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Metaphysical Free: The Poetry Of Henry Grimes

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Musician Henry Grimes came out with a volume of poetry in 2006 published by Buddy's Knife Jazzedition based in Germany. Marc Ribot's foreword is rendered in German and English, while the 49 poems are in the original English. Illustrated with mostly recent performance and publicity photographs, the text, Ribot explains, was selected from notebooks kept during the thirty-year period when Grimes enigmatically disappeared from the music world, to reemerge in the 21st century. Pieces are dated "early 80's," "circa 1979," "undated," and, humorously, "somewhere between 1984 and 1999." Only one is slated precisely for "August 12, 1983." Because of the time frame and what readers know about Grimes from the foreword, there is an expectation not of a collection but of the salvaging of wisdom and worthy writing from a mature man's life. Almost artifacts from a dig.

I was already a newcomer fan, having seen Grimes perform a number of times in New York where he lives. Marc Ribot leads a group that Grimes plays in, and Ribot's revelation of his reaction to the book is identical to mine: amazement and appreciation for the phenomenon of a music virtuoso who is also a formidable poet.

In the first section of the title poem "Signs along the road being put there," the modern American fact of signs is broken into sentimentally, parenthetically by "I said, as I thought if I would ever see her again." It is as if, like a Mondrian, Grimes approximates the surface of urban commercialized life, then shows the emotional truth beneath. He contrasts the "human heart" with the "city's heart." The effect is that of cool jazz segueing into a torch song and then a synthesis. "We who are the country-born," he admonishes. One feels, historically, the sensibility of the black southern musicians who immigrated from plantations and farms to Chicago or New York, and, symbolically, of all humanists who must contend with industrial materialism. Concluding with the refrain, simmered to "When can it be that I/will see her again," the "desire to clamp them into time" can be read as finding a balance between the oblique signs and the "warm sunlight" of the woman, and also as the need to trap the flux in musical measures and rhythms.

Can a poet make up words? Whitman did. Wallace Stevens did. Can he subvert words? Yes! Atypically "Signs" is in quite standard English, until in the next poem a Hardy-esque- hyphenated "weather-worth" appears. Some Grimes inventions are "eccequasive," "apporic," "spiritive," "condistinction." Sometimes (as Ribot notes) one is unsure whether the word is correctly spelled or left unresearched in the heat of creation. Maybe these should be words, one thinks with mixed bafflement and wonder: "oblocely," "poresscence," "din-activity," "otherama..."

The poet also uses, as poets are wont to do, technical terms to spice up his verse. I looked up the "hyoid bone," "protagon," and "antigen," which Grimes spells "antigin." These terms confer a tantalizing glimpse of a wide culture perhaps self-taught. They let the actual world into an imaginative realm where the coined words seem right as part of a strange original syntax that feels as if a new wrinkle is forming in the reader's brain.

An influence that crops up throughout is the Bible. There is a startling point where the poet says:

When men, who had
surveyed the wondrous cross

a phrase from a hymn suddenly in the midst of maverick free verse. And in "Untitled":

I knew that Lucifer was a liar
and that the Savior had long parted hair

evoking the "white" Jesus on the paper fans hand-held by the congregation's older women in the un-air-conditioned black churches of the past: a detail that encapsulates more history than one would think its brevity could hold. In "The Rivers Run Into the Sea," the last line echoes the conclusion from Ecclesiastes Chapter 1:7: "All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full...."

"Tared" appears in "Otherama the King": an alternative definition of "tare" is "an injurious weed of grainfields especially in Biblical times." And in "Peace":

a little child shall lead them

Still, the Biblical influence, whether the direct and personal identification with the ancient Hebrews heard in emotional black sermons, or the irony of religion as an opiate in Langston Hughes' "Who But the Lord?" or the King James rhythms D.H. Lawrence used to Whitmanize his verse – all this is not evident so dramatically, so forthrightly in Grimes' style. And one can say the same about the eminence of jazz and the blues not as material but as language.

Kerouac's 239th Chorus in *Mexico City Blues* celebrates Charlie Parker. In this and other poems, Kerouac tries to capture the sound and the cadences of jazz soloing and the way the performers (and sometimes their audience) talk. In this he enters a tradition that includes Yusef Iman and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Grimes in "Untitled" (there are two Untitled's back to back) gets a black colloquial gospel rhythm going which ends in a reference to Cecil Taylor. The difference is that one feels it is a personal anecdote: Grimes knows Taylor, they share the musician's life. Whereas Kerouac appreciates jazz, Grimes is jazz.

There is in Grimes a detachment, an omniscience, a looking down on the world from a height and regarding it with an abstraction born of stoicism. It is hard to highlight a point of view- the quick asperity of Amiri Baraka, the cogent symbolism of James Emanuel, the conversational street tone of countless contemporaries - all these poets have their trademarks. Noteworthy of Grimes is how poems just start and end, not with a calculated effect but as if with a bookmark, until he resumes recording his thoughts.

In "The Arch Stairwells" Grimes adopts a formal rhetorical tone that may remind one of Wallace Stevens and Archibald MacLeish. But it quickly dissolves to a seemingly cubist image: "it (may be) a guitar in a window," which could just as easily be from the New York school of poets, followed by a feeling of the city drawn from experience not literature (which seems to belie the rhetorical beginning), and ending in a dreaded non-modernist-allowed abstraction: "the Peace of Solitude." The point being that many of these poems are beyond stylistic analysis or rather that the tedium of doing so yields less than a simple reading. So why bother? To show the multifold, variegated and deft depth and pleasing texture of this oeuvre.

I have divided the poems into seven kinds, understanding that they may (and often do) overlap.

- 1) About Music: "Monk Music," "The Infant of Attention"
- 2) Pure Aesthetics: "The Arch Stairwells," "Apologia Pro Vita Sua"
- 3) Poems of Place: "The Place," "Untitled" (Cecil Taylor), "Back to Down Along Spring Street"

4) Primal, Mythical: "Easternal Mysticism, Virtue, and Calm," "Water Wax," "The Walk in the Dark That Was Heard at Night," "Grenth," "Hieroglyphics," "Ghost and Spirit," "Lilith," "Amazed Heart, All Ponderous Eye"

5) Historical and Critical-Sociological: "The Luckbill," "The World Our Society, Society Our World," "Coasts," "The Feeling of Ahaz," "In the Day"

6) Odes: "A Pre-Revolutionary Cabin," "Moments," "Egregious Grows the Light of Dawn"

7) Contemplative: "Peace"

Grimes is a maddening, unsatisfying poet only trying to obfuscate and stubbornly adhere to his amalgam of learning. Sometimes Grimes is an eccentric amateur writing to himself in his solipsism. One gets caught up in a conception as sticky as a spider's web, as murky as a swamp, and one recoils, wants to go back like a timid pioneer. Grimes' tic of repeating a word is sometimes prolix, perverse, as if he delights in his disregard of the audience and his disinclination to edit. One yearns for a "professional" poet, discouraged, fatigued, frustrated with an occasional jewel like "mummified in cosmic bind" and the satisfying meaty scan of "This was the secrets of the heart/that this dead ancient man had held..." Then one comes across "large harps and small lyres" shining like a nugget.

Such rewards define writing as poetry. I call Grimes a metaphysical poet because while wandering along the serpentines and arabesques and mazes of his thoughts and images, reading the hieroglyphs on the hoary walls with a torch, one must linger and mull over this strange language and foreign context. For Grimes is anything but light: one cannot race through these pages like a hyperactive kid on a field trip. Yet, though solid as an ancient, Grimes is mercurial as his music. He is American avant-garde, he is himself.

He takes on the great themes of history, mysticism, geography, religion, cities, good and evil. Compared to the paltry bourgeois world of careerist contemporaries, Grimes' scope and catholicity will come as a shock and a revelation, an acquired taste that upon rereading may certainly illustrate the difference between a full meal and finger food. A critic like myself may cite stylists such as Donne, Thomas Browne, Whitman, and Amiri Baraka to give an idea of the force and pith of Grimes' germinative power. Yet the prevailing reality is that Grimes is an amateur poet who has genius.

For though it may be especially enjoyed by those with an appreciation of Grimes' improvisations, this is not a book for fans only. It is not merely an adjunct such as a book of lyrics from a songwriter or a *roman a clef* by a celebrity. A harsh prejudice persists that a renowned artist must not be given credit for distinguished work in a different form or genre; this is partly the fault of proprietorial critics, partly the fact of exclusive audiences. Neither jazz nor poetry is popular at present. The lack of "crossover" may threaten to make Grimes' readership even scantier. As a critic, I recommend "Signs Along the Road" to anyone interested in jazz, poetry, twentieth-century American history, or esoteric individualism.

This book should be more widely known. It is provocative, compelling, soulful, and wonderful. Its publication should cause controversy in the rarefied world of poetry and in the ampler and deeper and expanding universe of the mind, to which it belongs. The United States has become a bureaucracy with a caste of academic versifiers and explicators. Solitary originals like Henry Grimes notwithstanding.