

KUSH: A WOOLY-HAIRED SON OF WHITMAN

To understand why, almost weekly, a short, wiry, raven-eyed fellow carrying a satchel full of poetry chants whole sections from *Leaves of Grass* on 16th and Mission St. in San Francisco's inner city, one must first learn what Cloud House is all about.

Founded in 1977 as a neighborhood poetry center, the Cloud has flourished, spawning a loose-knit collective of 35 to 50 writers who strongly identify with its goals. "Walt Whitman Breathes Here" read the cloud-shaped sign that floated above the original space just a stone's throw from Mission Dolores (founded by Fr. Serra in 1776); and, although real estate speculation has forced the Cloud to relocate to a site shared with Talking Leaves Bookstore in the Duboce Triangle area, old Walt still does breathe there in the guise of one wooly-haired son of Whitman who goes by the name of "Kush." Kush migrated to San Francisco from the towering skyscrapers of Mannahatta with a dream of establishing a practise of poetry radically different from the kind enforced in the MFA factories. Drawing on ancient mythic tradition, bardic fellowships such as Basho celebrated and the democratic vistas of America's own revolutionary history, he leased an all-window storefront in the workingclass Mission District so as to be part of the street scene, a presence within the community instead of a refuge where an elitist few can hole up in some ivory tower hide-away. Thus, site became statement, an extension of Kush's vision of a poetry for the people, and not just a decadent, *fin de siecle* attitude of art for art's sake.

The storefront quickly became a sanctuary of sorts from the speed and madness of urban life. The walls were hung with poems, paintings, broadsides, folios,

flyers, xerox art, letters from prison poets like Tommy Trantino and Pancho Aguila or postcards from poets on the road in Alaska, Paris, Nepal--a vast assemblage of interwoven connections with poetry the matrix and hub. Endowed with unwavering persistence, Kush marshaled a library of tapes from readings throughout the City, an oral history of San Francisco poetry in the late 80's that is unmatched in its scope. Museum, library, art gallery, performance space--the Cloud served many functions. By day it offered the passerby a quiet place to sit down and listen to the lyric playback of hundreds of poetic voices not available anywhere else or perhaps to page through the mounds of small press publications scattered around the shrine. And shrine it was with its backdrop triptych altar of poetry, a table covered with sacred objects and strange treasures donated to the Cloud, panels with illustrated poems pinned like hearts to the wood. On Thursday nights Kush hosted an unique open reading series that featured soft kerosene lamps, a relaxed almost reverent atmosphere with folks seated or lying in a circle on the carpeted floor, the sharing of tea, the sound of gongs and flutes, scent of burning sage. The first round consisted of persons introducing themselves and reading one poem each, the second an opportunity for individuals to read as much and as long as they desired. Sometimes pieces led to long, free-wheeling discussions. Other times musicians would pull out guitars or saxophone and play along with the reader. Poets of some renown like Robert Kelly or Jack Hirschman would mingle freely with neophytes there to read for the first time in their lives. That accounted, in no small measure, for the Cloud's charm, masters rubbing shoulders with beginners. Here was a practise of poetry, not encouraging of hierarchies and literary oneupsmanship, but rather committed to the transformative nature of poetry, its ability to heal sexist, racist, elitest wounds and put us all in touch with the deepest mysteries of life.

Gradually, over the years a community of poets became associated with Cloud House. Kush published his Sleeping Gypsy Pamphlet Series with titles like *How To Turn Your Living Room Into Walden Pond*, *ABC Liberty*, and *Dancing On The Brink Of The World*. More recently, he's come out with *Blake Times*, a visionary compendium of essays, graphics, poems and stories you'd never see in *Newsweek*. Contributors have included Left Writer's Union organizer John Curl, New Wave poet Andrew Hayes, ex-cabbie Joe Smith, and slain Sandanista Leonel Rugama. A second issue is in the works right now. True to his democratic beliefs, Kush has given away all his publications for free. A position as Instructor of Anthropology at the New College of California together with occasional donations has allowed him to subsidize the Cloud and its work. Thus, functioning on the periphery of the money economy, following in the hallowed San Francisco tradition of Emmett Grogan and the Diggers, Kush has escaped the political compromises and profit-mongering inherent in American publishing.

Clearly the practise of poetry Kush championed put Cloud House outside the mainstream of grants and academic recognition. The motto of the Cloud made this readily apparent: Poetry is the Heart at Liberty. The emphasis here is on imagination, that creative well-spring all children have access to and which all too often adults in an industrial society lose or must work hard to rediscover. Poetry in Kush's eyes is a pathway for imagination to be expressed, much as art or music or dance. It is the exploration of language, a faculty we all share, to uncover the wonders within and without. There is no doubt that craft is a component. Years of practise and study can only lead to increased facility or even the brilliance of a master product. But, admirable as that may be, it is the intrinsic value of the practise itself that recommends it to the society at large. Poets of the Cloud believe,

along with Lautremont, that "poetry must be made by all." If there is any hope of transforming our death culture into a vision of joy, the work that must be done revolves around freeing the imagination lulled into sleep in a nation of armchair quarterbacks and soap opera addicts.

The new Cloud at 99 Sanchez St. continues the tradition of Thursday night open readings, recently hosting its 250th consecutive reading in the series. In addition, on Friday nights, attempting to reach out and touch an even wider audience, Kush has begun a Brechtian poet's playhouse, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma (a name taken from a Kafka novel). The three short one-acts are often written and acted by local poets like Bill Herron, Dennis Dunn, Tobey Kaplan or Marsha Campbell. By offering three works by three different authors, Kush showcases a wide variety of performances with only a thin line drawn between poetry and theater. Since, however, the new Cloud must share its space with a bookstore, there is only limited room to display the archives of tapes, poems and artwork the Cloud has collected over the years. So, Kush continues to look for larger quarters to house the ever-expanding breath of his vision.

This is the ground from which sprang street readings. Kush felt that Whitman, Blake, Dickinson, Rumi and Neruda (to name only a handful), these and a hundred other poetic voices belonged out in the open air, mingling with the commerce of people's lives and not entombed in libraries, bookstores, academic vaults. And so began the establishment of an outdoor circuit where Kush would go to read and chant poetry. On street-corners, beneath skyscrapers, beside fountains, on the steps of City Hall--anywhere people gathered, Kush would bring the voice of prophecy and vision to the people. His example spurred others and a number of weekly open air series blossomed: in front of the (now

demolished) Straight Theater, outside the doors of the Civic Center's Public Library, in Golden Gate Park. People gawked, scratched their heads in wonder, sometimes even stood for hours listening. But Kush taught us that audience wasn't all that important, bigger wasn't necessarily better. Whether we attracted crowds or a single soul (and we did both on occasion), we were giving witness to the importance of poetry in our own lives and its power to touch one's deepest heart even in the hubbub of the city. We were bringing poetry out of the closet, making it come alive.

So it is, on any number of warm spring days, as the crowds bustle past 16th and Mission St., changing buses, scurrying down into the subterranean bowels of the BART system, or merely out shopping, one might very likely see Kush standing against the plaza bricks, palms waving in the breeze, pigeons circling in flocks overhead as the curious chant of Whitman being read aloud mixes with the colors and flash of the real world.