

Al Young and The Universe of Berkeley

The Hillside Club on Cedar St. in Berkeley, a stone's throw from the University of California, Berkeley, is a neighborhood clubhouse that looks like a church. Al Young was a poet, novelist, essayist who looked like a gentleman and a scholar. He was all those things and much more.

His tribes gathered to celebrate him June 3rd at the club. Folk from The Universe of Berkeley turned up, a unique body of lovers of the city, intellectuals, poets and writers, erstwhile Beats, Al's former students, and admirers of the gentle, affable king who was the Poet Laureate of California from 2005 to 2008. Ishmael Reed, his great friend, gave, in essence the keynote address.

Al left this world April 17, 2021, at 81 (COVID delayed this memorial). You could say he came a long way, baby. His loving son Michael nursed him through his final illness. Many at the memorial fondly recalled Michael's infancy, childhood, and young adult years. But it was Michael who nailed the quintessential quality that drove his father and others to the Universe of Berkeley.

"A California fever dream" is how Michael characterized what pulled his father to the golden state. Al migrated from the sprawling Mississippi of his birth and his much-loved red beans and rice, away from what Al called his "Gulf Coast cum Midwestern childhood." After he graduated high school in Detroit and attended University of Michigan, that fever drew him to California and a life of accomplishment (numerous books, grants, awards, and acclaim) and the good fortune of friends from all walks of life.

Those friends filled the room June 3rd. The crowd trended white, the crowd trended old, it trended gray and white haired. Al, after all, lived to be 81. You could say that the Grim Reaper was present with his scythe lightly resting in his lap. Al would have loved it, the folk hero, folk lover that he was. His lifelong alter ego O.O. Gabugah, of whom Al said, "gets to bothering me so much, I let him butt in," was present, appreciating the tributes, the gently nostalgic Patti and Tuck.

I can hear O. O. Gabugah himself singing a bit of the Eagles song *Hotel California*. If Berkeley epitomizes social activism, youth and innocence, loose funky cannabis California, the fight against American big commerce, then Al and throng never left. Even unto death.

My parents came in the fever dream from Oklahoma during WWII, but I was born in Berkeley (1946) at Herrick Memorial Hospital. I was brought home to our house on Acton St. to a world where my parents owned the only black cab company in the Bay Area. A world where my uncle had a big rooming house that welcomed family from Oklahoma in chain migration. A world where relatives saved change in Mason jars to finance neat bungalows in Berkeley and Oakland. A world where my mother's friend ran her own 5-and-dime on Alcatraz Ave. A world where blacks couldn't use the segregated pool in the Berkeley Y except one night a week. A world where blacks congregated in

their (our) own churches, fraternal organizations, and union groups. A world that became extinct.

Quite a few heydays later, after the integration of the Berkeley schools and downtown, the Beats sipping green tea and drinking endless coffee on Telegraph Avenue, the hippies atop VW buses, singing with their dogs and tie dyes, the student protestors at Sproul Plaza, the People's Park showdowns, Al Young's illustrious life ended, his having been a part of it in body, soul, and verse

I saw remnants of his life and mine at his grand memorial. Like Berkeley now, there weren't many blacks there, although I saw some of my fellow black poets. No matter. The sprinter who ran the 220 and 440 at Central High in Detroit made it all the way to the finish line.