Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

by Maria Damon

Way out people know the way out.

—Bob Kaufman, “Abomunist Manifesto”

Bob Kaufman (1925–1986) was a street poet, a people’s poet, a poet’s poet, a jazz poet, a surrealist poet, a modernist poet, a post-modernist poet, an African-American poet, a Black poet, a Negro poet, a New Orleans poet, a San Francisco poet, a poète maudit, a lyric poet, a Beat poet. Although he has come to be overshadowed by his white, formally-educated contemporaries Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs, Kaufman was one of the founding architects and living examples of the sensibility of the Beat Generation, a counter-cultural phenomenon of the Cold War which attempted to embody dissent from the tyranny of consensus in its artistic and everyday practice; New York and San Francisco were its primary sites. At the height of the movement (1955-1960), he was a vibrant poetic force on the San Francisco street scene; his broadside, *The Abomunist Manifesto*, rivaled Ginsberg’s *Howl* in its status as signature Beat text, and the term “beatnik” was coined by San Francisco columnist Herb Caen to describe Kaufman. In 1959 Kaufman co-founded the significant Beat mimeo-journal *Beatitude*, which has continued to appear sporadically into the present day. However, he also suffered from the racism—sometimes romantic Negrophilia and sometimes out-and-out violent prejudice—of his mostly white milieu. Treated as a favorite mascot for his outrageous antics (people would buy him drinks in order to get him to entertain them by insulting them), he was also not taken seriously as a poet by many of the active San Francisco poets, and he was brutalized by the North Beach police. Partly out of choice, partly out of disillusioned resignation and the ravages of street life, drugs and alcohol, in the early 1960s Kaufman, never a careerist to begin with, turned his back definitively on the seductions of fame and respectability, implicitly declaring solidarity with the world’s anonymous poor by informally adopting a “vow of silence,” neither speaking nor writing until shortly after the end of the Viet Nam War. In the 1970s and 1980s he resumed public life again to some degree; this period was punctuated by high points like the composition of his “bicentennial poem,” an apocalyptic rant entitled “The Ancient Rain”; a large and gala public reading in 1981 with fellow surrealist Philip Lamantia at the San Francisco Art Institute; and most importantly, the publication of *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956–1978*, due largely to the devoted editorial labors of Raymond Foye. A much-admired
extemporizer, Kaufman blended his own rapid-fire aphorisms and wisecracks with the considerable store of modernist poetry he had memorized. His poetry reworks and defamiliarizes that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Federico García Lorca, Tennessee Williams, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes and others. In its adventurous imagery, sonorous qualities and biting socio-existential wit, Kaufman’s poetry shares much with other New World Black surrealists Aimé Cesaire, Ted Joans, and Will Alexander, as well as with the jazz-inspired poetry and fiction of LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey.

One of thirteen children, Robert Garnell Kaufman was born in New Orleans on April 18, 1925, into a middle-class, African-American Catholic family, to a school-teacher mother who insisted on a high degree of literacy among her children, and a father who, according to Kaufman’s brother George, a Pullman Porter who traveled between New Orleans and Chicago. The historical legacy of labor activism among the Pullman porters combined with the intellectual ambition of Mrs. Kaufman for her children means that Kaufman grew up in a household saturated not only with classics by Proust, James, and Dickens, but probably also with the regular arrival of The Messenger, the official organ of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other political and topical materials. This double legacy was to be reflected in his subsequent activist and literary career; for example, his late poem “The Poet” riffs on Langston Hughes’s “Wise Men,” which first appeared in The Messenger. On his eighteenth birthday, Kaufman enlisted in the Merchant Marines, becoming a prominent organizer in the National Maritime Union primarily based in New York City. When the AFL and CIO merged in the 1950s, he was purged from the union, a casualty of the McCarthy era. Kaufman left New York City, eventually emerging in San Francisco as a familiar figure on the Bohemian literary and street scene, and reinventing himself as a Beat street poet with a colorful if somewhat fictitious legacy—that of a hybrid Orthodox Jewish and Martiniquan “voodoo”-inflected Catholic upbringing. (The possibility that his great-grandfather, Abraham Kaufman, was Jewish and Kaufman’s own fluency in French Louisiana patois helped to give rise to this legend.)

Driven from a life of labor, he embraced an ethos that saw the working world as one of dystopian conformity—which indeed, in the 1950s, it had become—without even, for Black people, the possibility of upward social mobility offered as the prize for such Faustian bargains as the growing American middle class was striking everywhere. Kaufman’s Beat period embodied playful but purposeful dissent in his lifestyle and poetry.

Kaufman’s first book, Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness (1965), was compiled, edited and sent off to New Directions publishers by his wife Eileen Kaufman. Many poems from this period describe, with humor and sympathy, the Beat community in all its posturing and genuine utopian yearnings. The poem “Bagel Shop Jazz,” which describes the uneasy alliance of “shadow people . . . nightfall creatures”—Beat women, Black hipsters, and “white ethnic” (Jewish and Italian) beat men in a marginalized, nocturnal counterculture—was nominated for the British Guinness Prize for Poetry in 1963. Other poems chronicle the predicament of being Black in America; still others are modeled on jazz compositional principles or invoke jazz themes; and, as titles like “Would You Wear My Eyes?” suggest, many are lyrics that
express acute dissociation and/or an intense desire to live beyond oneself. *Golden Sardine* (1968)—republished in its entirety in *Cranial Guitar: Selected Poems by Bob Kaufman* in 1996—continues many of these themes, and experiments with new versions of the long poem, notably the satiric “Carl Chessman Interviews the PTA from his Swank Gas Chamber.” In 1979 Kaufman received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, which facilitated the publication of *The Ancient Rain*. He died of cirrhosis and emphysema in January 1986, and his ashes were scattered over San Francisco Bay after a New Orleans jazz band led a procession of poets, family and friends around to the North Beach sites—bars, bookstores, cafés, streetcorners—which had been his domain during the height of his career as a poet.

Among those who recognized Kaufman’s importance to the African-American canon well before the academy at large took an interest in jazz and Beat or African-American literature were Barbara Christian, who published the first scholarly appraisal of his work in an essay entitled, appropriately enough even then, “Whatever Happened to Bob Kaufman?”; David Henderson, who co-produced, with Vic Bezdorin, an important radio documentary on Kaufman for KPFA; Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, who recorded dramatic readings of Kaufman’s work for a widely broadcast radio program; Langston Hughes, Clarence Major, Dudley Randall and Stephen Henderson, all of whom anthologized his work in foundational Black poetry anthologies of the 1960s and 1970s. The Darkroom Collective of Boston read his work voraciously in the 1990s, and many of its members, now scattered far and wide, wrote poetic tributes to Kaufman, as have Ted Joans, Amiri Baraka, Wanda Coleman, Devorah Major, Paul Beatty (naming the protagonist of his novel *The White Boy Shuffle* after him), and others. Current ongoing scholarship is reflected in the volume you are holding; in addition, essays by Lorenzo Thomas, Kathryne Lindberg, and Mona Lisa Saloy have appeared within the last decade, and more are forthcoming.

Kaufman not only treated jazz thematically and drew on its formal techniques in his poetry; his life itself functions as a kind of jazz flight: in its interplay between legend, silence and known biographical minutiae; in that the bare bones of biographical fact have been embroidered and elaborated with much fanciful speculation; in that his life and work have had multivalenced influence. In selecting material for this section, I have tried especially to reflect the latter to show both the directions in current scholarly interest in Kaufman and the widely varied range of his inspirational presence for contemporary poets. All the pieces, I believe, respond to different aspects of Kaufman’s career—his poetry and his life-poetics—with a resonant engagement that take on: his surrealism; his wit; his immersion in jazz as an artistic medium as well as a life ethic of constant self-invention, improvisation, accountability to a community and, simultaneous to one’s own vision; and the spectacular abjection of the latter part of his life (though this last must be qualified by a heavy dose of outrage that this could happen).

Will Alexander’s “The Poet in Post-Endurance” acknowledges Kaufman’s surrealistic bent and thematically addresses Kaufman’s later persona of the mendicant visionary, beyond fatigue and the reach of ordinary human pleasures and comforts, witnessing his own disintegration; in the words of photographer Jerry Stoll, a friend from the 1950s, Kaufman’s story was “an American tragedy.” Daniel Carter’s two
pieces, “Endlessly Mendlessly Seeking All Whole Nest” and “untitled” (edited by Scott Hreha), are extended lines of sonic/semantic flight that achieve the apex of free-jazz prose poetry, à la Kaufman’s broadsides “Does the Secret Mind Whisper” and “Second April,” a template of which, “notes from the hot garbadine [sic] scene,” is reproduced here for the first time. In his haiku, James Cherry foregrounds another aspect of Kaufman’s poetic repertoire: the terse, aphoristic zinger-aperçu that punctuates ordinary life with a quasi-alien “take,” while “Beat” indicates one of the literary movements Kaufman identified with as well as the puns its title played on: Kaufman was beat (exhausted, used up by life, oppressed, literally assaulted by policemen on a seemingly hourly basis), blessed with Beatitude (the name of the important journal he co-founded and edited with Bill Margolis and Allen Ginsberg), and heavily influenced by the rhythms of daily life and extraordinary jazz-life—in other words, his words and life were organized around both heard and unheard, explicit and implied, beats—that is, poetry. As his friends later put it, he was a poet 24-7-365, even during his prolonged silences. Tracie Morris’ “The Clicker” extends the critique of the media Kaufman engaged in poems like “Hollywood” and “TeeVee People.” Horace Coleman’s piece draws from the lexicon of Coleman’s own past as a soldier in Viet Nam to describe Kaufman as “missing in action” in the USA—a soul warrior gone missing in the land of ghosts; the accompanying note explains Kaufman’s importance to midwestern poets during and after the Beat period.

Cornelius Eady’s “Wild American” draws on the scathing social wit of Kaufman’s “Benediction” and other politically engaged verses, in which social commentary derives its effective punch from ruthlessly accurate poetic language; most poignantly, Eady’s last few stanzas describe the poet himself as raving street visionary, reduced to oblivion by the racist structures of urban America. Everett Hoagland’s “Walking Kaufman Home” nods to Kaufman’s “Walking Parker Home,” a tribute to Charlie Parker and also a reference to his own son Parker Kaufman, named after Bird, apparently at Jack Kerouac’s suggestion. David Meltzer, whose comradeship with Bob Kaufman stretches back to the 1950s, documents the Beat ambience of that time in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco, where coffeehouses, bars, street corners and the living rooms and bedrooms of beat “pads” comprised the Harvard College and the Yale of a Beat poetic education, and where Kaufman cut a flamboyant and beloved, if often patronized, figure; Meltzer’s enumerations, name by name, of folks long forgotten are themselves elegies and invocations; his “thick description” constitutes a kind of swirling, poetic auto-ethnography of the time/place, something Kaufman also accomplished in “Bagel Shop Jazz.” Finally, Harryette Mullen and giovanni singleton take the experimental trajectory of jazz writing into a formal and disciplined arena: Mullen via the anagram, in which the smallest units of phrases and words (letters and syllables) are manipulated to yield a series of resonant images of Kaufman as a remote, self-contained “hard nut to crack” who nonetheless played an emblematic role in the creative lives of his poetic descendants (the poet himself acting as an Afro-Zen koan, or enigma, calling forth others’ creativity in their attempt to fathom him, as in his own “The Poet”); and singleton via the mesostic, a form introduced into the poetic repertoire by composer John Cage, in which a series of words chosen from Kaufman’s books (and thus inevitably reflective of his sensibility)
are used to spell out (in the magical as well as strictly orthographic sense) his name vertically and thereby to summon his presence into their midst, invoking him as inspiration and animator of the lexical cascade that is poetic activity; they specifically invoke him as forefather to younger poets writing now.

The quintet of critical essays likewise demonstrates through their interplay and complementariness the protean—though subtle and certainly undersung—relevance of Kaufman’s presence to important postwar American literary, cultural and historical developments. James Smethurst’s “Remembering When Indians Were Red: Bob Kaufman, the Popular Front, and the Black Arts Movement” places Kaufman in the context of two extremely significant 20th-century politico-cultural movements whose relationship to each other has been insufficiently studied in recent criticism. The essay reminds us of Kaufman’s early political activism, the details of which have remained overshadowed first by the flamboyance of his early Beat years and then by the painful and protracted scene of his silent disintegration. Aldon Nielsen’s “A Hard Rain: Looking to Bob Kaufman” places Kaufman’s position not only among the Beats (a famously obscured position, if one may be permitted such an oxymoron) but in a powerful, globally diasporic Black modernism, a modernism within which surrealism occupies a special place, as it has been a poetic medium of choice for writers wanting to transcend the limits of a constricting (sometimes to the point of debilitation) political and social reality in order to sketch out a utopian realm of the imagination in all its marvelous linguistic and imagistic aspects. Jeff Falla, in “Bob Kaufman and the (In)visible Double,” demonstrates, through a dialectical reading of “Jail Poems” and other instances of Kaufman’s “extremely rich poetics” against the ethics of estrangement articulated by French poets Arthur Rimbaud and Antonin Artaud, the high psychic toll Kaufman paid to participate in a literary scene which was, to appropriate George Lipsitz’s characterization of the contemporary academy, more open to Black culture than it was to Black people. “Saxophones and Smothered Rage” directly addresses the jazz thematics in Kaufman’s work, and offers a useful counterpoint to previous attempts to fix “jazz poetry” in either overly triumphal or overly rejectionary terms; Amor Kohli’s essay underscores the generative ambivalence that necessarily accompanies an art-form whose credo is the “changing same.” Rod Hernandez’s “Between Black, Brown and Beige: Latin Poets and the Legacy of Bob Kaufman” documents Kaufman’s cross-cultural influence on a local / (potentially) global swathe of poetry-in-praxis: the Latino poetry scene in multi-ethnic San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s, during which the poetic scene moved from North Beach to the Mission District, a predominantly Latino neighborhood in San Francisco. During those years, Kaufman was a largely silent, physically frail though vibrational powerfully present, whose legacy of earlier rambunctious verbal hi-jinx, as well as the poignant residue thereof (the flickering moments when he seemed to come back into functional awareness), has continued to inspire Latino/a, Black, European, and Asian-descended poets of that Pacific Rim bohemia.

The musical composition by bassist William Parker repays the tributes that Kaufman so often paid to jazz musicians. Kaufman’s work has become central reading material for many practicing musicians; one can discern in the freedom with which Kaufman uses language a model compatible with these musicians’ own desires to
liberate sound from the constraints of the already-known into the “form of things unknown.” This piece has not been performed yet, and while it will be wonderful to one day hear rather than merely read or intuit it, its currently deferred promise of fulfillment is a perfect way to epitomize the unfixed and unfixable nature of yearning embodied—enSounded? (per)Sonified?—by creative music, and by Kaufman’s restless poetics of freedom and loss.

The selection of Kaufman’s own poetry is intended not only to accompany and clarify the poems and essays comprising the special section, but also, of course, to invite readers to enjoy the intellectual, affective and sensory pleasure to be found in reading his work and to learn from it as an historical record of and a human endeavor. As no selection can be truthfully “representative,” my hope is that this minimal exposure will lead to further inquiry.

Grateful acknowledgment is owed the poet’s widow, Eileen Kaufman, for her tireless efforts to make Kaufman’s work better known to the public; to photographers Jerry Stoll and Michelle Rochford-Boleyn, for their permission to reproduce portraits of Kaufman from their extensive archives chronicling the San Francisco poetic counterculture of the 1950s–1980s; to the Archie Givens, Sr., Collection on African American Literature at the University of Minnesota for permission to reproduce the typescripts; to Charles Rowell for getting Callaloo behind the project; to Brent Edwards for his suggestion that I join forces with him and Farah Griffin for the special jazz issue, which has worked out well; and to the network of Kaufman scholars and enthusiasts—a network which includes street poets, academics, musicians and others who still believe in the possibility of a world in which creativity, community and justice are more important than the accumulation of material gain—who helped me to gather the material from which this final offering is selected.

"The Archie Givens, Sr., Collection of African American Literature collects, preserves, and makes available books and manuscript material that document the literary history and cultures of African Americans. Housed in the Special Collections and Rare Books unit of the University of Minnesota Libraries, the Givens Collection includes rare books, literary manuscripts, correspondence, pamphlets, photographs, playbills, ephemera, magazines, and audiovisual media. The collection is available for use by students, faculty, staff, and the general public. Besides supporting research and teaching, items in the collection assist in promoting other outreach activities, such as exhibitions, public presentations, and class presentations. Collecting strengths include books, manuscripts, and ephemera created during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.

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