which lasts to this day.

I believe I was still in my freshman year, 1969. At that time, there were a significant number of African American students enrolled. It didn't take long for many of us to find each other and forge strong bonding friendships. As a matter of fact, many of us from UIC are still close friends. I remember there was buzz going around about this really cool professor, named Sterling Plumpp. Many of the Black students stated, “You've got to take his class.” At that time, Sterling was teaching Black literature and creative writing. Naturally I enrolled in his class. I remember him being so popular that daily, after classes were finished, there was a cluster of students gathered around Sterling's office. I remember there being so many students crowded around his office door, that you couldn't visibly see Sterling, who was sitting at his desk, continuing to share more of his keen observations and insights.

I vividly recall being perplexed on many occasions during Sterling's lectures. Sometimes it was difficult to follow his trains of thought, which often seemed to move at the speed of light. I was not alone. Anyone who has known Sterling Plumpp for a significant length of time can surely attest to this.

Sterling and I have slightly different recollections of this memory, but this is mine:

One of our assignments was to read the classic Arna Bontemps short story, “A

*Summer Tragedy.*” One of the specific assignment questions was, “How does this story relate to the Blues?” By this time, I had just begun my sojourn into the vast Chicago Blues universe. I was frequenting the many Blues clubs which flourished throughout the city, and even daring to get on stage to sit in with many of the now-departed greats: Junior Wells, Lefty Dizz, James Cotton, and Carey Bell, to name a significant few. Needless to say, when I saw that question, I was more than happy and eager to answer it. After all, the Blues had become my passion, so to be able to write about it in a class assignment was a task that I welcomed and completely immersed myself into. I recall arriving slightly late to Sterling’s class that day. I remember him holding my essay in his hand, and exclaiming to the class, “This Brother Branch really knows the Blues.”

I immediately raised my hand. Sterling acknowledged me, but at that time had no idea who I was. “I play the Blues, Sir,” was my response.

Bear in mind that Sterling was born and raised in Mississippi, and had a deep personal connection with the Blues. As a matter of fact, I believe one of Sterling’s relatives at one time owned a Blues club which featured such luminaries as Howlin’ Wolf and other Chicago notables. I can still remember the astonished look of disbelief on Sterling’s face when he quickly retorted, “What do you play?”

You have to remember that I was barely eighteen years old, clean cut, with a little fuzz on my chin, and sported a twelve-inch Afro. Needless to say, I did not look like the “typical” Bluesman.

I answered, “I play the harmonica, Sir.”

This would be an appropriate point to say the rest is history. I brought my harmonica to the next session and played for the class. The class was delighted. Sterling looked amazed as well as perplexed. The last thing he expected to encounter in his classroom was one of his eighteen-year-old, freshman, Barack Obama-looking students to be a Blues harmonica player. But he loved it.

Over the ensuing years, I would take more of Sterling’s classes and he and I struck up kind of an arrangement. As long as I had decent attendance and turned in most of my assignments on time, I would receive a decent grade at the end of the quarter. That is, under one condition: I had to play my harmonica and blues records for the class at the end of the quarter. I don’t remember exactly how many of Sterling’s classes I took, or how many times I fulfilled my end of the bargain. But looking back, I’d say it was a pretty sweet deal. However,

in all seriousness, Sterling recognized what a rare opportunity this was, and realizing the importance of the Blues in African American culture, I think he figured that this was an ideal way to impart some Blues knowledge to a group of young Black students that otherwise would have been somewhat ignorant of its significance and influence on the world music scene.

After I graduated, it wasn't long before I joined my first band: The Jimmy Walker Trio. Sterling and I kept in touch and he would often come out and listen. A few years later, I joined the legendary Willie Dixon's Chicago Blues All Stars. During my six-year tenure as Willie's harmonica player, The Sons of Blues, my own band, was formed. I eventually left Willie Dixon to focus more on my own career and have led the Sons of Blues for forty-two years.

During the early Eighties, The Sons of Blues played frequently throughout the Chicago area, but it was the South Side clubs where we really flourished. At one time, we were performing from five to seven nights a week. And at each of our performances was Sterling Plumpp, with his notepad and pen.

In the years to come, I became somewhat of a Blues guide to Sterling. I would introduce him to the various Chicago Blues musicians and club owners. Sterling, more than any other Black intellectual, ultimately became a fixture of the Chicago Blues landscape. He has jokingly stated numerous times that I used to take him to some "bucket of blood" establishments that made him wonder how we got out alive. Sterling forged friendships with many of Chicago's great artists. One of the more notable ones was with the great bass player and vocalist, Willie Kent. Sterling's book of poetry, *Home/Bass*, is a tribute to Willie Kent.

Early on Sterling became my mentor. I can't remember a period of time when we were not in direct contact. Over the years, he has written poems about me, my band, and various members of my family, including my daughter, dearly departed mother, and even an uncle. I have recorded his poem "Son of the Blues" as a song on two different CDs. He has been a constant supporter of mine and has always urged me to succeed. He came to my aid when I was in dire financial straits. He has been a wellspring of advice and encouragement. He became a member of my extended family many years ago; so much so, that he can recite my family history possibly better than I can. He possesses one of the most brilliant and analytical minds of anyone that I've ever known. But most importantly, he is my friend. I am proud and honored to be able to call him that. Congratulations, Sterling Plumpp. The Blues poet of the ages.

# Tribute to My Teacher Sterling D. Plumpp

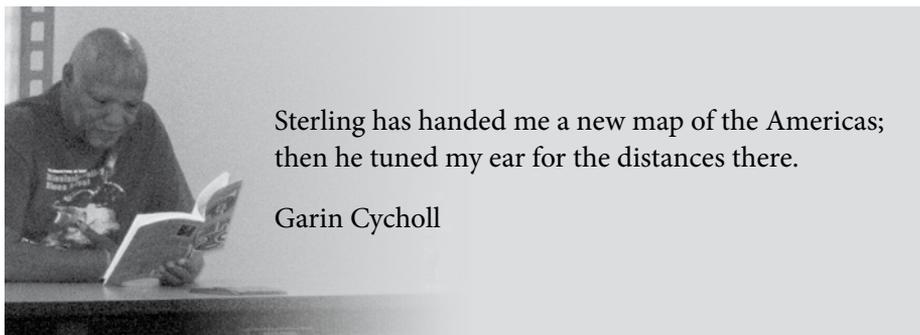
by Melvin E. Lewis

Sterling Plumpp is a river walker. His language changes with hot corn bread, hurricanes and the dropping of magnolia leaves in a quiet cove during the evening. He pushed nuggets and quoted great literature in his classes. An office full of Blues albums and books by thoughtful artists were his bandstand.



He listened to decades of young writers and activists in Chicago. They, as he was, were influenced by windy blocks and ice storms while walking to the EL, sorting mail at the Post Office and seeing bricks thrown at the head of Dr. King.

Looking at the holes made by shotguns and machine gun bullets through the walls of the apartment where Black Panthers Mark Clark and Fred Hampton were assassinated and hearing Curtis Mayfield whisper, “We, the people, who are darker than blue...” created images and memories. Mississippi roads, the voices of a million murdered Emmett Tills, South African fires and the smiles of his grandchildren are core sounds, softness and songs of his long poems.



Sterling has handed me a new map of the Americas;  
then he tuned my ear for the distances there.

Garin Cycholl

# ***Sounding the Critical Black Body***

(an excerpt adapted from "Epic Voice and the Critical Migrant Body: Approaching Sterling Plumpp's 'Mfua's Song'"  
(Valley Voices 9:1 spring 2009)

by Duriel E. Harris

Approaching the work of Sterling Plumpp, I have been invigorated by his dedication to and increasing achievement of oppositional mastery, the mastery of a blatantly unapologetic, living bluesjazz idiom. In line with Erica Hunt's theorizing in "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," the bluesjazz idiom is not only a particular style or aesthetic but also, and most significantly, an oppositional strategy of articulation that accesses the subversive potential of formal experiment. Choosing this mode, Plumpp champions the subaltern and asserts the legitimacy of what Delta scholar Clyde Woods calls the Blues epistemology, enacting a refusal of the primacy of the dominant order. In so doing, Plumpp privileges a distinct and unwieldy otherness—that which has been and continues to be marginalized, demonized, obscured, co-opted, and wished naught by hegemonic forces. Via his own aesthetic, marked by innovative use of characteristic blues elements such as indirection and signifying, and his particular use of short emphatic lines, fragmented thoughts, virgules' staccato breaths, polyphony, antiphonal counterpoint (call and response), metaphor, elision, pun, and anaphora, Plumpp works to resist "the principle of cooptation" according to which "opposition is alternately demonized or accommodated." (Hunt 202) Electing to engage his literary inheritance via this living bluesjazz idiom, Sterling Plumpp animates what Stephen Henderson calls the "moral impact of Black presence," and speaks a long-standing, troubling truth to power. (22)

CONJURE:

Blues: the power of the word, the sign in/against/through systems of signs, dance, drum, song that creates the mood and what you sing to get there, indirection, humor, irony, play, trickster, mask and meta-masking, improvisational transgression—

The Blues: a healing, everyday long into night resistance and counteragent, oppositional form and content encoded, heroic self-assertion facing social and material death, the gut and grit of struggle, earthy ambivalence, grounded radical pleasure of being in spite of trouble, in spite of worry, worrying the line, vexation, crossroads shift—



What Paul Garon calls the embodiment of true poetic spirit, Blues, the spirit of revolt, unmanageable excess, wild core of the docile body, Slim Greer, Slim in Atlanta, Slim in Hell, field-holla call, field-holla response, backwater, viaduct, levee, roll, ride and boxcars, birthing the mothership, how you sound, how you hear, how you sense and know, slick city, delta swamp, distinctive and dominant, source from which springs, outlandish renewal, signifying—

In *Development Arrested*, Clyde Woods offers this frame: “The blues courageously explores the origins, varieties, and consequences of life lived in a brutal and loveless society. It is also the voice of those who are dedicated to the preservation of their humanity. The blues is a vision of a society that is dialectically polyrhythmic, a democracy where both cooperation and individual expression thrive.” (288)

In the creation of “Mfua’s Song”—an epic blues—Sterling Plumpp extends his work to engage the entirety of Blues as vision, mindful impulse, and generative model. While conventionally lyric, Blues is inclined to myth, and in Sterling Plumpp’s capable hands, it fully lends itself to epic.

\* \* \*

Commenting on the title and conceptual anchors of his epic, in a recent interview Sterling Plumpp reveals “Mfua is the name I gave to the mother of the oldest known relative in [my] family, Tympe, who I am told was born in 1772 and died in 1803. I am sure she was from West Africa and for some reason I thought Tympe’s mother would be Mfua. The long work, ‘Mfua’s Song’ is based upon my entire family’s ancestry.” (Pinson, *Valley Voices* 81) Beginning *in media res*—in transit—in the hold of a slave ship, and carrying us to the contemporary moment, the loose chronology of “Mfua’s Song” fills countless pages—early drafts numbered as many as 500. It has progressed through various stages in its plentiful drafts and has been more than twenty-five years in the making. Attending to “Mfua’s Song,” Plumpp has remained deeply engaged in the world of Blues and bluespeople, a world, as Plumpp describes it, populated by “characters who are articulate but are not literate.” In this way Plumpp’s project is one of translation and transliteration, bringing to literary language

the “subjugated knowledge” of a “subordinate people.”

With this information in mind, I'd like to make several brief statements regarding the manner of the performative work of the initial sections of “World is a Witness Something Gone” and “Mfua’s Song” in general.

Alluding most explicitly to the first verses of Genesis, the familiar Judeo-Christian account of the beginnings of the universe, and James Weldon Johnson’s famous early 20<sup>th</sup> century sermonic re-vision of that account, Plumppp creates the space of the witnessing world as he proclaims its existence. In a troubling re-vision of Johnson’s text, documenting an other “genesis,” of an other world, Plumppp’s “Mfua’s Song” begins—in transit—in the slaveship’s hold. The first three sections from Book I, Part I, “World Is A Witness Something Gone” offer a poignant secular sermon:

Dark  
Dark with  
in winters lashing  
Dark  
Dark with  
in journeys rollicking  
Dark  
Dark with  
in air bleeding  
Dark with  
in skin remembering  
Dark with  
in chains lashing  
with  
in breaths ebbing  
with  
in tongues forgetting  
bodies distilling  
  
in the hold  
  
I got a song  
I got a song  
I got a song



Lord  
I got a song

(2)  
Momma all  
Ways say

Long ways  
Long ways  
Long ways

Where  
folded sheets of  
memory sleep  
I wake them  
in callings

Before shackles  
teach me  
distances from  
my familiar place

I was child of arms  
A land holding  
its kin

I was calabash

Rebirth of fruits  
in seasons after  
droughts/Rivers of memory  
gathered/Compressed for  
storage

There are borders  
There are borders  
There are borders

(3)  
Between the vine



singing in rhythm  
with the circle and  
fruit wandering

The child  
must wander  
let

its vines uncoil  
for dreams

History  
a woman's concern  
mending  
cleaning/Knitting  
a few things for hard  
times

My  
soul is a witness  
something gone

My  
soul is a witness  
something gone (1-71)

1. "I got something inside my veins"

POPS  
ME 2 - 69

A

I GOT SOMETHING INSIDE MY VEINS;  
I GOT SOMETHING IN-JIBE MY VEINS;

B

SOMETHING I DON'T HAVE WORDS FOR I GOT IT FROM

WINKS AT THEY FLEW MY MOTHER'S SIGNS; GOT IT FROM

THUNDER AT IT COLLIES MY FATHER! CRIES:

Compounding the biblical WORD and Johnson's re-worded sermonic oration, Plump's phrasing is metalinguistic, the world is multiple: constituted by physical and psychic space, communities, histories, traditions, inheritances—such that the speaker's song—read Mfua's song—is constituted at once as a statement of personal and collective location and a musicking embodiment—a mythopoeic engagement with history.

The defining quality of this location—the “dark”—is sensate—both as it is endowed with physical sensation and as it is perceived by the senses. More specifically, as both noun and adjective Plump's “dark” is doubly so, as it signifies an absence that absorbs more light than it reflects. It is, at once, a dark location and a dark condition of mind that threatens to take and ruin—a “troubling” dense with winters, journeys, air, and skin such that its depth and breadth—its volume—has weight. In the early lines this weight is not necessarily perceivable as burden, but via anaphora and caesura it augments. As we move through the stanza its oppressive quality becomes so pronounced that what is

by definition indistinct and indiscernible—dark—emerges as palpable.

Significantly, this location serves as a birthing place for the world of both the individual and the collective body.

In “Blues: The Conflict of Cultures,” Janheinz Jahn writes,

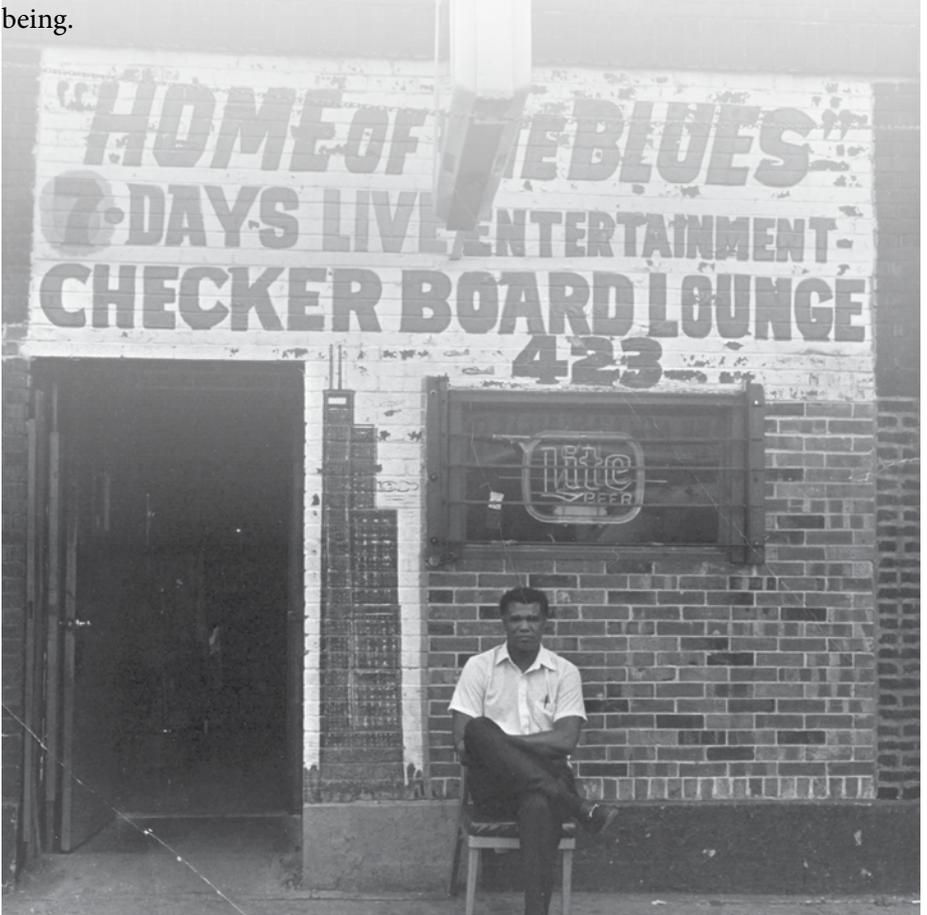
[T]he blues singer does not in fact express *his* personal experiences and transfer them to his audience; on the contrary, it is the experiences of the community that he is expressing, making himself its spokesman. Even when there is talk of loneliness, of the beloved who has run away, of the neglected wife, of nostalgia for the South, it is not the personal experience that is emphasized, but the typical experience of all those rejected by society.... (29)

Maximizing the ways in which the lyric “I” in blues idiom traditionally represents the individual and the collective, Plumpp complicates the dominant individualist notions of the autobiographical project to position audience members to (re)consider the character and grounding of the African American/Black collective consciousness. As spokesman Plumpp’s speaker, retells the African American originary experience, the collective primal scene, as that of palpable darkness, a complex image used to represent massive devastation and social death—the trauma of Middle Passage. The Middle Passage: the arduous intermediary phase of the Atlantic Slave trade during which Africans were transported to the Americas’ “New World.” Kidnapped from their villages and sold or dragged into bondage, Africans from Angola, the Gold Coast, Biafra, Senegambia, etc. who would eventually arrive at vast plantations of colonies in the Caribbean and somewhat smaller decentralized plantations in the colonies and subsequent slaveholding states of the American South, had to survive the journey. Conditions “in the hold,” in the belly of slaveships, were less than hospitable. Raped and beaten, stacked and shackled in metal cages with little room to breathe or move, African men, women, and children of various language and ethnic groups were accompanied by death and disease, traveling in darkness for weeks at a time in the filth and stench of waste and vomit, to arrive in the clutches of a life of degradation as chattel in the peculiar institution of American slavery.

Yet even within, against, and possessed by darkness, the epic voice, girded by the wisdom of antecedence, enacts truths by illuminating borders—shaping the name of the absent thing without naming it (“something gone”). Demonstrating that “you need not know the name of a thing to know it,” (Harris, *Drag* 17)

Plumpp disrupts dominant paradigms of knowing, displacing the dominant worldview in favor of the blues epistemology: the impalpable soul bears witness to material conditions—the abstract concretely manifest and intuited by the critical (read critically conscious) body.

In Plumpp’s “Mfua’s Song” these and other details of the specific considered lives—the life of Mfua and her speaking descendants—are crafted to illuminate human resilience. For the hold does not silence the speaking voice, cannot diminish utterance. Framed in the specific socio-historical moment—an always already contemporary moment—the anaphora (“I got a song/ I got a song/ I got a song”) operates to emphasize the speaker’s survival in the face of trauma and the enduring assertion of subjectivity through expression. Further, when recognized as a configuration of collective experience, its utterance enacts a performative, affirming the survival of the family lineage and the persistent presence of a community of people—blues people—and speaks their song into being.





Kinsmen –you and I  
You from Africa  
I from the USA  
–“Brothers” by Langston Hughes

## The Meaning and Significance of Sterling Plump's Relations with South Africa

by Vusi Mchunu

### Joburg – Chicago

*“The transplanting of millions of Africans into the West was an environmental switch, but there wasn't a simultaneous cosmological or worldview adjustment—the Black man didn't adopt Materialistic Thinking as a mode of defining his world.”*

–Sterling Plump

From the poetry book *PLEIADES-ISILIMELA* by Vusi Mchunu:

What remains vivid is a blue house, a blues-griot bringing ink-pressed books to me.

Sterling

What took me aback was Abdul's vintage Volvo sinking to left, as books filled the red bag.

Sterling

What echoed in my ear, sighs of mentors on Civil Rights as we sped around Chicago's lake.

Sterling

What startled my imagination was adoption by two pathfinders, two freedom riders.

Sterling

What lingered stubbornly, the memory of Brutus, of Ngubane, of Kunene, of Kgositsile

Of Sterling

Very big shoes. I better start working.

*(Dennis Brutus, Jordan Kush Ngubane, Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgositsile are departed South African poets and writers, comrades of Sterling, who were educated and worked in the USA.)*

## **Rooted in blood-ties**

Kinship between African Americans and the Southern Africans stems from a sovereign African continent, from the slavery raids of the Portuguese East African colony and its conquered African vassal kingdoms, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Southern African peoples subdued under this colonial-slavery yoke included today's Namibians, Malawians, Zambians, Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Botswanans and South Africans. The great coastal slave ports and markets of the Portuguese colony of Brasil, the Caribbean and the Americas received a segment of the 13 million Africans stolen into slavery, also from Southern Africa.

The following refrain from the poem “Zim-Bird Ancestor! We want to Know” (from *PLEIADES-ISILIMELA*) alludes to the demise of these Rozwi-Shona civilizations eventually conquered by the Portuguese in the east and by Lobengula's Matabele in the west. Following an earlier series of defeats and vassalhood to the KwaGaza Empire of the Shangaan King Ngungunyane, in 1906 Portuguese East Africa crushed the Shangaan, and sent King Ngungunyane to the penal colony of Madeira in the Atlantic. They forced him into Christianity with the name “Dom Pedro.” And it was only in the 1970s that President Samora Machel returned King Ngungunyane's remains for an honourable re-burial in a free Mozambique.

Bambadyanalo begot Mapungubwe  
Mapungubwe begot Great Zimbabwe  
Great Zimbabwe begot Khami  
Khami begot Thulamela  
Thulamela begot Mwene Mutapa  
Mwene Mutapa begot Dzata

*(These are significant African kingdoms from 11<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in today's South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique)*

UNESCO hosted the International Conference “New Approaches in Interpreting and Representing Slavery in Museums and Sites,” in March 2018 in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA. It was the Portuguese who perfected the business and value chain of slavery. This was highlighted in the presentation “Language of Slavery” by Mr. Charles Akibodé (Cape Verde), historian and researcher at the National Institute for Cultural Heritage. Akibode detailed the system of slave raids, of networks with subdued African kingdoms, of the coastal slave forts, of the cruel transportation across the Atlantic and the supply

to the slave markets from Brasil, the Caribbean and the Americas. Movement of the human cargo of slaves was from and to Arabia, Australia, New Zealand, India, the Atlantic, Brasil, the Caribbean and the Americas. This is the little-known counter-narrative to the generalization that the Atlantic Slave Trade was not linked to the Indian Ocean Slave Trade by the Arabs, the Portuguese and the Dutch East India Company at the Cape. “Indian Ocean Slavery” is a series of articles by Karen Williams on the slave trade across the Indian Ocean and its historical and current effects on global populations. Commissioned for the online magazine Media Diversified’s Academic Space, this series sheds light on a little-known but extremely significant period of international history. (<https://mediadiversified.org/category/indian-ocean-slavery/> )

### **Sterling Plumpp: A hybrid individual**

*“Sterling Plumpp is an individual whose ancestor is Africa, whose poetry style is from the great Western traditions of literature,....and whose routes have gone through West African poetry, handed down through the poems of the Negro Spirituals, also the Xhosa poems from South Africa, the blues and jazz, which originated with how the African played the drum.”*

–Discussing *Velvet BeBop Kente Cloth* (Third World Press 2003) and “The Writer’s Vision: A Conversation between Dike Okoro and Sterling Plumpp” (2004)



As a culturally and politically aware researcher and creative writer, Sterling is conscious of the historic ties between Black America and Black South Africa. “In 1895, the world-renowned Fisk Jubilee Singers, under the leadership of Orpheus McAdoo, toured Cape Town, and the diamond mining town of Kimberly, introducing many Negro spirituals to local church choirs.” In the 1890s, Rev. Dwane of the Ethiopian Church went to America to link up with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a visit that eventually saw Black American Bishop Turner relocating to Cape Town. (Couzens, Tim, *The New African- A study of the Life and Work of H.I.E.Dhlomo*, pp 87, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985). Dr. Pixley ka Isaka Seme, co-founder of the African

National Congress in South Africa, in his graduation speech at Columbia University in 1906 on “The Regeneration of Africa,” earned the University’s highest oratorical honour, the George William Curtis medal. The Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union founding Secretary, Clemens Kadalie, was in the 1920s a regular contributor to “The Messenger,” the mouthpiece of Phillip Randolph’s Pullman Porters Union, in New York.

### **Sterling the baton-holder from Langston Hughes and others**

*“And somebody told me that the person who had opened the doors for Richard Wright and all African American writers was Langston Hughes. And so I began to systematically read texts and philosophies, because I understood that Hughes used historical materials. That’s how you had to understand this world. Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown made the blues stanza, a poetic stanza already in the 1920s.”*

–Sterling Plumpp, from *Conversations with Sterling Plumpp*, edited by John Zheng

There were a number of South African students, educationists and authors who in the 1920s during their stay in America also firmed up the bonds of solidarity between the two oppressed peoples. John Langalibalele Dube--Oberlin College graduate, confidante of Booker T. Washington, and first President-General of the African National Congress (ANC), the political party of Nelson Mandela--founded Ohlange Vocational Trade School in Durban, modelled after the Tuskegee Institute. Solomon Tshekiso Plaatje--ANC executive member, author, journalist, and editor--formed friendships with Dr. W.E.B. Dubois and Tuskegee Institute Principal Robert Russa Morton, and also formed the Chicago-South African Bantu Brotherhood Committee together with Ida B. Wells and Dr. Mary Irving. Plaatje also visited the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and worked with Harlem Renaissance writers like Jessie Fauset and James Weldon Johnson. Charlotte Maxeke, a student and protégé of W.E.B. Dubois, later became the foremost voice championing African women’s social and political rights and vocational training in the freedom struggle of South Africa.

Langston Hughes was the Harlem Renaissance (1920-1925) link-man to the South African Sophiatown Renaissance (1949-1966). He said, “Many problems, particularly those of Black South Africans are closely related to the problems of Afro-Americans, and their reactions to them are similar. The incident in Richard Rive’s short story, ‘The Bench,’ could well happen in Alabama.” In the

late 1950s, Langston edited *The African Treasury*, with newspaper articles, folk tales, essays, short stories and poems. It became a classic, portraying new political and cultural thinking in Africa. Langston Hughes had long correspondences with *Drum* magazine writers like Ezekiel Mphahlele, Richard Rive, Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi. A number of these novelists, critics, poets and writers were exiled to the USA after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1961 by the Apartheid regime, studying there and teaching and growing their writing careers. Sterling Plumpp, so to say, took the baton from Langston Hughes, forging long-lasting friendships and relations with these exiled South African writers in America including the poets Keoporapetse Kgositsile, Dennis Brutus, and Mazisi Kunene and essayist Jordan Kush Ngubane.

### ***“Somehow We Survive” & “Johannesburg and Other Poems”***

Sterling Plumpp’s answer to the State of Emergency of the early 1980s imposed by South African President P.W. Botha was to edit and publish the classic collection of stories and poems by South African writers aptly titled *Somehow We Survive*. It is a handsome book reflecting established and emerging work by both exiled and in-xiled writers, and beautifully adorned by the drawings of leading South African painter, sculptor and film-maker Dumile Feni. It is also a glowing testament to the solidarity and collaboration between Sterling and the South Africans Mongane Wally Serote and David Bunn. In a way, the book is a poetic expression of the diverse work by anti-apartheid chapters led by African Americans throughout the USA.



“He will delve into mythologies perhaps  
 Call up spirits through the night  
 Or carry memories apocryphal  
 Of Tshaka, Hendrik, Witbooi, Adam Kok  
 Of the Xhosa nation’s dream  
 As he moonlights in another country:  
 But he shall also have  
 Cycles of history  
 Outnumbering the guns of supremacy”

–“Native Letter” by Toronto-exiled Arthur Nortje  
 in *Somehow We Survive: An Anthology of South  
 African Writing*, edited by Sterling Plumpp;  
 Thunder’s Mouth Press; New York; 1982

"*Johannesburg and Other Poems* reflects my insights gained from meeting people engaged in revolutionary struggle...you do whatever is necessary to persevere or you perish. I heard gunshots and fleeing footsteps all night from my room in a Johannesburg hotel," said Sterling. It is a poetic and autobiographical fusing of three landscapes: the poet's native Mississippi, Chicago and South Africa. Sterling was invited by the *New Nation* newspaper to attend their conference in Johannesburg in 1992, just when Nelson Mandela had been released from Robben Island prison. He started a nationwide tour, meeting many writers, musicians, painters and poets, student and trade union activists, both in the rural areas and in the cities, as reflected in poems like "Toi Toi, Kimberley, Galeshewe, Orange Free State, Township, Thaba Nchu, Weaver." Like a blues song, this anthology is a work depicting the tragedy, the funny aspects of life and a quest for a common humanity.

"I ask this place  
This topography graced by songs,  
If these avenues paved by vomit and  
Bloodshed in honour of thieves...  
I ask, Johannesburg, if your streets  
Know my name. For I have come back  
Removed four hundred years"

"Johannesburg  
The orphaned memory I take  
Is celibate....  
Because the blues in you  
Is the blues in me"

—From *Johannesburg and Other Poems*,  
Sterling Plump

In this anthology, the ghosts come to life, the ghosts of the 19th century and the Harlem Renaissance poets like Maurice Thompson's "A Voodoo Prophecy," Jean Toomer's "Georgia Dusk," Countee Cullen's "Heritage" and Claude McKay's "Tiger." Only, Sterling Plump travelled to a South Africa transitioning to democracy in 1992, and lived the imagined aspirations of his predecessors.



# Special Thanks

To Cate Plys and Barry Jung for their incredible editorial talents; to Denise Billups for her lovely cover; to Jeff Waggoner for the stunning program design; to Breaker Press for making such high-quality booklets; to John Freyer for, once again, getting us the beer; to Argus Brewery and Vinejoy for making the reception that much merrier; to Don Seeley and Rana Segal, for capturing the ceremony so exquisitely; to all the presenters and contributors, for all your efforts, including long-distance travel, to make this a special night; to the Poetry Foundation, for their lovely building and brilliant staff; to all our CLHOF board members and volunteers who tended to so many issues, big and small; to all the ad sponsors, for making important donations that allowed us to undertake such a costly production; and, finally, to all in attendance, for supporting one of the greatest writers working in one of the greatest literary cities.

**Congratulations to renowned  
poet and Co-op member  
Sterling Plumpp!**

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The University of Mississippi Libraries  
**congratulate Sterling Plump**  
on receiving the Fuller Award!

We hope some of you will be able to  
come down to conduct research on  
one of our nation's great poets.



**Libraries**  
UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

Sterling Plump Collection

[libraries.olemiss.edu/cedar-archives/finding\\_aids/MUM00368.html](http://libraries.olemiss.edu/cedar-archives/finding_aids/MUM00368.html)



Congratulations to Sterling Plump  
on receiving the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's  
Fuller Award for lifetime achievement!

[guildcomplex.org](http://guildcomplex.org)

The American Writers Museum congratulates Sterling Plump on this well-deserved award. His art as a poet is matched by his generosity as a teacher and the AWM is pleased to support his inclusion in the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's storied ranks of living writers.



AMERICAN  
**WRITERS**  
M U S E U M



**Congratulations to  
Roosevelt University alum  
Sterling Plump '68 on  
this well-deserved honor.**

Thank you for your deep  
commitment to the poetic  
craft and social justice.

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UNIVERSITY**

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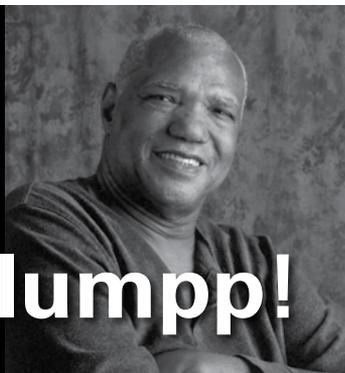
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Salima Rivera

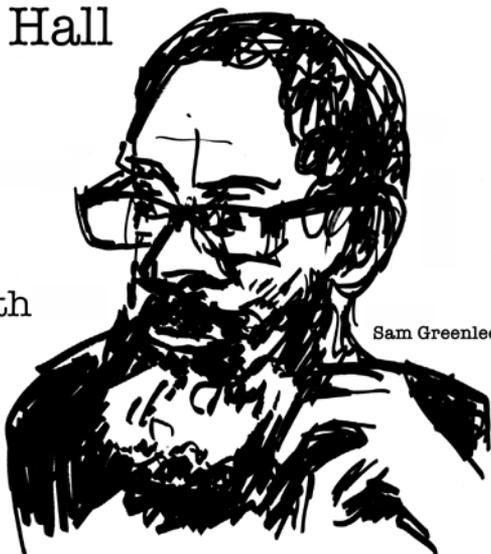


Frank Marshall  
Davis

# Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's 2019 Induction Ceremony

Thursday, Oct. 24th  
6–9pm

Cliff Dwellers  
200 S Michigan Ave.  
Penthouse (22nd Flr)  
Chicago, IL 60604



Sam Greenlee

Join us as we induct CLHOF's 9th class. Ceremony will include a specially-prepared dinner. Reservations required. Please go to [www.chicagoliteraryhof.org](http://www.chicagoliteraryhof.org) for more information, or email Don Evans at [dgevans@chicagoliteraryhof.org](mailto:dgevans@chicagoliteraryhof.org).

## The Cliff Dwellers

