

An Article by Peggy Dye

Peggy Dye (January 4, 1943-December 4, 2007)

MAKING CONNECTIONS

City Lore and Poets House thank New York City writer Peggy Dye for sharing the marvelous connections she makes between the *People's Poetry Gathering* and her own life experiences. Over 150 poets and 5000 people from around the country took part in a three-day event in April 1999 that shone a spotlight on this nation's and the world's literary and folk poetry traditions, paying special attention to poetry's oral roots. Audiences reveled to readings by poets Robert Bly and Galway Kinnel; music by Ani DiFranco and U. Utah Phillips; performances by African jalis, hobos, cowboys, and *décimistas* from Colombia, Mexico and Puerto Rico who improvise poetry to music. City Lore and Poets House believe the biannual *Gathering* will inspire people to make links, identify new affinities, appreciate the world's diverse poetics, and participate actively in the popular traditions of poetic expression.

Join us for a virtual *Gathering* at www.peoplespoetry.org that begins September 2000, and for the 2nd People's Poetry Gathering at Cooper Union and other sites in downtown Manhattan March 30 – April 1, 2001.

The *People's Poetry Gathering* thanks its funders: the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, The Rockefeller Foundation, Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs, The Chase Manhattan Foundation, The Greenwall Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, the Ruth Mott Fund, The Scherman Foundation, and The Fund for Folk Culture Conferences and Gatherings Program underwritten by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Martha Cooper



Raymond Patterson

Sun going down,
I sure won't see this day again
Sun going down,
I won't see this day again
When I started out,
I didn't think this day would
end.

— Raymond Patterson

Uncle James' Blues

by Peggy Dye

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I came on a damp Sunday, a perfect night for the blues session of the first international *People's Poetry Gathering* ("Anybody can sing and holler," "bluesician" Raymond Patterson told, "it takes a special pain to sing the blues.") As I closed my eyes to listen to Cephas and Wiggins sing the blues, I could hear the stories — I would call them blues stories that I heard off the front porch in Evanston, Illinois, in the 1950s. ("Children cry when they lose their candy, babies cry when they wet themselves," Patterson continued, "Young folks cry any time it's handy — blues come up from deeper wells.") When I opened my eyes, I could see my uncle James with his white straw hat like John Cephas, and the plaid band around it. I saw my uncle with his pecan-colored face and flowered shirt and flat Mississippi drawl. My uncle from the country was suddenly part of culture and of big-city culture, of "governing culture."

I am a Vassar graduate and learned at Vassar to read William Blake. We did not read the blues at Vassar. Now, after Poets House and City Lore's *Poetry Gathering*, I want to bring my uncle's words and rhymes to Blake and who knows — to Goethe too. My uncle could have quite a talk on the front porch with Goethe. Or, better, with that man who had the blues before Goethe — Hamlet.

Yes, indeed. My uncle James could have sat down and talked with the prince about the slings of fate and outrageous fortune and about getting a rotten deal from one's own uncle and mother — how mean people can be. My uncle could also tell Hamlet how to have a good time while you're having a bad one. The blues teaches you.

My uncle sang the blues. I began to learn myself, too, from what happened one Sunday after church when my uncle James was driving us in his new car for a ride. In the early 1950s a new car was such a novelty that people went for rides the way some of us now go to the movies. My uncle James was driving us around Skokie, which is next door to Evanston, and the suburb where we lived outside Chicago. My uncle James was showing me places I hadn't seen — a stray corn field, plus a canal and blocks of new ranch houses along with a store that served cooked Polish sausages better than even the \$2 hot dogs at Arlington Race Track. We were in the new world in Skokie. The car was purring, and me and my uncle were purring too.

Then the police car pulled us over. "Boy, what you doing in this area?" The big headed cop stuck his face through James' window.

"Just driving my niece on a ride sir," my uncle said, soft as rain. My uncle had a big voice and weighed 200 pounds. But he talked soft as spring rain now.

"A ride? My, my, my. Well, you better ride yourself back to your own place. Aren't no colored living over here. You got no business here. You out of your neighborhood, boy. No place for you here. Understand, boy?" People in Chicago lived segregated. Our neighborhood was black. Skokie was white. The cop peered at me. His dark eyes were as hard as the black crystal beads my grandmother bought from the Hungarian bead lady who sold jewelry at Doc's pharmacy. I flinched at how the cop's eyes glittered and at how my big uncle didn't talk back.

"Sometimes," my uncle said as we drove away, "you have to keep quiet, because the other man has a gun and you don't. The police always have a gun. They don't like us any better than the sheriff did down home. So I talk soft," said my uncle when I asked him how come he spoke to the police as if he were in church.

I didn't like the answer. Felt my uncle — who made good money in construction — shrink before me. Felt the wide canal and the wide spaces with its green fields shrink. My uncle's new, black Chevrolet shrunk too. I felt cold inside my stomach.

Yet my uncle, driving slowly home, watching his mirror — I guessed he was checking for the police — started to sing, "Without a song the day would never end, without a song a man ain't got a friend." That was his favorite song. It is a blues song.

I felt a little better listening to my uncle's sad song. But when we got to James' house with its big front porch and giant oak tree shading the front, he hurried past my mother Alice and his own wife Gladys and my grandmother Ada and Aunt Pinky. The women were eating cake and coffee and highballs after Sunday dinner and watching people go by. Uncle James hurried into the house. Everybody stopped talking. His wife Gladys jumped up to go inside after James. But he stepped back out fast with bourbon in his glass and ginger ale for me with a sprig of mint. Before I could ask where my cousins Jean and Lee were my uncle burst into the story of the police stopping us.

My aunts and grandmother listened, butting in, from time to time, to tell how they had been run out of places or knew people who had, and about ways they had learned to get where they wanted to go, by hook or by crook. Between the choruses my Uncle went to put a blues record on the Victrola in the living room. He opened the window to the veranda and "Without A Song" flowed out. My mother Alice, meantime, told me to come get a hug and not to be afraid. "This is what can happen when you try to go somewhere in the world, baby. Trouble. That's why I'm telling you to go to school." I liked school. But I liked better my Uncle James' back yard, stealing plums and cherries from along the alleys in my neighborhood, and visiting my mother at her job running the cash register at Jack the Greek's grocery. "You go to school, Peggy Anne, to learn what is needed. We can use learning to get a change. The police you saw don't own the world." I didn't see the connection, fully. But I knew that my mother was saying learning had something to do with getting the freedom to drive where you wanted to go.

The *People's Poetry Gathering* stirred up all those memories. "The blues is about life," said John Cephas in his straw hat. "And the telling of it." The lowly, the slaves and the ex-slaves speak the same language of feeling as princes. Therein lies the human bond. We are all story makers — even Hamlet got the blues. We share the same emotions across the class divide. And sometime, our blues songs and our stories may yet show the way to end, even, that wide chasm. ♠

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