

The Performance Worlds of the Lost Tribe and the Carma Bums

M. Lane Bruner

How can one explain the Lost Tribe and the Carma Bums, or their many transitions through various poetic forms? A book, *Twisted Cadillac*, a documentary, *Luxurious Tigers of Obnoxious Agreement*, numerous chapbooks, and a section in *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* attempted to capture the spirit of the groups we were, but the task was not easy.¹ Given the range of language games played by our groups, not to mention the range of performance theories those games were based on, who could succinctly yet fully explain our performance worlds, if by that term we mean a “world” where “poetic” language is conceptualized in a unique way, where there is a community of people who share that conceptualization, and where members of that community use that conceptualization to create and publicly disseminate their “art”? Even I find it difficult, and I was a founding member of both groups. Perhaps it is safe to say that the first group, the Lost Tribe, sought something like Hollywood fame by moving in an entertaining and often pop cultural poetry world, while our second group, the Carma Bums, gave up on such ambitions to move into a more theoretically motivated and improvisational performance world. No doubt both groups embodied very different notions of what “performance poetry” was all about.

Meeting in Hollywood in 1982, flourishing from 1983 to 1995, and performing together until 2009, the four members of the Lost Tribe (me, S.A. Griffin, Doug Knott, and Mike Mollett) and the six members of the Carma Bums (the Lost Tribe, Scott Wannberg and sometimes Bobbo Staron) performed hundreds of times in venues ranging from art galleries to biker bars, from libraries to cabarets, and from coffee shops to old growth forests across the western United States and Canada. In our ear-

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¹ The Carma Bums, *Twisted Cadillac: A Spoken Word Odyssey* (Los Angeles, CA: Sacred Beverage Press, 1996). Alan Kaufman and S.A. Griffin, eds., *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1999), pp. 568-83. Bruce Dickson directed our video. See <http://www.brucedickson.com/biography> (accessed June 9, 2011).

liest performances, we simply read our poems at small open mic venues and coffee-houses, but then quickly moved to memorized recitations, and then moved from reciting our poems to staging them in nightclubs, theaters and cabarets, complete with blocking, choreography, props and lighting. At the same time, we also experimented with other types of “poetic” performance.² The Lost Tribe got married, for example, complete with wedding dresses, a lovely cake, a baseball of truth (if you held it you had to tell the spontaneous unvarnished truth), and money sandwiches as hors d'oeuvres for the guests. We also ran for President of the United States, appearing in theaters and on cable television programs as a collective candidate.³

This, however, is only half the story. After winning the revived Gong Show on CBS (with the lowest score in the show's history, an 8 out of 30) and being courted by The Improv Comedy Club, we blew ourselves up completely, and in our later performances we turned away from memorized poems designed for maximum entertainment value toward spontaneous spoken word, or “non-linear raps,” based on Scott Kelman’s improvisational techniques, who in turn had been influenced by the Living Theater and the Open Theater in New York.⁴ In the spirit of the Beats, and after some halting beginnings under such names as Wounded Theater and The Dead Beats, the newly formed Carma Bums picked long interstate highways, booking a handful of shows in towns and cities along those highways over a period of two or three weeks. We first hit the road on “poet’s tour” in August of 1989, assuming that our formal performances were only an excuse for the real show, which was on the road. After several such “tours” the Carma Bums went online in the mid-1990s and built a website composed of various word games, from “radio mysteries” to “exploding texts,” where viewers could co-create the latter. The website, *The Carma Bums International Superhighway Tour of Words*, which included graphic images created exclusively for the site, was the first poetry website of its kind upon its launch in 1995. Continuing periodically to travel as a troupe, in 2004 we came together in Atlanta to develop yet another show, “Armageddon Outta Here,” and to record experiments on improvisational group speaking and listening as a form of conceptual jazz.⁵

² Members of the Lost Tribe and the Carma Bums were wary of the term poetry and the label of poets. We all had the desire to experiment with a wide range of performance techniques and forms, and we were reasonably unsure if everything within that range was “poetry.” That said, all of us certainly wrote and often performed memorized poems.

³ We were “married” by Pope John Paul George Ringo I (Neal Taylor) at X=Art in West Hollywood, a house transformed into a club by Deborah Exit. As for our presidential bid, a show called “The Tribe Must Be President” played at Scott Kelman’s Pipeline theaters on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, and we gave stump speeches on Victoria Looseleaf’s cable show on the Los Angeles art scene and in various cabarets and nightclubs. Our campaign lasted for about three months. Sadly, we did not win.

⁴ For a brief autobiography by Kelman, and his history as a performer, producer, and teacher, see “Scott Kelman,” in *California Performance 2* (1991/1992), pp. 74-92

⁵ Exemplifying this work is the soundtrack for the Judith Hoffberg mail-art memorial retrospective. It can be seen and heard at <http://wn.com/TheCarmabum> (accessed June 30, 2011).

This brief chronology, however, hardly captures the *spirit* of the Lost Tribe, or suggests what our “obnoxious agreements” looked like as the Carma Bums, or speaks to our untold adventures in Griffin’s decked out 1959 Cadillac Sedan de Ville “Farther” (without radio, air conditioning, or speedometer), or explains why we were often chosen “Pick of the Week” for nightclub and theater entertainment in Los Angeles, or describes the general strategic zaniness we were caught up in for over two decades. From our first performances for small audiences at venues like ZTZU or the Water Gallery, to the wild ovations the Lost Tribe received in packed Los Angeles cabarets such as the Lhasa Club, to the intriguing experiences we had on the road as the Carma Bums, it would take a “mathematical symphony” to fully capture the performance worlds we entered and created. Here, only a brief and light operetta can be offered, though this is perhaps fitting, for no matter how serious we may have become in our various performances, we ultimately saw and presented ourselves as self-effacing jesters making our critical poetic commentaries as comical and lighthearted as possible.

The Discovery of the Lost Tribe

As a young man living in West Hollywood, California in 1982, I happened to hear Ivan E. Roth on a KXLU radio show devoted to the local poetry scene. His poems seemed pleasant enough, and honest enough, so when he agreed to take calls at the end of his show I phoned. I told him of my interest in poetry, and that I wrote poetry. Upon hearing this, he spoke enthusiastically about an open mic event at a local art venue, the Water Gallery, held every Wednesday night from about 9 p.m. to midnight. In fact, even as we spoke, he added, it was happening in the gay/leather district on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood, only blocks from my apartment.

Grabbing a few poems, I headed off. Upon entering my first public poetry venue, I found myself in the foyer of a small, narrow, dark, and smoke-filled art gallery with about twenty-five people inside. A poet was reading his work under a light in the back, sitting on a stool on a raised platform. The doorman, “Murph,” dutifully took my two dollar entrance fee; then he quietly asked if I wanted to read, and how I had heard of the place. Immediately upon hearing my answer he got up from his seat, interrupting the poor reader, to announce, “Hey everyone, Ivan E. Roth sent this guy!” I was then embarrassingly ushered to the stage amid undeserved hubbub and proceeded to read my three short poems, which, by the reaction I received, were obviously quite bad.

This hard lesson, while depressing, was also exciting. After all, if I could sense my poems were bad among these critics, who apparently all thought of themselves as poets, then there was a lot potentially to learn. So I took my seat among the strangest of these Hollywood strangers, who I soon discovered had names like Leah Really, Johnny Forever, Fish Karma, Girl George, Jerry the Priest, and Tequila Mockingbird, and listened, as carefully as I could, to the rest of the evening’s readers, and then resolved to return the following Wednesday.

The Water Gallery would prove to have a profound impact on my future as a poet, a performer, and a person. For the next three years, almost every Wednesday night, I would head for “the Water.” Some nights, it is true, were sparsely attended and tedious, and often filled with very bad poetry, and I contributed my small part, at least at first, to the general misery. On other nights, however, it was nothing short of magical. This, after all, was Hollywood, the city where everyone is actually somebody else, and where talent is always struggling to emerge. The waitress is really an actress; the gas station attendant is a scriptwriter; the cashier is a dancer, or a choreographer, or a set designer just in from Kansas City, and so on. It was no different with me or the people I met at the Water Gallery. At the time, in so-called real life, I was merely a bank teller without a college degree, yet like most of my Water compatriots I also had boxes filled with poems at home. So of course we were all really poets, or at least we wanted to be “Hollywood poets,” whatever that meant, and sometimes the poems and performances were not so bad, and sometimes they were wonderful.

I remember any number of interesting nights at the Water Gallery. There was the night when the owner of the gallery, who we rarely saw, descended upon us all. He came down from his upstairs loft to a full house, yelling and drunk out of his mind, upset with Murph for moving his small statue of “King Ubu” (of Alfred Jarry fame) on the upright piano in the gallery. He ended his tirade by pulling down his pants, pointing at his ass and exclaiming “this is what you are!” Then, just as abruptly, he pulled up his pants and stormed off. Now it just so happened that that particular night was especially terrific. The place was packed with about fifty people, many we had never seen before, but this was an increasing occurrence as the Water Gallery’s underground reputation grew. In the middle of this evening of exceptional performances, one of these newcomers, who we never saw again, took the stage to announce, in a most dignified and serious way, that he had been living in the sewers of New York for the last two years composing an opera, an excerpt of which he was now to perform. After so speaking, he began to expertly play a haunting and brilliantly complex tune on the Water Gallery’s rarely played, and slightly out of tune, aforementioned piano. After about five minutes the music began to build toward a crescendo, but as it did so, and in its own sort of reverse crescendo, the music also began to fall apart, eventually being reduced to nothing more than his pounding on the keys with his elbows. At the peak of this slowly building chaos, the sewer composer actually began to froth at the mouth, moving into a sort of convulsive delirium. Then, exhausted and done playing his “excerpt,” he immediately and fully composed himself, rose to bow, and then returned to his seat in the audience, again in all dignity and seriousness.

There was another night when Doug Knott, who usually emceed the open mic at the Water Gallery, appeared late, sweating and breathless. He burst into the well-attended gallery and immediately took out a cigarette, loudly proclaiming the following: “Two men are standing up to their waists in gasoline. One has seven matches, and the other has five matches. Both think there’s a referee . . . but there’s not!” Upon passing this veiled nuclear judgment, he leaned toward an unsuspecting young woman

with the unlit cigarette in his mouth, as if to ask for a light, which she dutifully procured. The audience exploded, for unthinkingly she had struck the first match! Now we were all obliterated, and perhaps our scheming emcee had actually said, “Both think there is a referee, but there’s Knott!” Pleased that his little performance had worked precisely as planned, he then triumphantly proceeded to the stage, performed another memorized piece, and thus the open mic began.

There were many such moments, both edgy and interesting, and in them I managed to meet just about every underground poet in Los Angeles over the course of 1983 and 1984. I was fortunate to be in a position to familiarize myself with the wide range of styles people brought to their performances, and it did not take long to learn who, at least to my mind, were the most talented and entertaining among them: S.A. Griffin, Doug Knott, Mike Mollett, and Bobbo Staron. There were other good poets, and some with decent performance skills, but for me they were not as unique, interesting, engaging or entertaining as these four. Knott was simply a great poet with a genuine cabaret confidence. S.A. was a tall and handsome television and film actor with a tinge of Elvis who was successfully building his Hollywood career. His poetry was earthy, humane, and filled with popular references. Mollett was completely abstract and quirky. He would do sound poems or extremely short pieces that made you laugh or scratch your head. Bobbo was something like a postmodern folk musician-poet, though trained in classical music. All of them were extraordinarily confident and energetic when they took the stage, often they performed memorized poems, or songs, or some type of performance art, and they consistently captured audiences with their presence, their talent, and their wit.

The poetic camaraderie between the five of us began to grow, even though the Water Gallery thrived for only a few short years, from 1981-1985. Still, as long as it survived, it was a true conduit to the larger underground Los Angeles art and entertainment scene in more ways than one. Not only was it a meeting place for fringe artists, it also happened to be connected via a hallway at the back to the backstage door of the hippest cabaret in Hollywood at that time: the Lhasa Club.⁶ Along with Al’s Bar, the Anti-Club, and a small number of less stable locations, the Lhasa was a risk-taking performance space, famous among up and coming artists and entertainers in Los Angeles, especially those on the cutting edge of the burgeoning punk rock and performance art scene, and we poets very much wanted to play there. After all, we were developing into performance poets who memorized our work and delivered it dramatically, which was something unique and risky in Los Angeles at the time.⁷ We also had discovered that performing memorized poems, and working to embody those poems honestly and fully, brought added opportunities and challenges to us and

⁶ For a small taste of what the Lhasa Club was all about before its demise in 1989 (“as close to a pre-war German cabaret as one could get in Los Angeles”), see the sample articles at <http://www.articles.latimes.com/keyword/lhasa-club> (accessed June 22, 2011).

⁷ This was before the “world” of “slam” poetry had come upon the scene, which we had absolutely nothing to do with and eventually came to abhor, with its often “slick,” overly rhythmic, cliché, competitive and capitalist overtones.

our audiences. As performers, not simply readers, our relationships with audiences were dramatically magnified, since any sign of poor execution, dishonesty, or pretension was immediately and damningly visible. Furthermore, audiences were no longer there simply to listen attentively, or to reflect privately and passively on the work; instead, they had to confront both the poetry and us, for better or for worse. For example, one night, with the permission of the owner, the Lost Tribe “stormed” the restaurant Gorky’s in downtown L.A. with pantyhose pulled over our heads, and, holding baked potatoes in our hands that we had picked up off patron’s plates, proceeded to “shoot into the air” using gestures suggestive of guns, “kidnapping” our surprised audience who were then instructed to “pretend” they were “at a poetry reading, so that nobody would get hurt.” In so doing, we successfully “took over” the restaurant. Poetry events, in other words, became far less “safe” and far more confrontational, and that made them more dramatic in every sense of the word, and this is one of the reasons why we longed for larger stages.

Our development as performance poets began in earnest with the emergence of the Lost Tribe, which we developed between 1985 and 1988 into something of an underground sensation.⁸ After Griffin, Knott and Mollett did a show called *City of the Jealous Gods*, and I did a few shows mixing poetry and music with Staron, the four of us who ultimately became the Tribe, while riding on the floor of a VW van on our way to a poetry reading in Orange County, determined that we should start doing shows as the Lost Tribe. So we booked a few shows in San Francisco under that name on April Fool’s weekend of 1985, while Bobbo, who was honestly more interested in music than poetry, decided to go his own way. At our first performances we simply lined up four chairs in front of the small audiences in attendance and read or performed our poems from memory, one at a time, in a round robin style. We realized right away, however, that the approach was not right; it was not engaging enough, and within a year we moved from this primitive set up to increasingly elaborate, staged presentations based on loose themes. In the early phases of this transformation we would place dozens of words in a hat, including articles, nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and then take one out each.⁹ We would then decide on the order of the words for the title of our shows. “The Warsaw Pigeon Myth,” performed in early 1986 at Be-Bop Records in Reseda, California, for example, was a show built abstractly around this theme.

Given our growing repertoire of memorized poems, by late 1986 we were focusing on clearer themes and more elaborate staging. When someone performed their poem as lead, the rest of us would interact with them and the audience as chorus in ways that provided context or commentary. Our cabaret and nightclub shows, which

⁸ For a sample of posters and other visual evidence of performances by The Lost Tribe, see <http://carmabum.blogspot.com/2011/06/lost-tribe-flyers-pics-1985-1992.html> (accessed July 5, 2011).

⁹ Such techniques were encouraged by Mollett, for whom John Cage’s “chance operations” was an early influence.

became increasingly frequent and well-attended, came to consist of the four of us interspersing two or three of each of our pieces. Our performed poems usually lasted from one to three minutes, so the shows, which became seamless performances, averaged about twenty-five minutes, which was just right for the venues willing to present such fare. As we became more popular over the next three years, we would usually take the stage right before the headliners, who were usually members of well-known punk bands, and right after four or five other acts, from comedians and musicians to performance artists such as Robin the Pops and Pans Percussionist, Bob Flanagan, John Fleck, Wanda Coleman, the Dark Bob, or the Del Rubio triplets. For us, the question was simply this: which poems could be most happily and successfully staged? What most moved and entertained audiences, and where and how far could we take them into the jungles of language we loved to explore without losing them?

Starting in 1985, Knott, our Water Gallery emcee and now official Lost Tribesman, had managed to infiltrate the Lhasa Club as a producer and sometimes performance poet, and for the next four years he regularly produced a bi-monthly series of highly popular variety shows combining music, performance art, exhibitions, poetry, comedy, dance, and short films. By the end of 1986, their popularity prompted the *LA Weekly* to declare Knott “the underground Ed Sullivan of the ‘80s.”¹⁰ Our fortunate connection eventually provided us with opportunities to perform at the Lhasa with rising music sensations such as Exene Cervenka of the band X, Henry Rollins of Black Flag, and Flea of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

It was at these Lhasa shows where the Lost Tribe reached its summit and where the cabaret performance poetry world of the 1980s blossomed for us. Between 1986 and early 1989, we were regularly featured in the *LA Weekly* under “Scoring the Clubs,” or in the “L.A. Dee Da on the Streets” gossip section, or as “Pick of the Week” under readings, theaters or clubs. It was also at the Lhasa where we chose in late 1986 to premier what would become one of our first highly popular shows, “Slobs in Suits,” and an extended synopsis of that show may provide some sense of what we were about.

Knott had named this particular evening of entertainment at the Lhasa the *Show to Go*. It included Michael Blake (who went on to win an Academy Award for *Dances with Wolves*), Flea, Exene, and two solo performance artists, and we, as came to be the norm, were the penultimate act. In the performance, we took the stage, populated by four folding chairs and scattered props, initially appearing like automatons in suits carrying briefcases, then engaging in a very fast and stiff choreographed “bit” where we sat in turn, crossed our legs in turn, then opened *Wall Street Journals* in turn, then set them down in unison, and then opened our briefcases in unison, which contained other props. At that point, still moving quickly, Knott rose to perform “How to Judge

¹⁰ K. Canoe, “We Are A’Mused,” *LA Weekly* (December 1, 1986).

Poetry,” a light and easy poem where we all make fun of each other to set the tone for the show.¹¹ Here is a segment from the poem.

poets are those guys with skinny chests [we all point at Mollett]
 who can't play guitar as well as the rest [we all point at Knott]
 who nobody listens to! [we all point at each other accusatorily]
 listen
 if you ever hear a poet complaining about no one listening to them
 it's their own damn fault!
 either they are no good [we all accusingly point at one another]
 their stuff is no good [we again all accusingly point at someone else]
 or both! [we all point at Griffin, who also points resignedly at himself].

The poem ends with the following lines: “poetry has to pull the plug/or at least fake the feelings of truth very well/otherwise it is no good/and you know/you can just tell.”

At that point we all give Knott a “score” written on large cards, as if he were on the Gong Show or at an Olympic event, then reach into our briefcases and pull out masks to put on (Knott was Nixon, someone else had an elephant's nose, and so on), since our next poem is one of mine, “Cartoons are My Life.”¹² The rest of the guys accompany my piece, as appropriate, with ridiculous gestures and various cartoon sounds, both vocally and with penny whistles, and after this slightly more abstract comedy we turn to S.A.'s more sobering “Football and Beer.”¹³ At this point the stage goes dark, save for a blue special strobe providing the illusion of television light. The poem begins darkly:

he hates his job
 his tie is too tight
 he cuts himself shaving
 he hates the music on the radio
 he works
 every day
 he has children who hate him
 he hates his parents
 he drives home in the traffic
 he puts on his tattered clothes that make him
 feel good

¹¹ The poem is in Doug Knott's *Small Dogs Bark Cartoons* (Los Angeles: Seven Wolves Publishing, 1991), p. 49.

¹² The poem can be found in *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*, p. 570.

¹³ For the full poem, see S.A. Griffin, *A One Legged Man Standing Casually on Hollywood Boulevard Smoking a Cigarette* (Los Angeles: Shelf Life Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.

he watches the news
 he hates the news
 he watches
Monday Night Football!

On that cue, the lights come up, and we football fans moodily watching the imagined television suddenly jump up behind Griffin and open previously shaken beers, which spray both us and the audience, and we cheer maniacally for *Monday Night Football* and beer. Here the energy of the poem increases, and S.A. becomes the increasingly drunken quarterback and we his excited team. We each continue to spray beer and finish off the cans, and I run out into the audience to catch an imaginary touchdown pass, after which S.A. throws dog food out across the audience when celebrating the touchdown with his team. Then, at the height of our Dionysian merriment, and as the audience is laughing, the poem again abruptly turns dark, as we learn that our quarterback sometimes “pukes/very hard/ and he tears things up/and he hurts his wife/and he hurts his children.” At the end of the piece, we drunken fans, exhausted from football and beer, lie prostrate on the ground, where we next become “cockroaches” for Knott’s “I am a Bad Housekeeper.”¹⁴

In this darkly comic yet relatively abstract piece about cockroaches in Knott’s very own apartment, we crawl about on various lighting and line cues, such as “I turn on the lights/and I disturb/school!” And, “I turn off the lights and yes/you can hear them/they sound like tiny computers” (and we dutifully make the sound of tiny computers as we scurry about in the dark). Free to do whatever we want as the lights come back up, we cockroaches might beg Knott for food, or rub against his legs, or rise up on our legs as if to attack. Extricating himself with difficulty, and retrieving a ridiculously gigantic fumigation can from the back of the stage, he sprays us until we die, which ends the poem. This transitions us into Mollett’s “I am the Bomb,” a much darker piece about nuclear annihilation where “the cats & refrigerators slam/thru space with the buildings and the cars” and where the bomb “vaporizes all those habits,” while we, dead on the ground, can do nothing.¹⁵

Following up on this dark tone, and now sobered, like good businessmen the slob chorus returns to our chairs as S.A. stands and delivers “Paperwork,” a poem about being buried in bureaucratic meaninglessness.¹⁶ As he speaks we slowly and reverently rise to mummify him from the feet up in computer paper (the old type, with holes on the side). We cover his head just as he completes the poem: “I became a lost Egyptian prince of print/a pyramid of paperwork/I think I need a vacation/I will send the paperwork to personnel.” Then, after the briefest of dramatic pauses, he busts out of

¹⁴ Knott’s poem, missing the final stanza, is in *Small Dogs Bark Cartoons*, p. 42. The final stanza in the performed piece is as follows: “So I share my house with my fear/Tomorrow I will tell tell the landlord/and he, like St. George, will save me/from those little boys’ arms/that reach out out of glass/and push me away.”

¹⁵ Mollett’s poem can be found in *Twisted Cadillac*, pp. 90-1.

¹⁶ This poem is also in Griffin’s *A One Legged Man*, p. 45.

the paper with a yell, just as we stoop to pick up makeshift spears, and Knott launches into “Jam Ram Damn Cram,” a nonsense poem about “Tarzan the fag,” as we dance about him like cannibals. Here is how it begins:

Jam! Ram! Damn! Cram!
 [we cannibals start to chant “scumbag scumbag scumbag you/dumbbag dumbbag dumbbag you” as Knott proceeds with the poem in time with our accompaniment]
 Pimples come out of your mouth!
 You must be from the south!
 [scumbag scumbag scumbag you/dumbbag dumbbag dumbbag you]
 Tarzan is a FAG with a David Bowie mask on
 Tarzan in a FAG with a David Bowie mask on
 Under the grass skirt *Jane’s into it too!*
 [scumbag scumbag scumbag you/dumbbag dumbbag dumbbag you]

Eventually, a few stanzas later, after being “captured” by the cannibals, Tarzan is arrested and “served with rolling papers,” and “he say to the court/those things/that look like you/fall off my face!” And we all conclude with a hearty chorus of “Jam! Ram! Damn! Cram!”

Thus moved into the wildest of abstractions, Mollett next performs a manic piece of his own called “Some Bizarro Cult Thing,” and we, still half mad cannibals, drop our spears and curiously gather about him as he picks up a magazine and starts to rant:

Oh jeez. Look at this. Another one of those weird magazines. Some bizarro cult thing must have had an orgy inside. GODDAMNED MAG. I’VE JUST ABOUT HAD IT. SOME PEOPLE WILL BUY ANYTHING. Look at this. Look at this here . . . GODDAMNED MAGAZINE. GODDAMNED DIRTY MAG, GODDAMNED PERVERTS. They should take it off the shelves. Arrest the leaders. Lock um up. Put um away for good. Force them to listen to classical music like plants. Kids could get a hold of this. Little girls” [he says with a slight hint of perversion] . . .¹⁷

Going on like this for another minute or so, we eagerly agree with everything he says, becoming so agitated, and titillated, that when he finally shows us the “centerfold” (a collage of high fashion and war carnage he put together just for us to look at, since “out of delicacy” he refuses to show it to the audience) we are motivated to walk away in disgust at his last line “they oughta be shot!” (referring, obliquely, to ourselves), striking poses upstage, with back lighting, as if we are riding on a subway train, dejected.

¹⁷ The complete poem is in *Twisted Cadillac*, p. 8.

Equally disgusted and dejected, Mollett quickly joins us as Knott steps out to perform his “Ballad of Bernard Goetz,” a poem about a man who shot several black muggers on a New York subway train. The poem is highly confrontational, as Knott becomes Goetz, he “gets him a gun,” and he points it (his finger) at the audience as he “practices/for the moment/*THE moment*/all alone in his room.” Upon this cue, the rest of us step off the stage to roam with true hostility around the audience, and I am directed to approach any white women I choose and, borrowing lines from the poem, meanly and cruelly say the following: “give me five dollars at least/you white bitch/give me that/and give me that/and give me that and that and that.” Then, as we re-ascend the stage, Griffin approaches “Bernie” demanding “five dollars at least,” but we do “not know/that Bernie [is] packin’ a piece.” Continuing his poem, he shoots us one by one: “bang!/bang!/bang!/you look like you need some more lead young man/bang!” Then he moves out to the audience and earnestly asks, “Do you want me to hang?” Reacting to however the audience might respond to that question, Knott wraps up the poem and we transition to our finale, which in this case is the poem “I Don’t Know Where I’m Going.”

Moving very quickly, the lights go dark once again as we assemble as a tight group, arm in arm, with Mollett in the front and middle grasping a car’s steering wheel. S.A. and I stand on either side of him with operating flashlights/headlights attached to belts around us, and Knott is behind us. Mollett (hauntingly singing): “I don’t know where I’m going.” We repeat (in the same haunting tone) “I don’t know where I’m going.” Mollett (flatly):

hands on the wheel
the 405 freeway
that direction in front of me
following those lights
those lights mate out there waaayyyy ahead.

We repeat the same haunting phrase “I don’t know where I’m going” as Mollett, with increasing agitation and a rising pitch, says

if
I don’t know where
if
I don’t know
if
if it takes
if it takes that long to know I’m with you
I will keep my foot on this accelerator!

As his energy rises, the rest of us make equally energetic rumbling car noises, and with the word “accelerator” we all take off and careen off the stage, making all sorts of

racket, knocking props over, revealing as we exit that Knott has a lit license plate attached to his behind.

Our audience that night responded with a standing ovation, which caused us to stick our heads out briefly from the back door like the Marx Brothers, one head top to bottom, to wave and happily repeat in unison, “We love you! You're beautiful! Don't ever change!”

And the times were happy. In the following years our shows continued to meet with solid and ever-increasing success, and it was at this time that we hit our stride as poet-entertainers. We found that we had discovered a new type of “serious” comedy. While always self-effacing, and while most of our shows included light pieces on Madonna, or Michael Jackson, or current events, we were still able to take our audiences into dangerous poetic territory after gaining their trust. Making our audiences laugh and then moving deftly toward the tragic and then back to the comic, we were given license to stretch the boundaries of language in a popular forum, and this was uniquely exhilarating.

In the flush of these successes, some of us were especially eager to see where all of this might take us as the inventors of a new and previously unheard of type of popular entertainment. Audiences responded in surprisingly intense ways to poems like “Football and Beer,” which was actually a sideways attack on the overly masculine male, and my “Mayberry Song,” a ditty about living in small town America, and S.A.'s “While Making Copies At The Xerox Place In West L.A.,” a poem about homelessness and human cruelty, and even “I am the Bomb” could be pulled off when coupled with self-effacing buffoonery through pieces like “Shithead Mechanic” or “How to Judge Poetry.” We had, we believed, created a new type of entertainment where poetry had finally met Hollywood, and where we could proudly proclaim on our press releases and promotional flyers that we were performing “poetry for people who drink beer,” and that “artists who fake fine art [had] met their match.” Some of us, especially me and Knott, became real dreamers, believing the Lost Tribe might eventually make it to the Improv Comedy Club or the Comedy Store, and then maybe even the David Letterman show, and then who knew what might happen.

It was, however, not to be.

One late day in the life of the Lost Tribe, in late 1988, just as we were indeed being introduced by a talent scout to The Improv, and just after winning the Gong Show doing something completely ridiculous about the 405 Freeway set to the tune of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” and having just completed our successful theater show “The Tribe Must be President,” S.A. suddenly but for good reasons pulled the plug on the troupe by announcing he was quitting. First of all, his professional acting career had taken off. He was, for example, regularly booking national commercials, film and television work; in 1985 he had appeared in Clint Eastwood's Pale Rider; and in 1988 he landed a role in Twins with Arnold Schwarzenegger. Second, and even more importantly, he was starting a family. Third, he was quitting because, as was really obvious to everyone, our fun had slowly but surely become work, and he wasn't happy with the direction the group seemed to be taking: more “Hollywood” and less

“poetry.” As an indispensable member of the troupe, it was a crippling blow, and just like that the group stopped performing as the Lost Tribe.

S.A. could not be blamed. On the one hand, as our popularity increased, and we began to learn in earnest about the possibilities for performance poetry, we gradually found ourselves fighting all of the time, mainly over the art, or over what would and would not work, and why. On the other hand, it was our very popularity that eventually destroyed us. At our peak we were doing one or two shows a week in various venues, and, because the venues for large audiences were relatively scarce, we had to write new material and develop new themes on a fairly regular basis. It was crucially important to keep the act fresh. Even for the few months when we played with the “Slobs in Suits” theme, no two shows were ever the same, and then we soon changed themes again. While we might find ways to slip in an old favorite or two now and then, it suddenly became incumbent upon us to create new poems quickly, then think them through as performance pieces, and then rehearse and perfect them. It took a great deal of time and effort to create consistently challenging yet entertaining pieces and to combine them artfully for maximum effect. As long as we were stumbling along looking for the ideal form, and while we were writing poems for fun whenever we wanted and without pressure, everything was fine, but once we began to be more seasoned entertainers, and thus became more popular, it soon became a real burden to produce appropriately sophisticated work on demand. Before, it had just been fun, lots and lots of fun; but now, perhaps paradoxically, it had become conflict and labor; therefore, the Lost Tribe simply faded back into the forest of the city.

From Wounded Theater and the Dead Beats to the Carma Bums

As one might well imagine, that even in spite of this blow, given our prior successes and our personalities, our poetic enthusiasms could not be so easily suppressed; sure enough, in 1989, our group began a slow and painful metamorphosis into a completely different type of poetry troupe: an improvisational poetry troupe that eventually became the Carma Bums. At first I refused to participate. Angered at losing “my big chance,” and having returned in the meantime to college to study Communication, I was now working in the evening as the Executive Producer for Kelman’s Pipeline Theaters. Still, it was tempting to return to the fold. After all, it was in Kelman’s performance workshops, which all of us had been taking while performing as the Lost Tribe, where we learned the improvisational techniques the guys were now trying to use in public. Nevertheless, I thought these initial shows, where the guys called themselves Wounded Theater and The Dead Beats, were ugly and inartistic, at least at first.

The other ex-Tribesmen, now joined by Wannberg and Staron, being relatively anarchic compared to me, far more “devil-may-care joyful” in their word play, and far less concerned that we “do it so well” that “the audience can get it,” dived right in to the deep end of the improvisational pool. For about six months they did improvisational performances (wordplay more than poetry) in small venues, while I at times hovered offstage, often cringing, and sometimes being publicly accused by those on

the stage of being a coward for not participating.¹⁸ Perhaps they were right, for these were strange and dangerous language waters.

Kelman's workshops were curious to say the least, for they were primarily concerned with such things as "awareness about presence," "learning that it is impossible not to act," "radical listening and watching," "trusting the process," and "erasing the line between being and acting." In something like the exact opposite of method acting, where you conjure up relevant memories, then deeply investigate your character's motivations, and then act accordingly through empathy, here the idea was to empty your mind in order to fully listen and observe, to set your imagination completely free, and to trust unintentional processes. At the time, as far as I know, the six of us (the Lost Tribe plus Wannberg and Staron) were completely unfamiliar with previous forms of non-rational, a-rational, and super-rational approaches to language in performance. Only Mollett was familiar with Dada, and none of us were familiar with the Surrealists, so we failed to recognize how this new approach to language we were learning could be linked to the critical side of the avant-garde tradition in poetry.¹⁹

One of Kelman's exercises particularly relevant to our emerging conceptualization of a new type of language performance was what he called the "non-linear rap," or non-linear speaking. In learning this exercise, and the many others he used when teaching us his detailed performance vocabulary, we definitely entered a completely different performance world. Suddenly, no longer were we "Hollywood" performance poets memorizing and staging pieces for maximum theatrical effect, and no longer was our art tied to "playing audiences like a violin;" instead, we were now beginning to explore the unconscious, to trust the process of language unfolding without conscious manipulation, and to allow our public performances to emerge out of radical group listening to spontaneous spoken words (and intensely watching each other's actions in the process).

Non-linear rap, only one of Kelman's improvisational techniques, is initially nothing more than learning to speak as quickly as possible while disrupting narrative coherence.²⁰ In the workshops for beginners, students were put in a circle of five or six

¹⁸ For the best account of one of these anti-performances, which occurred at the Poecentric Lounge when we were receiving an award from the Los Angeles poetry community, see Knott's short poetic essay, "Mortification Theory and Practice," in *Twisted Cadillac*, pp. 44-7. This was also likely as close as we came to the nihilism of Dada.

¹⁹ For helpful introductions to Dada and Surrealism, and how they relate to poetry, see Maurice Nadeau, *A History of Surrealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1994]/1989); David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Jerrold Seigel's excellent *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 295-397.

²⁰ These techniques can be roughly compared to early Surrealist approaches to "automatic writing," where "a monologue [is] spoken as rapidly as possible, on which the subject's critical spirit brings no judgment to bear, which is subsequently unhampered by reticence, and which

people and one would begin speaking non-linearly for thirty seconds or so. It immediately became clear, however, that when speakers passed judgment on the process, or thought too hard about what they would say, their “centers would rise,” to use Kelman’s terminology (i.e., they would freeze up because of judgment and over-thinking). Conversely, those who became proficient at non-linear speaking, and who had found a way to play without judgment, would go dancing off into associations that might go something like the following spontaneous (and un-retouched) passage:

The man on the horse carried me away on a ship beyond thoughtlessness because nurseries anymore are filled with emotions one might hardly imagine, being had like a whore on the beach with some drink in your hand, by the aisle in the grocery store where I met you sunning yourself in refrigerator shades, while the light danced off you, there on the tile floor, complete with the nuances of desire and fate.

It is crucial to understand that *it simply does not matter* if the sentence “makes sense,” or how one word or sentence relates to another, since the whole purpose of the exercise is to give the speaker free reign to free associate.

When “rappers” felt they had gotten to the end of what they had to say (Kelman stressed shorter bursts for beginners), they were instructed to “cycle” the last few words of their “rap.” In this case the person would say “the nuances of desire and fate, the nuances of desire and fate” over and over again, deliberately, while looking at someone else in the circle. Then the person so enjoined would also cycle the same phrase. When the two people’s voices fused sufficiently through continuously applying energy to the words, radically listening, and co-adjusting one to the other (Kelman wanted this to happen as quickly as possible, but not before the voices were truly fused), then the co-cycler would begin their own rap, the original speaker would drop off, and the process would continue.²¹ Once students began to grasp the basic principles and “stopped thinking so much,” the small group of five or six persons in the circle would not be allowed to return to their seats until everyone had participated successfully in the process without anyone’s “centers rising.”

In the intermediary and advanced workshops, students who had mastered this basic technique, which provided a ready-to-hand resource for endless (if “wild”) invention, would then be provided with what Kelman called “a safety net,” or a range of choices they could make while moving through their non-linear musings. One could, for example, simply cycle a phrase in the midst of a rap to themselves, emphasizing different words and discovering new imaginary possibilities within those words,

is, as exactly as possible, spoken thought.” See Nadeau, p. 81. Still, as we shall see, Kelman’s techniques were far more sophisticated.

²¹ This was only one of many exercises, but space does not permit a more full elaboration. Suffice it say that others dealt with the improvisational use of space, or relationships between bodies, or with sounds.

and then take off in a new non-linear direction. One could also “become the thing” one was talking about. In the short riff above, I could have become, for example, “some drink in your hand.” Then, for a short time, I could talk about what that was like. Perhaps I would describe the cold glass, or the sweat on the glass caused by the ice, or the shape and color of the glass, or maybe I would “discover” that the drink was a “screwdriver,” which would then take me off on an entirely different tangent related to shop tools, or “being screwed.” By the time one reached the advanced workshops, there were numerous choices one could make while “rapping,” though always returning quickly to non-linearity, and we had learned them all.

As already noted, rather soon after the breakup of the Lost Tribe, the other fellows were just beginning to experiment with this work in public as either Wounded Theater or The Dead Beats, mostly in small art spaces and coffee houses, while I for the most part refused. Still wanting to be “entertaining,” I insisted that, in order for the techniques “to work,” we would need “tremendous discipline” and “lots of practice” (precisely what the other ex-members of the Lost Tribe were tired of). To my mind, the idea was not simply to stay in the non-linear state but to use that state to spontaneously discover interesting poetic connections and then explore them for a while, even encouraging the development of narrative threads, and only then returning to free association. This was difficult enough to do on your own, but it was even more difficult in group performances, with everyone free associating together physically as well as verbally, and things could devolve quickly into mere chaos. As far as the others were concerned, however, the most important thing was to start having fun again, and to free ourselves from the burdens of “discipline,” “practice,” and “thinking about how to ‘do it right.’”

It was our good fortune that about this time, in the spring of 1989, S.A. made a trip to Denver related to his acting work (guest starring as a gun wielding psycho on a *Perry Mason* movie of the week), and on that trip he had the grand idea of creating a new group. Drawing upon his experiences with poets in Denver, and combining those experiences with some of Kelman’s ideas, he invented the idea of the Carma Bums (a blend of his Cadillac car, karma, and Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*). As he imagined it, the Carma Bums would be the antithesis of the Lost Tribe (anti-Hollywood and literally only existing “on the road”). According to his plan, we would all hop in his Cadillac and hit the highways, traveling from venue to venue with our improvisational antics, mixed, as appropriate, with older, well-worn pieces. More than that, however, the “show” would really be the trips themselves. So, in the summer of 1989, having convinced all of us that this was possible, and given the crucial fact that S.A. was willing to shoulder most of the expenses, we went on our first “No Seat Belts Tour of Words” to Denver, joined by Knott, Wannberg and Staron (sans Mollett).²²

²² The 1959 Cadillac was built without seat belts, but laws had been passed that required them. The Cadillac, however, being an antique, was exempt; therefore, we had both figuratively and literally become poets performing and touring “without seat belts.” We were also joined by

To my surprise, that first tour proved that we had indeed learned the techniques with sufficient skill to blend improvisation with our established repertoire of performance pieces. In fact, by the time we went on our second “No Seatbelt Tour of Words” in the summer of 1990 (sans Staron and with Mollett) to Vancouver, Canada, we had established a consistent performance mode that blended (mostly) improvisation with set pieces. The first two “No Seatbelt” tours were followed by the “Start from Zero Tour of Words” in April 1991 (a title meant to remind us that when “our centers rose,” either because we were “thinking too much” or “not listening enough,” we had to “start from zero”), the ill fated bus tour “No Girlfriends Tour of Words” or “Nowhere Tour of Words” in August 1991, “The Lost Tour of Words” in 1992 joining Lost Tribe and Carma Bums performances, “The International Superhighway Tour of Words” in 1994, the “Twisted Tour of Words” in 1996, the “Armageddon Outta Here Tour of Words” in 2004, and a short “Unregulated Tour of Words” in 2009, which would be our last.²³ Though we had tentatively decided to stop performing in 2009, the sudden death of our hero Wannberg in August of 2011, who had become the very heart of the Carma Bums, made that decision final.²⁴

While it is impossible to provide an example of a “show,” such as the ones performed by the Lost Tribe, given that they were mostly improvised, a series of examples will hopefully suffice to provide a sense of what these new performances were like.

Generally speaking, by 1990, when we were more seasoned in using Kelman’s improvisational techniques in public, normally one person would speak non-linearly and the others would be very closely attending, not only with their minds but with their bodies, to what the person was saying. One physical technique taught by Kelman that was helpful in such moments was called “point/counter-point.” All this term means is that when someone is doing something on stage, either you mirror what they are doing or you do not; it is a conscious (though random) choice. It is, however, more complicated than that because, when rapping or engaging in point/counter-point, another rule is that “if you get a good idea *don’t do it.*” Instead, to keep from being merely “clever,” you should at least go on to your next idea, if not yet another. Then, if you like, you can choose one of those newer, less “manipulative” ideas. To make this somewhat clearer, here is an example of this process from a show we did at

the Los Angeles poet Ellyn Pinkster, who we christened Ellyn Maybe, a wonderful poet (and person) who opened almost all of the Carma Bum performances.

²³ For a sample of posters and other visual evidence of Carma Bum adventures, see <http://carmabum.blogspot.com/2011/06/carma-bums-flyers-pics-1989-2009.html> (accessed July 5, 2011).

²⁴ Wannberg was an exceptionally prolific writer, authoring over twenty-four books and chapbooks. Among his many works, see *Tomorrow is Another Song* (Los Angeles: Perceval Press, 2011); *Strange Movie Full of Death* (Los Angeles: Perceval Press, 2009); *Nomads of Oblivion* (Los Angeles: Lummo Press, 2000); *Amnesia Motel* (Los Angeles: Dance of the Iguana Press, 1993); and *The Electric Yes Indeed* (Los Angeles: Shelf Life Press, 1989).

Luna Park in Beverly Hills in August of 1996 when kicking off our “Twisted Tour of Words.”²⁵

To begin the show, the other Bums decided to play a trick. I had gone to the bathroom, thinking we would begin the show upon my return, but when I emerged they were all lying “dead” in front of the bathroom door. The show began, properly enough, without my consciously being aware of that fact, and now all eyes were upon me. We were, after all, the Carma Bums, and who knew what might happen? According to “the rules,” of course, it is forbidden for me to follow my first good idea (perhaps they are not dead), and I have to remain in “counter-point” because otherwise, as Kelman taught us, there would be no “drama” in the situation (i.e., if I simply laid down and joined them the scene would literally “die”). Therefore, two or three ideas later, the Bums, now as puppets under my control, make their way to the stage. As we do so, S.A. begins non-linearly speaking, and then, upon reaching the stage, decides to investigate the low ceiling under which we are performing, having likely said something about “the sky becoming hard” or something like that. Upon touching the ceiling, he discovers that he is actually holding the sky/ceiling up, and, since we all (watching intensely) simultaneously see that the ceiling might fall, we either have to choose to help him hold up the sky/ceiling or not (trusting that this was not some “good idea” he had, but this was the idea he had after foregoing some previous idea). Randomly, then, everyone, save for Doug, chooses to help hold up the ceiling (Doug was now in “counter-point” mode), at which point he discovers that he is actually standing among “tall beans,” and so he launches into his poem “Vegetable Politics,”²⁶ which begins like this:

I am an enemy of eggplant
An appeaser of Hitlerian potatoes
I flee the groans of red meat
And hide in the shade of tall beans
A green witness to myself

While he performs his poem, moving in and out of we who have become tall beans, we stay in that counter-point position, and the real challenge is to move immediately back into the non-linear mode as soon as the piece is done. Keep in mind, though, that we should not follow our first impulse, for we must radically listen instead of willfully act, unless we are inspired by unfolding events to latch onto an appropriate set piece; therefore, even in the best of such shows there would be numerous awkward pauses, and sometimes we would simply have to “explode ourselves,” moving

²⁵ Viggo Mortensen, married to Exene Cervenka at the time, offered to pay for the filming of our tour after seeing the show, and the result was *Luxurious Tigers of Obnoxious Agreement*, with original music from members of the band X.

²⁶ The entire poem is in *Small Dogs Bark Cartoons*, p. 43.

about randomly until striking a point/counter-point pose (another of Kelman's techniques) and letting someone start rapping off of that new tableau.

It was complicated stuff, because it was a complex mix of rules and spontaneity, and a complex mix of improvisation and memorized pieces, and it was poor style if more than one person starting talking, but by 1990 we had found a decent balance between the non-linear explorations, which ultimately came to dominate our performances, and the discovery of opportunities for pieces that would truly emerge out of the non-linear and unintentional process. In every show it was a firm rule with the Bums that we *not* have a plan. We would all simply get into our improvisational performance mode, as best we could, and let the show unfold. Furthermore, we rarely discussed how a show went, or whether or not it had been "successful."

Another example of what was possible in a Carma Bum performance occurred in Vancouver in 1990, which was almost completely improvised. S.A. was bit so hard on the chest by a drunken punk girl that it drew blood, and he had to slap her to dislodge her, just after she had come on stage to announce she was "death," coming to destroy a young man (her boyfriend) who had just stepped up to be "life." Upon announcing she was death, the audience began to boo her, and then she began to cry. S.A., trying to console death, then got bitten. After the violence, we immediately brought the performance to an end, but we were then approached by the owner of another local club who wanted us "to do the same show" later than evening (as if we could).

Another memorable event occurred in 1989 in Taos, New Mexico, when we were taken at night to see the Cross of the Penitentes by locals after our show, where, as Knott would later say in his poem "This World Meets the Next,"

. . . we traveling poets always glib
and ready for improvisation
made small talk with the gods, flying beings
and fish that walk
while wires hung out of our faces naked
in the night forking wind
and all of the invisible people
of the ghost towns of Northern New Mexico
turned on their invisible TVs to watch us
side by side with the steely Spaniards
who came before us to these hills
that rise like brown fists
from a brown ocean
with sudden arrows stuck in trees.²⁷

Earlier that night we had concluded our show in typical form. While simultaneously supplicating to the audience with outstretched arms (I cannot recall precisely why), we

²⁷ The poem can be found in Knott's *Small Dogs Bark Cartoons*, pp. 17-19.

each discovered five light bulbs lighting the stage that were just outside of our individual reach, so we simply stretched together, unscrewed them, and with that the performance was over – though, as S.A. would insist, the excursion to the Cross was also part of “the show,” as was everything else that happened on the road during all of our years together.

Since we booked our formal shows in advance sight unseen, sometimes we arrived at venues where two or three people were sitting having a drink at a bar, and other times we would find ourselves performing before hundreds (again, part of the mystery of the process). I remember one particular show in a spacious coffee shop in San Diego with forty foot high ceilings. The place was filled with over a hundred people sitting at tables having coffee, chatting, and certainly not waiting for a performance like we had come to offer. There was no stage, no one to announce our presence or intentions, and it looked for all intents and purposes like they never had performances there. I remember telling S.A. that if we could capture and keep the attention of these folks it would be a great triumph. No sooner said, Staron, who had gone exploring, discovered a tall ladder and leaned it up against a wall in the middle of the crowd. This captured people’s attention, leading them to wonder what was going on, or if something was wrong. Then, having climbed the ladder to nowhere, Bobbo did a terrific rap, who knows about what, and the performance began, lasting well over an hour, complete with improvisational high jinks that concluded with a “wedding” performed for two young people in our entourage who had obviously fallen in love.

There was a surprisingly large show in Mollett’s home away from home in the foothills of the California Sierras where we began our performance by moving through the audience from the back of the house and giving everyone (probably over 150 people) big and honest hugs, just because we all spontaneously came to discover that we all needed one.

And so it went performance after performance.

In sum, following our established procedures, our performances would emerge organically, but we had to be extraordinarily deliberate (another one of Kelman’s exercises unsurprisingly was called “deliberation”) lest we talk over one another or dishonestly force the development of a scene. If by chance in our non-linear speaking and other shenanigans we came upon the perfect scene for a known poem, then the person so inspired would perform that poem, keeping the rest of us fully with them in order for the improvisation to immediately and smoothly begin again once the poem was done. When the shows were at their very best, however, it became difficult to distinguish between improvised and memorized pieces, and audience members would sometimes approach us at the end of shows, as they did in Vancouver, to ask for repeat performances, or copies of “poems,” that were lost forever.²⁸ Over the course of our years together, the Carma Bum performances were often perceived as “hap-

²⁸ This was all before video phones and the proliferation of other new media devices, and so the vast majority of what we did in those years, both as the Lost Tribe and Carma Bums, is now lost.

penings," taking us far beyond the realm of any sort of typical performance or reading.²⁹

By the time we reached the end of our years of touring in 2009 we had gone from traveling alone in a Cadillac containing five or six Bums, to a Cadillac followed by a couple of other cars, to a bus covered with graffiti and filled with fellow revelers, in the spirit of Wavy Gravy and the Merry Pranksters, but unfortunately without an engine sufficient to sustain us. Like our poor doomed bus, which died somewhere out in the deserts of New Mexico, our own energy for performance also could not be sustained. I had chosen to pursue my academic career, leaving Los Angeles in 1991, and while our several tours kept us together for a time, we slowly lost touch with the desire to collectively perform. Age, and our differences, had finally caught up with us.

All for the Love of Performance Worlds

Clearly, the Lost Tribe and the Carma Bums constituted two completely different approaches to the public performance of language. While "poetry" in the first group meant memorized pieces calculated to produce particular and anticipated effects on the audience, and where poetry was literally blended with choreographed performances designed to be broadly popular, "poetry" in the second group meant playing with spontaneous word games, freely associating with energy in real time, not ever really knowing where we were going or what impact our words might have on audiences. While we would never receive standing ovations as the Carma Bums because we were not that kind of act, we were, nevertheless, a type of act, a more difficult yet intensely more adventurous "poetry" group.

One could think of the Lost Tribe and the Carma Bums as relating to performance worlds in a number of ways. Not only were we a community of artists committed to the public expression of a unique conceptualization of what "poetry" was all about, one could also think of the different environments in which our groups emerged. The Water Gallery in Hollywood, situated back to back with the Lhasa Club, where all types of Hollywood fringe types would gather, was undoubtedly a unique environment. The environment was exciting, bordering as it did on the entertainment industry and popular culture, and we believed and hoped the time was right for popular culture to become reacquainted with poetry. Clearly, though, moving toward the Carma Bums meant moving away from Hollywood, entertainment, and popular culture. As the Lost Tribe, we were saddled up next to fame. On our ride from the Water Gallery to the Lhasa Club and beyond, an additional leg to the Improv, the Comedy Store, or even The David Letterman Show was not difficult to imagine. The Carma Bums, however, had no such illusions. By moving into the improvisational poetry world pointed to by Kelman, we had given up entirely on being more broadly popular, or even oftentimes "readable." We exchanged predictability and the

²⁹ For representative examples of audience reactions to Carma Bum performances, see the "testimonials" in *Twisted Cadillac*, especially those provided on pp. 88-89.

artful management of audience emotions and thoughts for the perilous ugliness and beauty of the spontaneous. By moving from the world of fame, pop culture, and entertainment into a more exploratory, experimental adventure, we made a conscious decision, predominantly to ensure that we continued to have fun while publicly playing with language, to inhabit a different type of “poetic” environment altogether.

In addition to thinking about the poetry environments in which our groups emerged, one might also think of the different performance worlds we sought to inhabit by “doing poetry” in different ways. As noted, the Lost Tribe thought of language as a source of conscious aesthetic influence over the emotions and thoughts of our audiences. We had learned how to make people sad after a moment of laughter, or to make them laugh at the saddest of statements. We had learned to take topics as diverse as homelessness, drunkenness, crime, war, and existential anxiety and make them poetically accessible. It was poetry that people unfamiliar with poetry, but otherwise familiar with entertainment, could relate to.

With the Carma Bums, conversely, language and whatever meaning it might supply became gifts of the gods or a function of whatever forces we would discover upon entering our improvisational state. Who knew what might be said, or what it might mean, and to whom? Who knew what scenes we might stumble upon that might call forth, if not demand, a particular poem, utterance, or poetic action. These performances were much less readable, less broadly popular, and yet far more risky and daring.

Also, the performances of the Lost Tribe and the Carma Bums, as a result of their significant differences, had very different impacts on our audiences, which likely led them to think about “poetry” in very different ways. The audiences for the Lost Tribe were far safer (though not all that safe!) than those for the Carma Bums. After all, people attending a Lost Tribe show usually knew who was going to be on the bill, when the show would start and end, who might be at the club, or the reputation of the theater, and what sort of performances they could expect. Plus it was hip and everyone knew it, at least if one read the *LA Weekly* or listened to the word of mouth in the artistic underground. The poems were almost all highly relatable, even those that were more abstract, and the emotional tones of the poems made sense in a sequence (e.g., a crazy abstract and funny poem would follow a tragic piece, or vice versa). We were also self-effacing and oftentimes silly. Many of our Lost Tribe audiences were composed of either young or early middle-aged people somehow wanting to “make it” in Hollywood, and they were accustomed to a wide range of entertaining performance styles. Our shows were also highly polished, which reassured audiences that we “knew what we were doing.”

Conversely, the audiences for Carma Bums were not safe at all. Our performances on the road were obviously far from Hollywood and the underground art crowds. Oftentimes families who had stumbled upon our shows with small children in tow, or people not at all familiar with performance poetry, let alone of a Hollywood variety, and let alone with an often spontaneous and hardly readable character, would scatter in horror. That said, when they did not scatter, and they usually did not, this was

proof enough of their bravery and openness to adventure. I remember, for example, a show we did in Big Sur on the California coast at the Henry Miller Library, where we started the show in the beautiful lawn in front of the library to about fifty tourists, some with children, who just happened to be there. Then, however, having scouted the location in advance, we took our show deep into the old growth forests behind the library, inviting (daring) them to come along, despite the “adult” nature of much of our material. Taking perhaps thirty fellow adventurers with us, while mercifully allowing the others to flee, they trustingly followed us into the woods as we pranced along ahead of them, neither knowing what we were going to do or what we were going to say to them.

While it is true that the Lost Tribe would also do risky shows, such as our “takeover” of Gorky’s, or when directly accosting the audience with pieces like “The Ballad of Bernard Goetz,” that often took more bravery on our part than the audience’s, since they realized we were going to regale them with polished poetry performances. Carma Bum shows, however, required a type of bravery on both sides. For us, we had to bravely trust that in throwing ourselves at the mercy of spontaneity the muses would save us and give us the focus we needed to be successful. We also had to radically trust one another in new ways. Lost Tribe performances were so precise that you had to trust that no one would forget a blocking move, or a line, or a cue, whereas Carma Bum performances were precise in another way: here it was not merely a matter of “dropping a line”; instead, it was a matter of radical listening, applying the proper amount of energy into the performance form, and being willing to go wherever our tempered madness might take us and the audience. Audiences had to be much more open-minded in Carma Bum performances because, by its very form, it was “weird.” Seen from several angles, during the improvisational sections there really was not anything to “understand,” save for whatever you as an individual might get out of some string of words.

Far too many people, when they think of poetry, think of hated high school English classes, or libraries where people with glasses on the ends of their noses read things in arrogant tones to hushed audiences straining to be sufficiently appreciative. Many times the Lost Tribe and the Carma Bums proved to be a “great embarrassment” for members of the “poetry for the page” communities. While each of us has been published many times, and some, like S.A. and the late Scott Wannberg, have produced multiple books of poetry in press, we were never invited, say, to the universities, and we were certainly never taken very seriously by the literary world.³⁰ Then

³⁰ There have been rare exceptions. Mollett and I published a co-written poem in the *Evergreen Review*, and S.A. has been invited to speak at formal retrospectives on various well-known poets, such as Charles Bukowski. For the co-written piece, called “After the Break In,” see <http://www.evergreenreview.com/102/fiction/after/preafter.html> (accessed February 19, 2013). Also, a performance troupe of Mollett’s called “The Mud People,” a group who basically undress, cover their bodies with mud and rags, place large paper mache masks over their heads, then move about Los Angeles in silence, deliberating over any man-made objects they

again, we never pretended to be great poets in that sense. Our goal was instead to create new and fun ways of making our words (and our minds) accessible, simultaneously enjoying the broadest range of honest “poetic” experiences as possible, and reaching people far away from thoughts of “poetry,” whatever that might mean to them, and in so doing to change their views on poetry and their worlds.



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encounter, was featured in an essay in *National Geographic*. See Rick Gory, “Sunset Boulevard,” *National Geographic* (June 1992), pp. 40-69.