

A Look Back: *David's Copy*, A Celebration

by Micah Ballard

On October 12, 2005 at New College of California, a celebratory reading was held for the publication of *David's Copy, the Selected Poems of David Meltzer* (Penguin) edited with a forward by Michael Rothenberg and an introduction by Jerome Rothenberg. *David's Copy* is a veritable assemblage of verse spanning from 1957 right up to the time of publication. Included in the gathering, among various other books, are poems from *Ragas*, *The Dark Continent*, *Luna*, *Hero/Lil*, *Blue Rags*, *No Eyes: Lester Young*, and *Beat Thing*.

Unlike many Selected Poems which seem only to take from the poet, *David's Copy* delivers a re-visioning of poems rather than a retrospective. From changing tenses in poems to rearranging and cutting specific lines, *David's Copy* presents a chronicle of one who lived within the lines of his poems and always kept walking, talking, and breathing between those lines. Ultimately human but otherworldly, David's arias of domestic and urban living, pop-culture, Jewish mysticism, and Gnostic folklore reveal that he's habitually led by a sort of dictation, or what the poem, through someone or something else, tells him to do. It's through a trust in this conjuring that David's been able to write towards a cosmology that makes his work forever appear familiar but somehow different. Either by projection through the past or into the future, his verse contains a universal, timeless tone, a collage of daily life that's ever-presently changing and challenging in its going forth and returning.

The cover of *David's Copy* is by his close friend and fellow collagist, Wallace Berman. Completed in 1964, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" is a collage of

Berman's that mirrors not only the aesthetic and spiritual interests which he and David shared, but also speaks to specific aspects of poems gathered within. Like similar Berman covers for other books of David's, such as *Luna*, *David's Copy* has the feel of a small, new, intimate collection of poetry that's been printed in a limited edition specifically for friends. Besides the book's title which references a possible collection of rare photocopied poems, the cover offers a glimpse into that "bop kabbalah" which was as much a pursuit of origins as a re-visioning or hearing through them. Taken together with the editorial efforts from Rothenberg, *David's Copy* is an astonishing book that retraces not only David's life within his verse but also that of others in and around it.

Gathered to read in celebration and tribute to David and his *Copy* were fellow poets Duncan McNaughton, Joanne Kyger, Diane DiPrima, Clark Coolidge, and others. As most readings tend to begin later than scheduled, there was ample amount of time to visit and congregate over a wealth of wine and food provided by the editor and friends. After the New College Cultural Center was filled with over 80 in attendance, the event began with the above mentioned poets reading David's verse first followed by a short intermission. David then read selections of his own work as well as a collaborative translation, made with the author, of work by Shiga Naoya.

From McNaughton's own reading from the Naoya piece, to Kyger's "Rent Track for Lew Welch," DiPrima's "15th Raga / For Bela Lugosi," or Coolidge's long ensemble piece from *Beat Thing*, each poet read as if they'd written the poems themselves. The abundant variation among David's poems, and the lively recitations of it by his peers, brought the work marvelously to life. David's being one of the few whose voice lives both equally on the page and off. During the

reading one could actually see the words being written on the page as they were said aloud. Not only was there a conjuration of the immediate “act” of writing these poems, but each reader read as if it were a collaborative effort, half their own poem and half David’s. Adopting a common cadence of speech, reflection of tone, or dramatic monologue, each poet spoke to and through David. Coupled with his own reading at the end, one felt as if a typewriter had been passed around the room and a whole new batch of poems conjured. Similarly to the construction of *David’s Copy*, the reading of his verse was a “re-visioning” in that oratorically it was also a ceremony of one total poem. Or as Whitman said of *Leaves of Grass*, each poem was a part that made up the whole, the totality being one poem read by one person, or as in this case one by many.

For those who could not make this celebrated eve, or never had the extraordinary pleasure of hearing David read, *David’s Copy* remains available, amongst many other books. Just glance at the bibliography and bio notes in back, and you’ll see there’s over twenty books of poetry and ten books of fiction, anthologies, interviews, and even records listed from his old band The Serpent Power. That’s not to mention the later books such as *When I was A Poet* (City Lights), along with hopefully those yet to come. There are also numerous videos and recordings of David’s many readings available online. Always available for conversation, David was commonly found, until the institution ceased to exist, at the New College buildings on Valencia Street where he served as a core faculty member for the Weekday Humanities B.A. Program and the Graduate Poetics Program. When not in the classroom he was roaming the halls, hanging out with students, and usually laughing. If by chance you saw him, you never forgot to say hello and even asked him to sign your copy of *David’s Copy*. He was known to have grabbed a needle, pricked his finger, and signed his name in blood.

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David Meltzer

He is the writing I have come to know
& never since abandoned yet always
return back to. The experience in all
or rather the occasion before or after it
never without undoing & certainly alone
in his powers. He's with us now, but wait
there's that familiar sound, sweet cadence
of laughter, the conversation always
as if one were channeling the other
the seeing ahead to hear what is not near
but been here all along. He is not
without us or we his music, but has
summoned us here as he might tonight
just to get this down, let us all in
as he's coming back out.

[Fall, 2005; previously unpublished]