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A Poet (and Proprietor) Is a Beacon in the Bowery

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BOB HOLMAN'S pale blue eyes flickered over a visitor's Starbucks cup as he settled into a chair in the Bowery Poetry Club recently. He's the proprietor of the new club on a storied skid row that is absorbing luxury lofts, downtown hipsters, even New York University dorms.

Mr. Holman, 54, has been called the ringmaster of the spoken word, the dean of the scene; all sorts of things. So when he ribs you about the Starbucks coffee, you wait for more. He isn't the type to heckle, though, or to hold up a scorecard as he does in the popular mock-Olympic poetry slams he introduced to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, over which he was a guiding force more than a decade ago.

It turns out that Mr. Holman simply thinks his club's coffee is better. "It's the best coffee on the block," he said. "It's the only coffee on the block." He said it was so good the construction workers were coming in on breaks from gentrifying desolation street.

You couldn't help wondering what had happened to him.

This is the poet, a former cabdriver and temporary worker, who used to call himself Plain White Rapper. For a few years, he ran a spoken-word record label, Mouth Almighty.

"The Bowery is a vein of change," he explained. "Being blind is not the way to retain the aspects of the past that need to be honored. In order to change the world, you have to be in the world. As you get older, the risk of selling out and becoming part of that system stays real but it's mitigated by wanting to get in there and dig."

He gave a tour of the performance space. The artwork on the exposed brick walls is curated by his wife, the painter Elizabeth Murray. Above the modular stage is a glowing Lite-Brite portrait of Walt Whitman. An Edgar Allan Poe raven is perched high. The stage was set for the weekend show, Uncle Jimmy's Dirty Basement, a dada rock musical with obscene puppets. (Don't ask!) The club also serves alcohol, sandwiches and pastries from Balthazar.

"I run a coffee shop and bar so you can have poetry every night," he said. "Somehow, you have to pay for your addiction. They say no one has ever gone broke running a bar in New York, but we're going to give it a shot."

Mr. Holman, who has a stubble of a beard and wears large round glasses and a velveteen blazer, cycled in from his TriBeCa loft on an old Raleigh seven-speed on this morning. He has a rich bass voice that ripples with humor.

The notion of the club amuses him. Talk about a paradox, he said: a poetry club that is part of a real estate deal. He found seven investors to buy the building at 308 Bowery, and takes pride that only one tenant was displaced, a gilt frame shop that relocated to Queens.

HE sees the club as a hinge to the Bowery's past and future. He pointed to the dark-red concrete under the doorway that is like the sidewalk creeping in. Outside, a resident of the Sunshine Hotel, a flophouse, scuttled by. Mr. Holman said the man read poetry at the club, which shares the ground floor with DV Dojo, a boot camp for digital filmmakers.

Near the club's bar is a framed collage from the United States of Poetry, a 1996 PBS series that Mr. Holman produced. A visiting professor at Bard College, he also won three Emmys for a WNYC television poetry series in the mid-1980's. He has published six books.

His latest labor of love officially opened in September.

"I can't tell if we are making it in the big sense, but we're making an impression," he said.

Amiri Baraka, the politically embattled poet laureate of New Jersey, recently attended to read his poem, criticized as anti-Semitic, about the attack on the World Trade Center. There was even a news conference for the poet.

"We want to be in the world and they had us on the 11 o'clock news," Mr. Holman said. "That's where we should be."

He ticked off other foot traffic, from improvisational poets and Russian poets reading in Russian and West African griots to neighborhood teenagers. The other day, he said, Edward Hirsch, a poet appointed to head the Guggenheim Foundation, dropped in for coffee.

Mr. Holman sensed his own calling in the third grade when a teacher complimented him on a poem, then asked where he copied it from. He describes his roots as Harlan, Ky., where he said his mother, a coal miner's daughter, married the only Jew in town. (He said he didn't feel Jewish until he moved to New York in 1966.) His father committed suicide when he was 2. After his mother remarried, he was raised in rural Ohio.

He said a federal program that was expanded under former President Jimmy Carter strongly influenced him as a poet. The program, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, led him to become an arts administrator for nonprofit poetry groups, starting with the St. Marks Poetry Project in the East Village. He moved on to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in 1989 as one of five co-directors.

"I'm sincere in my belief that poetry can change the world," he said. "It has changed my life so profoundly, it flavors my breathing."

Mr. Holman has fantasies about people he wants on stage. Mr. Carter is one. He recalled the former president, himself a poet, reciting one of his pieces on the PBS program he put together.

"It was about the wonderment of the cosmos, swirling planets, romantic poetic stuff," Mr. Holman said, "and you're expecting him to say, 'All is well with God's firmament,' and instead he says, 'It troubles me.' And I'm saying, 'Man, you nailed it there!' I'd love Jimmy Carter to drop by here and kick his poems."