Bill Mohr: An Interview

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Bill Mohr was born in 1947 in Norfolk, Virginia. He grew up there as well as in Hawaii and San Diego. He moved to Los Angeles in 1968 and acted with several theatre companies, including the Burbage Theatre Ensemble. He has worked as a California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence in the San Gabriel Valley and also taught creative writing classes for L.A. Theatre Works at the prison in Chino. He is currently rewriting a one-act play, *Slow Spin Out,* about a group of prisoners who are about to be released. After editing the first two issues of *Bachy* magazine, he started Momentum Press and has published *Momentum* magazine and over two dozen books by twenty-two writers. He has also published two anthologies, *The Streets Inside: Ten Los Angeles Poets* (1978) and *"Poetry Loves Poetry:" An Anthology of Los Angeles Poets* (1985), which contains almost four hundred poems by sixty-two poets. His work has appeared in several other anthologies, including *Poets West* (Perivale Press), *Young American Poets,* a Japanese anthology edited by Bob Kuntz, and *The Southern California Literary Anthology.* His first book of poems, *hidden proofs,* was published by Bombshelter Press in 1982. His second collection, *PENETRALIA,* was published by Momentum Press in 1984. He is working on a new manuscript, *barely holding distant things apart.* He lives in Ocean Park with his wife, Cathay Gleeson.

Northridge Review: We wanted to start by talking about your editing.

Bill Mohr: Everybody always does. I'm notorious for hating interviews that begin with talking about editing, to tell you the truth, because editing isn't the main reason I do poetry. And yet obviously that's the thing that has the most public recognition.

NR: You've just published this book *"Poetry Loves Poetry."* Would you tell us how you went about selecting the poets and poems for the book and about any difficulties you might have had in getting it together?

BM: I've been editing in Los Angeles for about fifteen years now. I was the first editor of *Bachy* magazine, which was published by Papa Bach's Bookstore. I edited the first two issues of that and then I began my own poetry magazine, *Momentum*, in 1974, and edited ten issues of that. Then I started publishing books in 1975. So I've known poets in this town for a long time. It wasn't as if I just decided I was going to do a project and then had to start digging up poets or going to readings. I had a pretty good sense of who I was going to select from the start. I would say that I knew the work of at least three-fourths of the poets. I even knew individual poems that I wanted. I asked those poets to pass on the word, and I did get manuscripts from other people, I did include work sent to me from people I had never met. For example, Allison Townsend; her work was recommended by Holly Prado. I liked it, so I included it.

NR: Was it different from editing *The Streets Inside,* in that it kind of ballooned on you?

BM: That's exactly what happened. As I worked on the project, to a certain extent, it got out of control. But that's only a reflection on how much poetry is occurring in this city. Relatively speaking, *The Streets Inside* was fairly easy to put together. There are just so many poets working in this city, all of whom consider themselves to be just as good as XYZ. One of the things I like about *"Poetry Loves Poetry"* is I think it's not just any one particular group. If you look at the Beyond Baroque Reading Series right now, it's roughly organized around two magazines, *Temblor* and *Sulphur*. But there are a lot of different kinds of groups that are represented in the book, and without actually breaking it up into any formal divisions. It segues from one to another. There's a chunk of Bukowski/Locklin/Koertge and then it goes off into another group.

NR: Exene Cervenka and John Doe would be another group.

BM: Yeah, right. David James and Dave Alvin would be in that group too, the "punk" poets, in real quotes because they're certainly not punk poets. But they come from a musical background. One of the reasons the book got so big is simply because I felt I had to include these different groups.

NR: Why did you stop publishing *Momentum*? Was it so that you could work on publishing books?

BM: The magazine wasn't selling at all. A lot of poets liked it, but . . . . When you publish an individual's book of poems, it's not just a question of initial sales. As that poet's reputation builds, two or three years later that book will still sell. Whereas, there is nothing deader than a three-year-old magazine, except to someone who is really into it. I think a magazine is a good way to tutor yourself about poetry and there's no better way to learn something than by doing it. It's hands-on experience as opposed to sitting in your room and reading poems and writing poems.

NR: It's more objective because you're forced to decide?

BM: Yeah. You quickly realize that it's not just a matter of taste. I can take a poem and show you in almost a scientific way why it works or doesn't work, how it could be made better . . . . Most of the poems in this book tell stories in one way or another. Although there's much that I admire in the recent Language-Centered Movement, I'm not even sure I'm a poet anymore. What I call myself is a narrationist. I'm a Born-Again Narrationist. I really believe in the power of narrative. That doesn't necessarily mean plot, I want to make that distinction. This book is about stories. I think poetry loves stories as much as it loves poetry.

NR: You said during your interview on KPFK that the poets in the anthology aren't academics, that most of them don't make a living teaching. How do you think their activities in publishing, running workshops, acting, and being in rock bands has affected their writing? Has it made it more narrative?

BM: That's a good question. I tried to disclaim in the Introduction this sort of Hollywood aspect in terms of how the poets make a living. It's not so much that they haven't taught for most of their lives, it's that working other jobs has given them

experience that gives them something to draw on when they turn to the blank piece of paper. Jim Krusoe teaches at Northridge, but if he made out a resume you'd find out all kinds of other jobs that he's done. Teaching is a very interesting experience, but it can also be very limiting, just as any job can be if that's the only one you do all your life. Unless you're lucky, like Williams. Of course, being a doctor you meet a lot of different people, and I think that was Williams' secret. What makes the poetry narrative is a curiosity about the world and just simply observing what you see. I don't know that being in the University or not being in the University makes that much difference. David James is one of the "punk" poets in the anthology, yet he teaches at Occidental. There's no such thing as a set definition: this poet teaches in a University and writes this way, or this one sings in a rock band and writes this way.

NR: In the Introduction you categorize these L.A. poets as being in the Self-Portrait School of Existential Romanticism. Would you like to explain that label?

BM: Largely it's that the work is autobiographical, just as Whitman's or Williams' work is autobiographical. The term autobiographical has gotten a very bad rap because of the emotional extremism of the Confessional School. The poets in here aren't confessional. Nevertheless, they use their own lives as material for the subject matter of the poems. No one would denigrate Rembrandt's self-portraits and say, "But it's only a self-portrait," in the way that they'll say to a poet, "Well, you're only writing about your life."

NR: The difference between self-portraiture and confessional poetry is, I think, that the writers of these self-portraits have more of a sense of humor about what they're dealing with . . .

BM: A distance, yes.

NR: And they also add fiction to their lives.

BM: Right. That's a great part of it, so that the whole time "autobiographical" is in quotes. The autobiographical material is used to create a persona, to which a lot of fictional material is added. And of course the distinction blurs between what really happened to the writer and what was made up . . . . So the Existentialism part? It's sort of grade-school Sartre: "Existence preceeds essence." I don't think any of the poets here choose any particular form when they start out to write a poem. You use the subject matter of the poem and form grows as the

poem grows. It isn't predetermined, and that's very romantic. I think that essentially Existentialism is a Romantic philosophy. If we were able to move two thousand years ahead of ourselves, we'd look back and see that the whole period from Blake and Wordsworth probably well into the next century is basically a Romantic period. Terms like Modernism and Post-Modernism will be meaningless.

NR: You also talked on the radio show about the difference between the New York Poets and the California Poets and their concepts of craft. How would you define the craft that these Los Angeles poets are using?

BM: I think the craft we use is a dramatic craft. What we're concerned with is how to get a story rolling and how to make a listener pay attention. Gerry Stern has said that technique is that which makes a reader pay attention. You can talk all you want about meter and metaphor and symbol but real craft in writing is making the reader pay attention. That's the whole point of it and that's the end result. I'm not interested in being called a poet anymore precisely because so many poets have gotten lost in this sense of craft for craft's sake. I think that a good poem is one in which you get the sense that the poet *had* to write this poem, absolutely had to write it, was compelled to write it.

NR: Given the large amount of readings in L.A. and the performance poetry, do you think that these affect the poetry that people are writing? Do they make it more dramatic, more immediate, more accessible?

BM: Why don't you be hostile witnesses and complain about the lack of craft of L.A. poets? Certainly the East Coast would say that we lack a sense of formal control over the poems, that there's not enough sense of stanzas and the line breaks are sloppy.

NR: O.K. Let's look at the other side. What are L.A. poets trying to do? And does it have something to do with a conversational tone? With Wanda Coleman or Exene Cervenka you have a different kind of craft. The poems come off very well when they are read. It's a craft that wants to be narrative, wants to be effective when it's heard or read on a surface level as well as reading into it.

BM: The East Coast poets' criticism of us would be that it works better out loud than on the page. But, God knows, I don't

think their work holds up well on the page even though they mostly write for the page. I've seen many poems which if you ran them off on a mimeograph machine and handed them out to a bunch of people those people wouldn't be impressed. Whereas, if you picked up a poem like "Howl," I don't care if it's mimeographed or not, the language is so charged that you're going to pay attention to it. I suppose a lot of our performance poetry does go back to Ginsberg, the quintessential Romantic. Who also has one of the great voices of the Twentieth Century. Everybody always raves on about Reagan's voice; he doesn't hold a candle to Ginsberg.

NR: Why did you get started in poetry and what's kept you going?

BM: The question is, do I really want to review an old story? The original impulse behind my writing is having questions and hoping that by putting words together I could find some answers. It was also just a raw, uninhibited, almost sexual pleasure in the sound of words. The world exploded for me one spring when I was about nineteen years old. Some kind of delayed adolescent time bomb went off and I actually saw flowers for the first time and the world lit up. I wanted to capture this experience and words were what I felt most comfortable with.

NR: Who were the poets who interested you as you were beginning?

BM: I read everybody I could get my hands on. I was very fortunate in that I had a teacher at San Diego State, Glover Davis, who dittoed off a list of poets with the titles of their books. I went through a library and worked my way down the list. It had everyone on it from James Tate to Weldon Kees to Philip Levine. Everybody I read I decided for the next two months I was going to imitate. John Berryman was a wonderful poet to read, but a terrible influence on me. I tried to write dream songs for a year and a half. It was very detrimental to my own writing and yet what I did pick up is an ear for all kinds of different rhythms and word combinations. I feel that that has continued to serve me. A lot of rhythmic possibilities aren't being explored in the English language right now. The thing that I like about the Language-Centered School is that they have gone back and said, "What is the basic unit of thought in speech? It's a sentence." And what is a sentence? It turns out that there are several hundred definitions of what a sentence is. What I want to segue into here is, how much can be contained

in a single sentence? One of the things that fascinates me about some poets, poets as diverse as Theodore Roethke and Paul Blackburn, is that a lot of their best poems are single sentences. Even Roethke's poem "Big Wind" which is actually two sentences, you can tell that he wanted it to be a single sentence. I have been thinking about this question for a long time and I think a sentence is our experience of eternity. I mean that literally, in that when we come to the end of a sentence, which could have wound on for a hell of a long time, we are able to instantaneously understand the complete sentence. In a sentence you have the past, the present, and the future all existent within the initial capital letter and the final punctuation mark. That is why we were able to understand sentences, because time does not exist in a sentence. And eternity is where time doesn't exist, so there you are. It's not that simple and yet I do feel I'm onto something. When you read a good story and say, "I felt like I was in another world," that's because you are in another world: you have left time. Your consciousness has transcended the temporal. Language still fascinates me because it is, as Charles Olson said, "the intersection of an eternal event with a temporal one." When Dickinson says poetry takes the top of her head off, that's what she means. But it's the sentence that does that. Robert Bly criticizes Whitman, saying he doesn't have caesuras in his lines; that's because Whitman is working with sentences. The line is less musical because it isn't a line, it's a sentence. Ginsberg certainly picked up on this.

NR: Ginsberg talked about that being a breath, but really it's a thought-grouping that you could call a sentence?

BM: Right. The term "breath" gets a little tricky and I think it would be easier to call it a long sentence. He's talking about breathing but that's only an esoteric way of talking about something that's fundamental, like sentences.

NR: How do you do your work? Do you have certain conditions or techniques which help you write and how much do you revise?

BM: I have an illusion that I don't do much revision, and yet I have stacks of paper in my room which show many different drafts of poems. The best poems I've written are often first takes. My poem "Vallejo" is almost word for word as I wrote it. I try to make every poem different. Each poem is written under different conditions. There is a prose piece I wrote called "Substitute Teacher" that I began about 11:15 one night last spring and finished about 2:15 in the morning. I just kept writing

it and the further I got the more uncertain I was, and yet I was laughing like crazy. I revised it somewhat, deleting things, but the material I kept was revised very little.

NR: Do you think these poems which worked as "first-takes" are due to inspiration? As a student, the first thing you learn is how to work. You cannot depend on inspiration to get you moving.

BM: I think that's very true. Jim Krusoe quotes some other writer as saying, "A poet is a writer who doesn't write every day." The truth is that poets are very lazy writers and we *don't* write every day. But if you depend entirely on inspiration you will stop writing because you haven't built up any habits. I think it's good to go for awhile and try to write something every day and then to go for awhile and just see what happens . . . . So how do I work? I haven't been writing much in the last two years, actually. I was working for the Caifornia Arts Council as an artist-in-residence, a situation which became politically untenable when I submitted the poems to be published in a booklet as part of my residency. They said, "You can't put these two or three poems in the booklet because of their political content." Not because of four-letter words, just their political content. At that point there was no choice, I had to resign. The ironic thing is that the California Arts Council makes a pretense of providing artists with time to work on their art, and the truth is that I wrote less as an artist-in-residence than at any other time in my life.

NR: Was it the pressure they put on you?

BM: It was just that there is too much work to be done, teaching third and fourth graders to write poems. Talk about Existential Romanticism . . . This is a project worthy of Sisyphus. "Sisyphus, you can let go of the rock for awhile." "Ah, thank God, boss." "Uh, we want you to teach kids to write poems, third and fourth graders." "I want the rock. Gimme the rock back." It feels like that sometimes . . . "Please, kid, write something." "I can't think of anything to write. I have no dreams and I have no memories. What are you going to do about it, poet?"

NR: In your poems such as "The Will to Live," "Mantra for the Evacuation of Santa Monica," and "The Big World and The Small World," what I hear is a political voice that doesn't negate the human, isn't just full of vituperative attacks. You have the personal and the political existing side by side and I

was wondering if you thought there was a place for the political in poetry, if it is handled this way?

BM: I grew up during the time of the Vietnam War and I was involved in a lot of protests. I also wrote political poetry. My first public reading in Los Angeles was at a resistance house, in fact. The thing I finally have arrived at, that I like about my political poems, is that they aren't simply about politics, they are about daily life. There is a woman writer, and I can't remember her name right now, but she says one of the five elements of literature is "dailiness." That is something I have been concerned with in my own writing. In almost a Zen Buddhist way, the most ordinary gesture or the most ordinary perception can contain the possibility for immense insight. In my political poems I simply can't leave this out. That's why there is a children's story about a whale in a political poem about nuclear war. In that "Will to Live" poem, the whaler, who's about to shoot this whale, says to Santa Claus, "This is the first whale I've seen in a week." What I like about that line is that it is my implication that Santa Claus could say, but doesn't, "Listen, asshole, the reason you haven't seen a whale in a week is because jerks like you have been killing all the whales." I don't want to beat it over the head in an obvious way. I am trying to lure the reader with an interesting story, so you're not listening to yet another poet drone on about the political situation, which just bores the shit out of me.

NR: Back to what you were saying earlier about imitation. Would you say to young writers, "Read, don't imitate, just read?"

BM: I don't think it's worth it to imitate other writers. It is important to find out as quickly as possible what it is you were put here on earth to say. The sooner you can get to that, the better. There's no predicting when it's going to happen, so you have to . . . just get to work, I guess. When I wrote "Substitute Teacher" I had no idea I was going to write that piece that day when I woke up. Suddenly, at eleven o'clock at night, I get this idea about a guy who identifies with the brain that's put into the monster in the Frankenstein movies. Of course, a man who has this kind of obsession/identification is someone who can only make a living as a substitute teacher, going from school to school . . . . Why continue writing is a big question. I'm going to be thirty-eight this year and if someone had said to me, "You'll be thirty-eight and nothing's gonna happen, Bill. You're still gonna be typesetting and taking home eight hundred dollars a month. You'll have no publisher and no one interested in

publishing your work," it would have been much more difficult to get through times when I had hope. (Laughs.) There were times when I was young that I never thought my work would be where it is at this particular point in my life. All you have to do is look at Whitman, who had to publish his own work, or Williams, who in his late forties had to pay for the publication of his work. If it's that way for Williams, well, why should it be any different for us? Or for anybody who's doing work that will endure, as opposed to work that's currently fashionable or acceptable.

NR: Well, what are the accomplishments, what are the values of writing?

BM: It is worthy to write. My belief in the value of it comes from the fact that my grandfather was born in Holland and that he wrote, but never did publish, a journal about what it was like to grow up in a Dutch village late in the last century. When he died, my mother looked for that book but never found it. In a hundred years from now someone may ask, "What was it like to be a kid in Holland in 1895?" I think that that's what we're leaving behind, a record of what it was like to be alive.