

Links: After

"It's all gotta be non stop ad libbing within each chorus, or the gig is shot."

-Jack Kerouac, from the introduction to his *Book of Blues*, the poetry collection in which his long poem "Orlanda Blues" appears.

It was 5:45 pm, Friday, May 25th, and *Links* was fifteen minutes from opening. I was in the exhibition room (the back room at Roanoke Vineyards) frantically starting up MP3 players, checking the headphones to make sure they were playing, then stapling them in under their custom duct-tape covers. Amy was in the kitchen slicing cheese and assembling crackers onto platters. We had already put a case worth of white wine on ice, and had just opened the first four bottles of red. Ten minutes to go. The MP3 players were all working, their covers were stapled. The first guests had arrived. It was hot outside, and hot inside. I was sweating in my dark suit, and I could feel pomade melting onto my forehead. The digital video camera was still out on one of the counters, but we wouldn't be using it, it had arrived with a broken tape cartridge mechanism. I quickly put it back into its case. Five minutes. I made a run for the restroom. Coming back into the tasting room, there were a few more guests arriving. I pulled the tarp off the table where the typewriters were set up, flicked the light on over the "Welcome To Links" sign, opened the gate to the back room, and we were ready. *Links* had begun.

I composed *Haiku I* on September 8th, 2006, in Orlando, Florida. I had arrived there two days earlier to begin my time as Writer-In-Residence at The Kerouac House of Orlando, Florida, the house where Jack Kerouac was living when *On The Road* was published, and

where he wrote both his novel *The Dharma Bums* and his long poem *Orlanda Blues*. Approximately eight-and-a-half months later, on May 25th, 2007, this same haiku went on display as one of twenty-two pieces that comprised the poetry portion of *Links*. Nine new works of visual art had also been created, thirteen new songs had also been written and recorded, and twenty-two artist participants had come together to make the project a reality. Amy Marinelli, my fiancée, my support, my inspiration, had not only contributed both the first and last works of visual art, but had nearly single-handedly brought the physical installation to life through her sheer determination, skill, and vision. Dennis Nurkse had mentored the entire endeavor, both the creative and the academic, and Richard and Soraya Pisacano, owners of Roanoke Vineyards, had joined in to provide a venue, lend installing hands, and supply wine for the opening. Some eighty people attended the Opening Night Reception, and by seemingly all accounts, the event was a complete success. And somewhere in the midst of all the celebrating and enjoyment, all the listening and viewing, a point had been made. Art mattered, true collaboration and inspiration was possible, and poetry could step well beyond its boundaries to be a legitimate cultural and artistic presence in the world at large, or at least a small but vibrant portion of it. The night felt wonderful.

You enter the room through a gated doorway, after having passed a high round table made of dark wood and a wine barrel. On the circular surface are four vintage manual typewriters: a 1930s Remington, a Corona and a Royal from the 1940's, and another Royal, this one from the 1950s. A sign on the table requests that guests type their comments. To the left of the gated door leading to the installation, lit by a spotlight, there is another sign. It says "Welcome To Links." Passing through, you enter a high-ceilinged cement-walled room lit by some twenty work-lights clamped to a terrace of sprinkler pipes and electrical lines. You are in the near left corner of the room.

The left wall is draped with burlap hangings, alternately tan and black in color. Along this wall, in front of the burlap, are seven wine barrels. On top of each there is a set of headphones, a CD jewel case propped up like a signboard, and a slanted display sign. On display are sets of Haiku; typewritten black on white paper inside the clear acrylic. In the jewel cases are white squares imprinted with the names of musicians, and the names of the songs they've recorded; their tracks are playing through the headphones when you pick them up to listen. There are another five barrels in a circle in the center of the room, each outfitted in the same manner. Some of the recordings are instrumental, even so sparse as just a minute-and-a-half's worth of solo piano. Others feature vocalists singing the words of the haiku, still others are entirely new compositions, with all new lyrics inspired in some way by the original haiku. Some sound like jazz, some classical, some blues. Others sound like no genre at all, or genres unto themselves.

On the remaining walls of the room, there are works of visual art on display, with poems mounted on black matte board in between. The visual works are wildly different from one another in size, scale, and presentation, yet there are continuities as well, indicators of their shared inspirations. The "chain" begins with two large black-and-white works on paper, moves through an even larger, abstract oil painting, and on to five unified ink works on paper. It continues through a very small, essentially realist work in oil, an abstract work in graphite on black paper, and a figurative work in watercolor. It ends with an eight-foot-high collage, and a triptych that is not a triptych (three works painted in oil; two small paintings on board, one larger work on canvas, stacked and offset). There are nine pieces in all, and nine poems. This is *Links*.

—

I wanted to put everything I loved into this project. I wanted *Links* to honor every hero I've ever had, and I wanted to be every hero. I wanted to be Han-Shan and Son House both. I wanted to resurrect The Beats, resurrect the Harlem Renaissance. I wanted to go back eleven centuries to the Chinese Mountains, and fifty years ago to the Lower East Side. And perhaps most of all, I wanted to transcend my own ever-growing misanthropy, to rediscover again the faith, belief, and love that led me to the arts in the first place, led me to those heroes, to their works, to their examples. Vainly perhaps, I wanted to be at the center of something I believed in. Year after year, I have felt more and more a man out of time, relic in a world with no use for what I once worked so hard to learn. I wanted *Links* to recreate the world I used to love.

From the first moment I tried to explain *Links* to someone outside my immediate circle of collaborators, on through the Opening Night Reception, and including the interview I gave Pat Rogers, a reporter for the Southampton Press, the question I found most difficult to articulate an acceptable answer for was the question of what the two parallel sets of collaborations, poetry and visual art, poetry and music, had to do with one another. Seemingly for all intents and purposes, and certainly at first assessment, the answer appears to be, "Nothing." But that's not true, not at all. Yet how to explain the connection is difficult. Partly because it's an elusive concept, but mainly, because the answer is at the very heart of the entire project, and the project is nothing without it. There is of course an easy, if not altogether accurate answer. The academic requirement of the project was to pursue a "Creative Collaboration," which I understood to essentially mean taking one's genre outside one's genre, and specifically took as a challenge to prove poetry's vitality beyond "conventional" visions of the denomination. I could certainly explain *Links* as an attempt to prove that poets could work with both visual artists and musicians. I had certainly done both. But that wouldn't be the whole story, not even close. And anyway, it

had all been arguably done before, with admittedly varying degrees of success. I wanted something different to happen. What I was really after was trying to showcase, even exploit, a certain something that, for me at least, exists at the center of all great creative work, regardless of genre, method, or medium. It's a rawness, a purity, a receptivity, an honesty, a spontaneity, an integrity, a spirit, a vibe, a mojo, a magic. At its most fundamental level, *Links* is an attempt to present a physical manifestation of soul. A. Van Jordan, a wonderful poet with whom I briefly corresponded with during the early days of developing *Links*, and from whom I borrowed, then adapted, a certain idea and vision of Blues Haiku, sent me a copy of an essay that he published in a literary journal called *nocturnes: review of the literary arts*. His essay was titled *Earning Transcendence: Blues Iconography to Get Me Over*. In it, while discussing "The Blues Stanza," he wrote the following:

And it is the third line of the stanza on which so much depends. The Japanese poet, Basho, is rumored to have said that the haiku, a form translated into a syllabic tercet, should have the accumulated effect of bringing forth its full meaning — and, I should say, image as a conduit for meaning — in the final line, his description of this process a haiku in itself: petal, petal, flower. So it is with the blues stanza: not only does the poet hope to achieve an answer, response, or resolution to the situation presented in lines one and two, but the third line should bring a sense of transcendence, freedom from the problem introduced in the first two lines.

Were the project a blues, Line one would be poetry and visual art. Line two would be haiku and music. *Links* itself is the third line.

—

It's probably about 11:30 pm, Friday night, May 25th. *Links* is basically over. There are a few people still out on the patio: a group of winery regulars on their fourth bottle of the night, and three of the participant musicians, Will Scott, Jan Bell, and C. Gibbs. Jan and Will smoke cigarettes and drink wine, Gibbs has another fruit juice in front of him. Amy and I are both on our last legs, but pleased as all get out. It's been a good night. Strange to go in that room now, just a day ago it seemed so jumbled, so trashed, so far away from completion, and now it feels so empty, a stadium after the game is long over, a club after the music's long been silenced, Bourbon Street on New Year's Day morning. I pick up a set of headphones without checking the barrel. It's Jon Dryden's "G Minor Prelude." Just a few sparse taps on the heavy piano keys, miked so close I can hear his foot move on the sustain pedal, hear him shift on the bench. I go back out to the tasting room and gather up all the sheets of paper that the visitors have used to tap out their comments. Many of them are nearly illegible from typos, others are the silly and self-conscious spoutings of drunken twenty-somethings. There are a great many entries from the young daughters of one of the collaborating visual artists, most of which are as silly and self-conscious as the previously mentioned comments, but many of which are quite stunning, insightful, and downright heart-warming. One comment in particular, from the second-youngest of the four, only nine years of age, just stopped me completely in my tracks. By her words alone I knew we'd at least gotten close to tapping the magic and the mojo, to making at least temporarily solid that great intangible noun of soul, to quite possibly answering the question of just what it all was supposed to mean. In response to seeing *Links* she wrote the following;

Earth is dying...trees are dying...words are leaving us. People come, people go, and death is so important. And yet the main reason is birth. I'd be sad if death took this person though.

Exactly.