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Harry Goldstein interview for the internet magazine, Tripod

Listening to Barry Wallenstein talk out his poems in his raspy growl to the accompaniment of such accomplished jazz musicians as Arthur Blythe, John Fischer, John Hicks, Wilber Morris and Mike Richmond on his CD "In Case You Missed It," you can't help but concentrate on the poetry. Wallenstein's smooth voice combines with the smoky jazz like rye whisky and a Lucky Strike, drawing you into various characters, including "street-wise" Tony, who ply a noirish cityscape in search of themselves. For his day gig, Wallenstein is an English professor at City College of New York, where he also directs the Poetry festival that each year brings together poets of all ages from across New York City.

Tripod: Your CD features you working with a lot of great jazz musicians. Describe how your voice works as an instrument.

BW: I would hope it blends in so that when listening to it passively, without having a text or having to concentrate on the words, that the listener would appreciate my voice blending in as an instrument. I like to think that it produces a pleasing sound and there's always the delight that any human being has, I guess, of being a member of a band. I think that's a dream many people have. And since I don't play an instrument, to be a member of the band with my voice is a treat.

Tripod: How would you characterize the sound of your voice?

BW: A raspy tenor. I can't sing on key. Friends call me Johnny One Note. So I do better speaking than singing. And sometimes when I'm speaking, I'm really concentrating on the poem as an oral thing, I almost sing. I come close to singing, which I don't think is displeasing to the ear, because very few people tell me to shut up. One or two times I've tried to sing, people have told me to shut up. I once sang in the tenor section of a chorus and they told me to just move my lips, because I was throwing the section off.

Tripod: Where do characters like Tony come from?

BW: Tony is a character that just naturally came out of my search for a persona. Tony is a street wise and yet confused character, who inspects his life through the course of the sequence of now 14 poems. He talks to himself and tries to correct himself for any of the cardinal sins, whether it be greed or trying to think that he's outsmarting somebody, then Tony will say to himself "don't do that," "consider that," "you don't have to do that." Tony also lives on the edge of hurting himself. And he's a wise guy and on and off he knows it. Where do I get him from? I get him a part of myself that I'd rather not deal with any more directly than I'm able to there.

Tripod: Reviewers have characterized Tony as a down and out kind of character....

BW: Well, I don't really see him as a Bukowski type of unshaven, unkempt, slovenly kind of hippie beatnik, not at all. He's more on his own than that. Certainly he's on the margin, he's no capitalist pig in the sense that he's all buttoned up, quite.

Tripod: Speaking of beatniks, how would you distinguish your writing from that of your contemporaries, many of whom were Beats, though you were sort of young to be officially of that generation, right?

BW: Yeah, but not by a whole lot. And the beat movement, I guess people date it from 1949, though it wasn't recognized as a movement until 1956, so those were years when I was too young to write. Though by '57 I was a teenager, I was 17, so I was early on influenced by that. Very excited that this stuff was being called literature and for a 17 year old who was not really that well read by 17, this was stuff that I could read easily and get excited by. So it suggested to me that you didn't have to be a big brain with an Ivy League education to be able to read and write literature with a capital L. It had a political side and a subversive side, which certainly fit the spirit that I and many 16, 17, 18 year olds had. It's perfect stuff for adolescence.
But what I was doing, even as kid, was very different. I was not interested in writing a line of poetry that stretched across a page like Ginsberg or clever hiakuish little pieces of wisdom that Kerouac was doing or the quietism of Gary Snyder. The fact that these people were also getting up and reciting to jazz, at that time, didn't interest me very much. My own introduction to that collaboration was a series of accidents that were independent of the beat model.

Tripod: So who were your influences?

BW: Some influences on my writing came not from poets, but from things like the Broadway stories of Damon Runyan and George Orwell, when I was 15, 16, 17, those years. I soon became an English major in a fairly traditional program and read the classics. I was very excited in the early 60s reading Ezra Pound. Also the poets that Yeats, Pound and Eliot read themselves, the French symbolists, Fleur du Mal was a favorite book for a long time....and Lorca.

Tripod: And you saw yourself as a poet at that time?

BW: No, I saw myself as an English major studying the stuff. I had good teachers who told me, don't think of yourself as a poet. The recommendation was don't bother being published, just work on the stuff. Work on your craft. And the notion of thinking yourself as a poet or getting published, that is the major distraction for a writer. It's a luxury to live as long as you can without that distraction, without worrying about rejection. Are you a POET in capital letters and how do you rank with others, all of that stuff is insidious and to be put off as long as possible.

Tripod: Until when?

BW: Well, the age is hard to measure. I got lucky at 24 and sent some poems out to a very good magazine, the Transatlantic Review and they published it. But that spoiled me for a while, because it was a long time between that and the next publication. I still resist the idea of oh, what do you do? Oh, you're a poet! Because I know all sorts of people who are terribly not that and they walk around with that title to themselves. I think I've written some good poems, in each of the books, I think there are a few that I'd love to stand. But a poet?

Tripod: What is a poet?

BW: That's a very vague notion now, because there are so many people coming through creative writing programs able to write wonderful poems. Probably more terrific poems of different sorts being written now than ever before in this country. Now each of those individuals who does that may or may not continue to do it. They might say, I did that, I made that wonderful poem. I'm a poet. You're a poet at least that moment, but I don't know that the title is worth any longer discussing.

Tripod: The poetry movement that's garnered a lot of attention lately, gotten into popular culture....

BW: Slams and so forth....

Tripod: Spoken word. But no one's going out and buying their poetry.

BW: I have very mixed feelings about all that. Helen Vendler had a wonderful essay review in the Times this summer attacking Bill Moyer's book, based on his PBS series on poetry, interviews and readings and then it was published as a book. Moyers was aiming for the widest cross section, so you had all sorts--the democracy of poetry. And Vendler made the point that poetry has never been a democracy. It's always been a hierarchy. And the way we evaluate art, almost instinctively, has this hierarchical impetus to it. It's not peculiarly American or anything. A particular tribe in Nigeria will choose their griot. There's no griot second, third or fourth. There's the griot, the singer, the bard, for that community, chosen because he's probably better than the others.
The notion of being a better poet than someone else is politically incorrect right now and I very often will fall in with that political correctness. I run this poetry outreach program at City College where we bring school children in to read at a festival once a year. And I think what they do with poems is wonderful, by second, third and fourth graders. So there is something very cheering and wonderful about a democracy of poetry where second graders can share the podium with Adrienne Rich or anybody.
So I'm very confused. Certainly I would never give up the festival if I could help it, and I believe in it. And I totally believe that poetry is an arduous craft that very few people master. And I doubt that I've mastered it. I've gotten lucky often, when I say often I mean four or five times a year maybe, to make something good.

Tripod: How long do you spend on something good?

BW: I spend more time on stuff that's not good, to try to get it good. That's the arduous part. Spending months rewriting and rewriting and rewriting something that's almost good, but at the end it doesn't just snap in and be good. I love giving readings with or without music, because when I hear the poem on my voice I very often can make a revision. I'll discover what's wrong in the cadence of the reading. Or I'll discover where a word just doesn't sound true. A fake word somehow. Reading out loud is very important to my process.

Tripod: You just were on tour in Europe...

BW: I wouldn't say on tour. I gave some readings and workshops in Paris and London. I was invited to participate in a three week long homage to Charles Tyler, who was a saxaphone player that I worked with from 1976 to his death in 1992. He died in France and his widow has set up a very elaborate homage where muscians associated with his music came over and we gave a series of concerts throughout Paris and neighboring suburbs and as far away as Marsaielle. Wonderful muscians like David Murray and Wilber Morris and other people who recorded with Charles.

Tripod: Do you notice a difference between a European audience and an American one?

BW: The British audience is closer to a US audience than the French who, in contrast, are very excited about it, partially I suspect, because it's strange to them to have someone come and read poetry in a language that they're not that comfortable in. And also that whole aura that American culture has for the French. They're in love with Jerry Lewis or Woody Allen, or American jazz, nobody likes American jazz better than the French. So to have an American poet who's associated with jazz and performance, they're very responsive.

Tripod: What's "responsive?" Wild cheers?

VW: What's responsive is not just people in the audience, and the audience is more numerous than here, but also the responsiveness of the French government to invite American writers and musicians over there. The funding apparatus is responsive compared to England or here. They treasure artists and subsidize them. And what's going on here with the NEA and the various government endowments for the arts, the French could never understand it; it would be like taking away bread.

Tripod: What's the typical experience here?

BW: I could be booked into Cornelia Street Cafe and six people could show up. And by the way, that's not just me. Any poet, prize winning poet, rap poet, unless of course that person's being marketed by some commercial enterprise, will never be certain that there's an audience for the oral performance of the work. So one imagines all sorts of gimmicks to ensure and audience, like putting five poets on the same bill and giving each of them a hundred flyers and saying "get your friends to come."

But once they come, I think people generally like what we do, the collaboration. And that's why I've always been so thankful to work with great musicians. If I was on the edge of my life now, looking back on it, which I hope I'm not, I would look back and say I was sure lucky to be recording with Cecil McBee or Stanley Cowel or having stepped on the same platform with Charles Mingus. All these memories, if I let myself dwell on the past, are very rich as far as the musicians go.

Tripod: Have there ever been other poets who you've shared the bill with who you've like as much?

BW: So often, sure. I just gave a reading out in Ann Arbor and I was joined by the Michigan poet Richard Tellingast. It was wonderful to be sharing that with him. Not somebody who collaborates with music. I must say that of the ones that collaborate with music I'm less impressed by that. I'm almost sorry to say this, but the jazz poetry performance scene has not drawn the better poets to it. I'd say the majority of the work is very thin. Jane Cortez of course is an exception. Not only a powerful performer, but the poetry is worked on and is a real gift. And there's no doubting the gift of Amiri Baraka, even if he can be sometimes didactic and impossible that way. Those are the only two names that come readily to my mind who are alive today that I have great, great deal of respect for. Of course Langston Hughes did it, but we have very few records of it. The Weary Blues is a wonderful recording, I think with Mingus. And then there are the records of Kenneth Patchen and Kenneth Rexroth and all the recordings that Kerouac did. But there's an awful lot of uninteresting stuff that's been done with music. I'm almost ashamed to be part of it as a genre, because the genre itself has not been all that wonderful. Wonderful exceptions, but the genre itself...

Tripod: Do you see yourself getting out of it?

BW: No, as long as I have the opportunity to work with musicians, I get very energized by it and it feeds me. So I would rather not give it up, I think I would miss it. And I'm a bit of ham. I like to get up in front of people. I have to guard against caring too much about it because it's a lot of fun and sometimes pays a bill or two, but I must not overestimate it in terms of where performing poetry with jazz becomes too large a thing in the compartmentalizing my life. Because the most important thing is the work itself, which has nothing to do with performance. It has to do with oral recitation, but it has nothing to do with standing in front of people and being entertained by them being entertained by you and all that. That's very nice for the ego, but it's nothing compared to even teaching a class. Compared to being with people that you love, it's very little. But it can seem to be a very lot, because it's so exciting.