

## Bob Holman Cafe First Night

Photo Arlene Gottfried



Let's see. I first met Miguel at a marathon group poetry reading – this was before I came to the Café, maybe '75. Somehow, we ended up in the middle of a women's poetry troupe that was one of the organizers of the event. I remember Enid Dame being in charge of these Furies, which wasn't the collective's name, but their joy and camaraderie was contagious. What was their name? The Kaleidoscope Poets? The Parasols or Periwinkles? I'm working via sound memory here: one word, three syllables, starts with a P or a

K. For sure a much better name than what I've suggested.

A chaotic scene – who would read next? It was a big big group reading – maybe at St. Clement's? Donald Lev would remember. Frank Murphy? Anyhow, Enid and the women were laughing and I was there not knowing what I should do and there was Miguel, strikingly handsome, smiling, laughing, a gang of Nuyoricans around him, serious, like bodyguards. We nodded to each other, he elegantly took the mic, the audience hushed, the crowd on stage dissolved, as he started to sing, then talk, back to singing – my first experience of poetry Nuyoric style.

WBAI was the station everybody listened to, highly political, late-night talk, great jazz. They had started broadcasting live readings from the Café, the original Café, the one on 6<sup>th</sup> Street between B & C. I was a regular listener. Legend has it that Miguel's apartment became too small for the collective – Piñero, Cienfuegos, Loperana, Griffith, Shorty, the Pietri brothers, Correa, et al – so Miguel moved everybody over to the shuttered Irish bar across the street. I spent a lot of time at Miguel's apartment, but that must've come later. Because it was on BAI where I heard the wild party going on at the Café, ecstatic readings and shake-it music – it was just a few blocks away. I was on my way.

It did mean crossing Avenue A. Which was known in those days as the DMZ – from the boho East Village (a "new" neighborhood, created by real estate agents (as always), biting on the hipness of the West Village, separating it from the dour immigrant past (their italics) Lower East Side to the crime-ridden, druggy neighborhood (italics still theirs) beyond. There is also the race and class divide – Brown, Black, Poor. A few years later, everything would change. Loisaida (as Bimbo Rivas christened this part of the Lower East Side) would endure the 80s: AIDS, crack, and gentrification. The door swings open, not on a hundred sweating bodies dancing to live music under a disco ball, but a brightly lit room with a bar and a dozen or so people scattered

about on a variety of chairs, mostly folding, a boombox playing salsa. Miguel was at the bar, holding a (the!) marble notebook. We nodded. I sat down. A guy came over. Wadda ya want? I was drinking Schaefer Tallboys then. He wrote it down, along with a few others, mostly Budweiser. Most everybody else: Budweiser. You paid up front. Then the “bartender” went to the bodega next door, purchased the beverages, returned, and dealt them out. Thus was the bar at the first Nuyorican. When it reopened on Third Street, we dealt with liquor legality in a different manner: Pepe Flores would go down to the State Liquor Authority and buy a sheaf of one-day licenses for El Puerto Rican Actors and Writers Workshop, which was the name of the non-profit when Joe Papp organized the purchase of the in-rem building at 232 East Third St (B-C) from the City, from David Dinkins, who handled the sale personally, with Joe and Miguel and Miky in attendance. The price: \$1. The previous owner: Ellen Stewart.

Meanwhile, back at that first night at the Café, I wrote my name in the marble notebook. There it stayed, while poet after poet got up and read. People kept coming and going, the room always alive, a parade of poets to the corner of the bar, no need for a mic. Somehow, my name never got called. Miguel had that beautiful smile as I wandered out into the night. “Next time,” he said, and there was indeed a next time. A next time that lasted over twenty years.

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**Bob Holman** first heard rap at the Nuyorican Poets Café in 1979 and his life has never been the same. He was instrumental in helping reopen the Café after it closed for the 80s, hosting the first poetry slams in New York there in November of 89. Those were banner years for the Café, with tours ranging up to ten poets throughout the country and Europe, and the publication of *ALOUD! Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, now in its 18<sup>th</sup> printing. As a CETA artist in the late 70s, he learned how essential poets are to all communities – at the Nuyorican, he learned first-hand how this singular place’s commitment to poetry could re-form the body politic. While he and Miguel did not always see eye-to-eye, their friendship is a history of collaboration. Miguel’s appearance in *The United States of Poetry*, the series Holman created for PBS, singing and performing his “HIV Poem,” is a beacon at the crux of politics, art, and the human body. Viva el Café! Viva la Poesía! Viva Miguel!