

## Rashida Ismali Miguel Algarín. Presente!



When Miguel Algarín and his family migrated from Santurce, Puerto Rico they went to the sprawling communities where other islanders began; East Harlem. They spread out to The Bronx, Brooklyn, in Miguel's case, LES, Loisaida to a New York City Housing building on 'The Mighty D.'

Miguel soon developed life-long friendships with others from Puerto Rico. They embraced the excitement of the times and those young people who were making changes in response to challenging racial, social and political oppression. Ever present was the "The War," Viet Nam.

Along with Miguel Piñero and Lucky Cienfuegos, he co-founded The Nuyorican Cafe. They were brash Afro Latino poets, activist, intelligent, each influencing the other. At the beginning, Miguel used his apartment as a theatre, a space and hall for performances, readings and highly charged discussions. The need for and the response to the call literally burst at the seams. Much of the old buildings had been abandoned and so Miguel was able to purchase one and thus The Nuyorican Poets Cafe came to be. Soon, the word spread as the quality and quantity of work began to amass and leading figures in the writing and broader arts world found their way to Alphabet City.

Miguel Piñero staged some of his first work there. The usage of a new language formed to express the incorporation of experiences these young people were having; borrowing heavily on the idiomatic vocabulary of the broad African American base, a way of speaking to address the new way to be both 'Rican' and African. Something not always embraced head on on the Island. The language of the Nuyorican was "Spanglish" and it became honorific as opposed to an epithet.

Miguel was a seminal figure in the arts scene flowing freely between African Americans, Africans and African Caribbean. Colouration was challenged. Scholarship and artistry were encouraged and many were impressed by Miguel's pursuit of higher education. As a Shakespearean scholar, a translator of Pablo Neruda, a professor of literature all while creating some of the most intelligent, sensitive and declarative poetry, essays and critiques, Miguel did his work.

To say he left an indelible mark on the immediate Puerto Rican community is undeniable. However, the resonance of asserting an identity that at one and the same time; political, cultural and creative, is witnessed in the many publications of which, *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* co-edited with Bob Hollman.

On this physical plane, I shall not see my brother/friend with smiling eyes, an open mouth grin, in a body clad casually elegant in guayabera, trousers and sandals. His full body ready at a drum beat to "Baile!" Baile!" A mouth singing poetry or informing, inspiring against the indignities of all forms of unlearnedness. His sharp ear, as keen as musicians who played in and around him: Jackie Mac, Bird, Sonny. He listened to songs and rhythms of the streets; women hurrying home from work, children chasing after ice cream trucks and emboldened ones, hopping onto the rear of city buses.

He was a source, a triumph. "Tru cutum/ Cu tum Cu tum/ Clave//!"

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**Rashida Ismaili** is a poet, fiction writer, essayist and playwright who was born in Cotonou, Benin, West Africa, and in the 1950s migrated to the US, where she still lives in Harlem, New York City. She was part of the Black Arts Movement and has been awarded the Sojourner Truth Meritorious Award and the Puffin Trade Award and has been recognized by PEN America. Her published books include *Autobiography of the Lower East Side: A Novel in Stories* and poetry collections *Missing in Action* and *Presumed Dead, Rice Keepers, and Cantata for Jimmy*. Ismaili-AbuBakr has taught at Wilkes University and University of Ghana; worked at Rutgers University and Pratt College; and served as an executive board member of the Organization of Women Writers of Africa, Inc.