



DAVID RAY

David Ray Discusses *New Letters* & *New Letters on the Air*

It's an honor that your impressive site mentions that Judy Ray and I were founders of *New Letters*, a transformation of *The University of Kansas City Review* edited by Alexander Cappon and Clarence Decker. True enough, but there have been several hands and brilliant individuals of many talents who helped move *New Letters* and its public radio program along, chief and unforgettably, Bob Stewart, Judy Ray, and Rebekah Presson Mosby, who were co-creators, to say the least, my mention here being only the tip of the iceberg in acknowledging their many contributions. Professors Jim McKinley and Bob Farnsworth also were essential for those projects surviving, and Chuck Haddix's skills with tape technology. For the print magazine Lloyd J. Reynolds contributed calligraphy not only of logo and titles, but also of poems of Etheridge Knight, Richard Wright, and others.

Since Judy and I left for Tucson, there have been many more impressive achievements by the *New Letters* group we have witnessed from afar, advances fueled by fresh technology and the devoted work of producer Angela Elam, and we are fully aware of how daunting these efforts and continuing ones have been. I must vainly, however, share my memory of how I got the brainstorm for *New Letters On The Air*. I was simply walking down the street after a tedious English department meeting, glanced down, and noticed the imprint of an oak leaf embedded in the sidewalk as I passed the campus radio station. I then thought how terrific it would be if we had a larger audience for poetry, one that included far more listeners than other writers, and I promptly went in and talked to the late director Sam Scott, who was immediately supportive, though he insisted that we do a series of several programs to demonstrate our ability to produce appealing broadcasts. We sailed right into that work, drawing on many literary texts of both poetry and fiction and original music.

We started broadcasting with regular visits to the KCUR studio and eventually got linked to a number of stations in N.P.R.'s satellite network. The first time we heard from a fan—a man who had been driving across Kansas and heard the program on his radio—we knew we were getting somewhere. Bob Stewart and I were also aware from the outset that preserving the voices and works of poets well into posterity was a strong incentive. Even with my own readings I often felt that it was a shame that we might as well write or “perform” our work on water if we read to small audiences and the effort just disappeared as we traveled on to the next gig. I gathered tapes wherever I could, neglected ones from other venues, and taped interviews with writers, borrowing studio space here and there. At Yaddo I biked over to Skidmore College and interviewed and recorded a number of the Yaddo fellows. In Ohio I came across a private

recording of a James Wright reading. Like a collector of antiques I hunted down material for programs wherever I went.

Since then Bob and Jim and Rebekah and Angela have gone on producing programs immortalizing the voices of many departed writers as well as the still living, assuring a fabulous treasury of recordings available to listeners everywhere. I'll never forget hosting, in the U.M.K.C. studio, unique personalities such as John Ciardi, who seemed intent on fielding a Camels commercial in the tiny sound studio, telling us how in World War II he had replaced his regulation pistol in his holster with a pack of Camels, certain that if captured he would be more likely to be shot if he had a pack of cigarettes instead of a pistol. Sometimes we had to resist the efforts of guests to reshape the program to their liking. When informed that there were six words the network forbade and would bleep if we used them, a famous N.Y. poet used all six in her first poem. The Irish poet Richard Murphy, once we were seated before microphones, pulled out an L.P recording of his book, intending to play it, only to be informed that *New Letters On The Air* was a program devoted solely to poetry *in performance*; nor will I forget Maxine Kumin who, after her studio reading, took Judy and me for coffee and a muffin. Those were just memorable highlights. It was an honor to be part of such a history. We felt honored by any feedback, including censorship of Allen Ginsberg by an Indiana radio station that refused to broadcast the satellite feed of Allen's reading. Hostile as well as laudatory fan mail was welcome.

Back to that oak leaf imprint in the sidewalk: Perhaps the unconscious symbolism that hooked me was that image of a fragile thing of nature, a living being, preserved for the future in an art form comparable to the handprints of movie stars on a Hollywood sidewalk or, more sadly, the immortalized shadow of a victim of the Hiroshima bombing. The voices captured and offered to the world and posterity since then by *New Letters On The Air* have also survived, though thankfully not in concrete. My wife, Judy, and I are proud of having a part in creating that legacy, and I hope that pride is shared by all the others who worked assiduously on this leading.

With Love and Light to all who sustain both the work and the listening.

David Ray
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