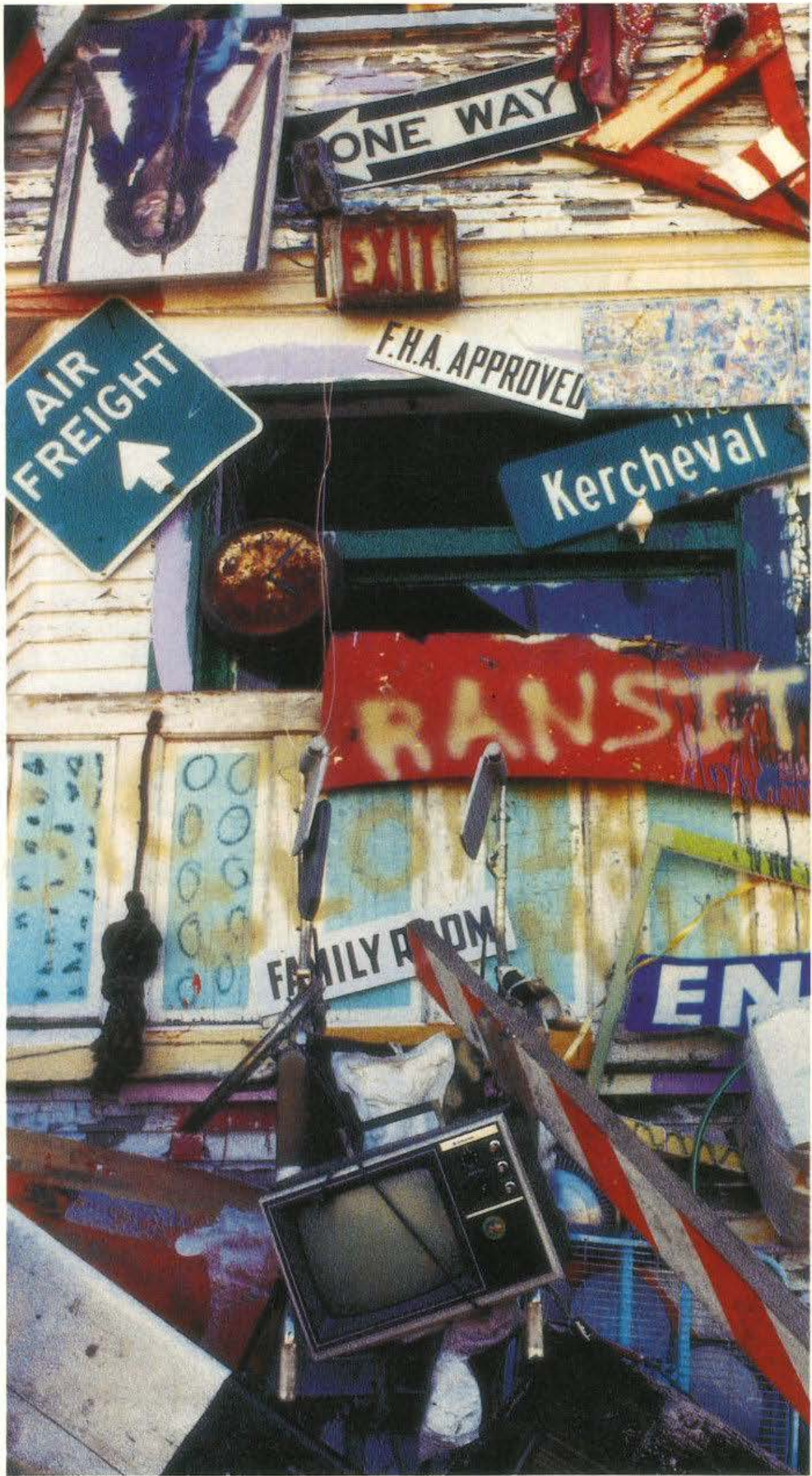


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WRITING IN THE CITY

"My poetry, I believe, comes from a spiritual base. I think that whatever feeds me spiritually is expressed through my art. This is the basic motivation of my writing as a poet. It encompasses a large picture of how I perceive reality. I try to capture this through my art."

—Ron Allen

During the twenties, the "Negro Renaissance" marked a cultural rebirth for Black literature. This period in Black history—also called the "Harlem Renaissance"—lasted into the mid-40s and brought the work of Black artists in poetry, music, painting, sculpture, dance and other forms into public consciousness on a new scale.

The writers identified with the Harlem Renaissance chose creative forms such as poetry to speak out against the bigotry, poverty and social injustices that Black folk were experiencing at that time in our history. Things are a lot better now, but we still have a long way to go.

Some of the major writers involved in the Harlem Renaissance were Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson. These writers led the way with their poetry and commentary and took Black literature to a higher level than ever before.

There are vivid echoes of the Harlem Renaissance in Detroit's modern-day literary scene. Like their forebears in that earlier renaissance period, a large number of writers here today are using the more creative forms of writing like poetry and drama as a means of self-expression and to speak out against some of the social injustices that still exist here in America and around the world.

One of the most important Detroit poets involved in this new renaissance is Ron Allen. This gifted Black poet, who is one of the leaders of a new school of performance poetry being developed in Detroit, considers himself a poet of drama as well as metaphors and images. His performances with his ensemble, which includes saxophonist Keith Gamble, drummer Byron Johnson, bassist Gregg Cook and actress Michelle McKinney, have set new standards for excitement and communication, and his work on the printed page fairly bristles with vitality and strong emotion.

"What I do personally as an artist," Ron Allen tells us, "is multi-dimensional, multi-faceted. I use actors, actresses, and music to broaden the scope of what the poem is saying and the ideas I'm expressing. Hopefully this expands the meaning of my work for the audience to give them greater accessibility to the totality of what I'm doing as an artist."

Ron Allen stays busy by keeping himself active, creative and productive. His own writing and performances are complemented by his energetic work as an organizer of poetry events, series and projects which link poets with audiences and causes to create public interest on a whole new scale.

When you speak about Ron Allen the poet, you must also talk about his on-going project, *Horizons In Poetry*, since the two are nearly synonymous. Now held the first Tuesday of each month at Alexander's, 4265 Woodward Avenue at Canfield—next to the site where the old Graystone Ballroom once stood—the popular *Horizons In Poetry* series presents the best of Detroit's poetry creators and performers as well as new, previously unheard voices who enjoy the regular "open mike" sessions held following the performances by featured readers.

Horizons In Poetry (HIP) was created by Ron Allen, John Mason and Wardell Montgomery in November 1982. For its first three years HIP used the legendary Cobb's Corner Bar at Cass and Willis as the site for their presentations, moving them to Alexander's when Cobb's closed for good in 1985. Although Montgomery and Mason are no longer involved in the series, Ron Allen has managed to keep it alive and thriving through the years. He's made it into one of the city's major poetry venues and consistently attracts large, nicely varied crowds of poetry lovers for the monthly sessions. That's why Ron is called "The Driving Force" by the poets who have been a part of this very successful poetry series.

I asked Ron Allen to reflect on *Horizons In Poetry* and its mission, and he told me, "We all felt there was a need to present poets in the community whose literary development had brought them to a point where they should be featured in a forum where they could share their art and ideas with the people in the community."

"It seems like there is a renaissance going on at this time in Detroit for poetry.

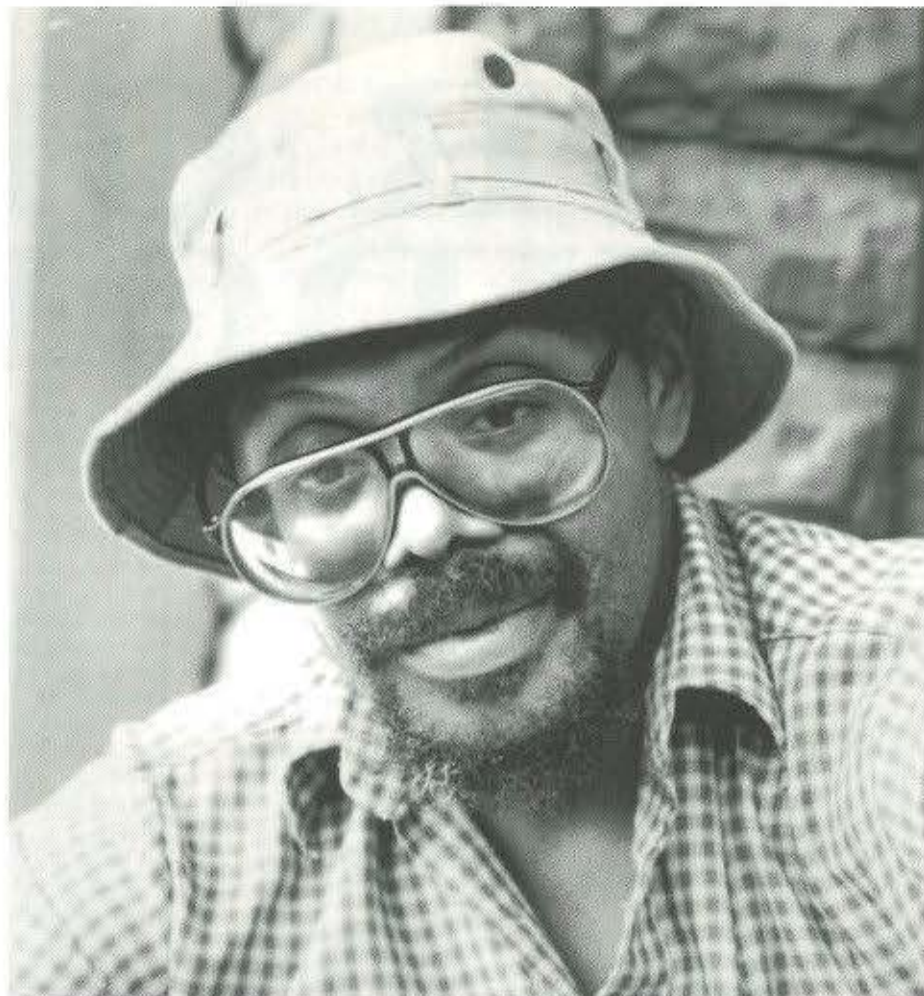


Photo by Rebecca Cook

THE DRIVING FORCE: RON ALLEN & HORIZONS IN POETRY

By Johnny Metcalf

There is a lot of energy coming out of poetry in Detroit these days. People are supporting poetry here in the city. They are happy to know that there is a venue where they can come and hear poetry and see it performed, if other artists are involved in the performances. It may be that poetry is a precursor of a cultural renaissance that might be occurring now in Detroit. Hopefully the *Horizons In Poetry* series can be instrumental in letting the public know that there is something going on in Detroit that needs to be recognized and supported."

In addition to his involvement with HIP, Ron also organizes larger readings

for various social concerns. Two major readings at Central United Methodist Church downtown featured around-the-clock poetry marathons with a new poet every fifteen minutes: "Poets Against Apartheid" was a fund-raiser to support the African National Congress to free South Africa; "Words Against Weapons" was held to raise funds in support of SOSAD (Save Our Sons And Daughters).

Ron also acts as a resource person for people and institutions looking for poets and poetry, and he's well known for offering assistance and support to other artists and their projects. He lends organizational support as well as his own presence as a poet and performer—he's always there when he's needed.

Ron Allen began writing after serving in Vietnam for the U.S. Army, an experience that would later play a major role in his career as a poet. Reflecting back on his service in Vietnam, Ron had some very interesting comments:

"My experience in the Army totally served as a trigger for me to explore oppression and social injustice, and certainly for me it confirmed the reality of me being a Black man. The idea of Blackness became very hard for me when I was in the Army. Basically we would gravitate to each other, the Black soldiers that is, and it was because of the racism we were experiencing in the Army. It was necessary for us to bond together."

"Out of my experience in the Army, I brought these feelings back to the community from which I had come. I would later express these feelings through my poetry. This wasn't an immediate thing—it was something that kind of grew inside of me as the years went on. Then, of course, exposing myself to other literature, like the *Black Panther* newspaper that was available at that time, and the Black Muslim newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*. This gave me a broader awareness of myself in the geo-political context as a Black person. It gave me a certain philosophical base to operate from as a Black man."

Ron did some writing after his discharge from the Army, but the big turning point in his poetry career would come later with his affiliation with the RAPA House's Poets & Writers Club. The RAPA House was owned and operated by the late Mrs. Lajune Rodgers with help from her very talented children. It was one of the major—and only—cultural institutions for Blacks writing poetry here in Detroit for almost three decades.

At RAPA House, located at 96 E. Vernor (now the Fisher Fwy service drive), Ron Allen first met up with and worked with such poets as John Nevins, Sally Wright, Wardell Montgomery, and

other members of the Poets & Writers Club. This was the period, in the early 70s, when RAPA House was in its last phase of existence, but the experience and exposure Ron enjoyed at RAPA House would prove to be invaluable to his later progress as a poet and performer.

It wasn't far from the Poets & Writers Club to *Horizons In Poetry*, which Ron is the first to admit was directly inspired by his experience at RAPA House, and which is definitely a serious attempt to carry on the spirit and productivity generated by its predecessor. I asked Ron for a statement on HIP, and he responded with the following, under the title "Kicking The Shit Out Of Angst":

"*Horizons In Poetry* is a community-based poetry/arts organization located in the Cass Corridor. We have served the community for seven years as a forum for literary vision and expression. We have featured poets, both local and regional, showcasing new writing in post-modernist America as part of the international literary community."

"One of the tenets of HIP's philosophy is to showcase new folk writing as well as the academically informed, but always meeting and addressing the needs of the greater community. We do this by providing a forum by which novice writers can recite their works to peers, gaining support and criticism to further their artistic growth. We also produce events at other venues where underexposed writers can read, furthering individual and cultural growth and gaining self-confidence."

"We are interested in capturing our indigenous aesthetic and artistic development so we structure our forum in such a way that writers can use idioms inherent in their work to fully express their concepts and experiences, that is, we encourage the exploration of other media married to poetic ideas such as poetry and music, poetry and film, etc."

"Poetry is a tool for instilling spiritual values, ethics, etc., and affecting consciousness about reality. We believe we have an important mission to further the community to the point of progress."

"Finally, we feel that *Horizons In Poetry* is an arts venue that embraces tradition, values, culture, and ideas of this local and international community, capturing an aesthetic that has spawned new writing and visions historically, presently, and always embracing the future!"

Looking to the immediate future, *Horizons In Poetry* will be presenting a three-month series of readings supporting Naomi Long Madgett and Lotus Press, a major Black publishing house located for more than fifteen years in Detroit.

Featured will be such outstanding local poets as Roberto Warren, Kim Hunter, Leslie Reese, and of course, Ron Allen. They'll be held the first Tuesday of each month, 8:00 pm, at Alexander's on Woodward.

Still another HIP project Ron's working on is the organization of a series of large regional poetry readings that would include poets from Toledo, Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit. This would later expand to include more poets from other cities. Each of these regional readings will include an open exchange of ideas, including post-reading discussions, comments, question-and-answer sessions and the like.

"A project like this," Ron points out, "could be a major step in bringing poets together from a three- or four-state region, working together on common projects that would help develop their skill as poets and at the same time bring to the audience the kind of poetry that will be enlightening with a clear and positive message."

Ron's personal goals include completion of a drama in verse called "Dead Penny," which examines the relationship between workers and bosses from both a racial and class aspect. He hopes to be in production with "Dead Penny" sometime this spring.

He is also considering organizing a poetry tour of universities and colleges on the East Coast by his performance ensemble, which I witnessed recently during the "Writing In The City" symposium at the Detroit Institute of Arts. This would really bring a breath of fresh Motor City air to the citadels of learning fortunate enough to experience it.

Whatever he does, there's no doubt that Ron Allen will continue to be a positive driving force on the literary scene here in Detroit and that he is destined to influence poets both locally and nationally for years to come. ☘

HORIZONS IN POETRY POETS & AUTHORS

1982-1988

Allen Adkins
Ron Allen
Alvin Aubert
Faruq Z. Bey
Gwendolyn Dionne Burton
Mary Ann Cameron
Stella Crews
Saundra Douglas
Lecia Duskin
Frankenstein
Jose Garza
Charles Gervin
Michele Gibbs
Errol Henderson
Mildred Hunt
Kim Hunter
Geoffrey Jacques
Angeline Kaimala
Kaleema
Sybil Kein
Faye Kicknosway
Paul Lichter
M.L. Liebler
Naomi Long Madgett
Glen Mannisto
John Mason
Ray McKinney
Sadiq Muhammad
Motor City Free Arts Group
Michael Nance
Kofi Natambu
Kim Nolte
Larry Pike
Dudley Randall
Leslie Reese
Bob "Righteous" Rudnick
Trinidad Sanchez
Semaj
John Sinclair
Damon Smith
Sharon Smith-Knight
Chris Tysh
Mick Vranich
Rayfield Waller
Tyrone Williams
Willie Williams