

A Review by Kirpal Gordon appearing in Bigbridge 2005

of

*I Tried to Sing in My Grandfather's Voice*

A spoken word CD by William Bradd

*I Tried to Sing in My Grandfather's Voice* is a spoken word CD by William Bradd. The front cover photograph, taken by the author, depicts a snowy rural winter scene from the primal Canadian North country, province of Ontario, above Lake Superior, Bradd's ancestral homeland, which celebrates particularly in Stage 1, "Kingdom of Old Men," which was recorded at a reading in Mendocino, CA.

His prologue, "The things that are lost most quickly are things that become forgotten," sets the tone for eight rambling remembrances into a mytho-poetic, pre-Cambrian past. Like Coltrane's folk art/fine art seam, Bradd mixes ancient outback lore with a disarmingly innocent and musical delivery. Sure, his vowel pronunciations locate him north of the Great Plains, but he's got the voice of a grandfather, too, especially if we think of the word as meaning both of his parent's father and a tribal ancestor. Like Trane, whose titles tip one off to the Middle Passage of African-Americans, Bradd traces deep roots in order to deliver an alternate take on "Civilization, ho" (Firesign Theatre) as the builders from the south construct bridges and a railroad, among other "improvements." They come "none too soon" and change everything so that the locals end up "locked into the penitentiary of choice."

There's poetry in every phrase of his narrative, a sense of music and rhythm driving the long line, which is full of asides and a clipped mid-western shorthand that knows it needn't spell it all out. It's funny; I love the alchemy that takes place with band and spoken word, but Bradd achieves an effortless listen-ability through his solo reading. In Stage 2, "Stalks and Sticks," recorded from the Wild Sage Poetry Show on KZYX-FM, Philo, CA, we find him in even better form. His introductions of each piece of writing reveal his sense of humor and cause us to consider the difference between text and conversation. His text is a kind of rarefied and compressed convo, full of a crafted momentum that glides and guides the words through the paces of his long breath.

Halfway through this section of shorter work, he sings the short ditty, "Whenever rain comes," and it sets up track 21 with its powerful repeating line, "There will be a Holocaust," which weaves together many of his themes and reminds you, like Trane, this work has its eye on Apocalypse, if for no other reason than the need for renewal. The section's most fun moment (theologians beware) is the brilliant "Bear," a parable about the meaning of that word in places where, like Hawaii, there are no bears. The final piece in the section is the six-part concierto, "The Big Wind Makes the Wild Things Fly." It weaves together in pure Bradd brilliance human dreams with geese, rivers, horses, leaves, memories, ants, melodies, cows, strangers, stones, metaphysics, docs, the king of thunder, dirt roads, apple trees, kids, foxes, Hank Williams, elephants and an otherworldly reach from the dead, undying, and unborn.

Stage 3, from a later Wild Sage Poetry Show on KZYX-FM, starts with a tracing out of ghosts before delivering "Calls Myself," a fast-moving, whitewater river of words, using the repeating line, "Call me Papa John," to great Whitman-like effect. They segue into the four-part finale, "A Man's Unfinished Dream." Bradd recalls his adventures in ice fishing outside of Toronto where fishermen like his Uncle Dudley dig holes in the ice and swim from one hole to another. Right away the diving takes on a metaphoric element as the sea becomes both entrance and exit to life and death. By the time Dudley dreams of Aunt Enid, the word order of his incantatory phrases keeps shifting and re-shifting until that slow bubble at the bottom of the lake rises from its depths.

It's brilliant business throughout, and like the other CDs, it passes the rubber-meets-the-road test, i.e., equally listener-friendly, whether in the car or alone in a room. The only heads-up is that the CD can only be purchased at the Mendocino post office box.