



<http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-et-daaood16apr16,1,7720730.story?ctrack=1&cset=true>

## No ivory tower poet

### Kamau Daáood's writing and activism carry the pulse of his Los Angeles neighborhood.

By Lynell George  
Times Staff Writer

April 16, 2005

Only moments after what looks to be the last of the rain, Kamau Daáood is catching the first bit of sun. It's early yet, so it's pretty much just him and the birds and someone already set to watering their little patch of cement.

Seated on a bench just across the street from the newly reborn 5th Street Dick's Coffeehouse in Leimert Park, in his ever-present newsboy cap, Daáood drapes one long leg elegantly over the other and keeps sentinel on this short, quaint stretch of Degnan Boulevard — like always.

The poet is in a bit of a quandary as to where to go to catch up on all the latest with a visitor — most significantly on the publication of more than 30 years of his poetry, "The Language of Saxophones," out this week from City Lights, No. 57 in its venerable Pocket Poets Series.

"You see, if we stay here on Degnan, we'll probably be interrupted," picking up his heavy leather case, straightening up into his full 6 feet, 5 inches. "And I really think I've got ADD or something," he says, strolling near the center of the street, like he owns it, which in many ways he does. "The phone will ring," he continues, his deep voice traveling down an octave, then another, like a horn. "People will stop by. It's difficult to stay focused with so much always going on."

Such has been the case for many years for Daáood, who has been not only an "oral poet" but also a de facto activist in this neighborhood, particularly this stretch of business — gallery spaces, boutiques, artists' workspaces — that celebrate African and African American art and persistence. Since Daáood and the late jazz drummer Billy Higgins threw open the doors in 1989, the World Stage, a performance and meeting gallery, has played host to jam sessions, drum circles and various music and literary workshops. Consequently, Daáood has become the filament, an inspiration for many a young writer, thinker or drifter who has wandered by with a flicker of curiosity.

The decision then is to head a little bit south, then angle west. He suggests a cafe in Westchester where he sometimes slips in to do some reading or thinking. But just as he's unfolding out of the car, a truck rolls up and a voice tumbles out: "Hey! Kamau!" Here comes the handshake, the back clap, the hug.

Only a beat later, up sidesteps another: "Kamau, man, whassup?"

Daáood stops dead in his tracks, throws open palms heavenward. He bows his head before he goes into a "So much for that plan" head-shake.

It's impossible, really, for Daáood to slip off into the background, probably absurd to expect that he could travel anywhere around the city truly incognito. His voice, like his stature, is like his legacy — expansive and attention-getting. He's spent many years helping a community not just find a voice, but pick the sharpest and most resonant language with which to tell its story.

"Poets are often on the fringe of society," says poet Michael Datcher, author of the memoir "Raising Fences" and who ran the World Stage's Anansi Writers Workshop for more than a decade. "We're broke. We drive raggedy cars, but he helped to make the notion of 'community artist' noble." Daáood created new options, says Datcher, who like so many was drawn to the World Stage by the music, voices and people flowing out onto the sidewalk.

"For too long the heroes in the neighborhood were gangsters and hustlers, but Kamau made people look up to a poet. And that was revolutionary."

In his own verse, Daáood sums himself up as the man who "stands on the o.g. corner" telling "old school stories with a bebop tongue / to the hip-hop future." And in his time here, he has shepherded the Stage from a cultural hub to a spiritual one as well. "It's been wonderful to watch it all blossom," he says. "We went in to do art but found we were reintroducing a lifestyle."

A native Angeleno, Daáood, 54, says he never has known a time when he wasn't interested in reading and writing. "It was a relationship with ideas rather than words," he says, settling into a tiny booth in the sunny cafe. "Writing has always been a part of me. In high school, I would read [my] stuff and it would affect people. I could see it."

He wandered into the Watts Writers Workshop. Spent some time working with musician Horace Tapscott in his Pan African People's Arkestra, as a "word musician." Before long, people would stop by with a question, would need to talk about direction. "Then after a while, before you know it, people begin asking you to speak at their funerals and name their babies," he says, "to where now, some news outlets look to you when something happens to explain it."

Much of his work has grown out of the very pulse and cadence of the neighborhood: Youngbloods collecting on the corner; the booming beats that thud out of passing car windows; barbershop wisdom; the workaday rhythms of city life in southwest L.A.

His pleasures and his worries have grown up side by side here. Close by still are his wishes and his sorrows: "*Old ones who could stain minds / with the lips of ancient sons / and make them friends of wisdom,*" he writes, "*these children of asphalt / blinded by gray and neon / tongue-tied with empty money clips / looking for faint footprints / of their home training / deaf to the voices of the old ones.*"

That's the reason that Daáood hovers here; can't go too far away.

"I grew up not so far from here, so I was always coming to Leimert Park. It's structured for socialization the way it's blocked out with the little park at the end. It's set up for people to come together." But, he recalls, there was a period of blight until artists rediscovered it. By the time he and Higgins set up shop, mid-block on Degnan there were already galleries and studio spaces. "Artists rediscovered it long before developers did. It was just wonderful to see a thought become a thing."

Being a community artist, a poet off the page, had much to do with the socio-political atmosphere of the '60s. The decision was easy. "I came up in the '60s as part of the early Black Arts Movement. That's what you did it for. You were educating," he says. "I don't know if you choose it, or if it chooses you."

In Daáood's case, from the outset, it seemed to be more than a bit of both. "He was young, thin and mad, mad, mad. He was mad at everybody and everything," recalls artist John Outterbridge, who met Daáood when Outterbridge was running an innovative community arts school, Communicative Arts Academy in Compton, in the mid-'70s. "I would take him aside and we'd talk about things. He was an activist. Even then."

In those talks, Outterbridge also noted something else. "He was always prepared to pen something. He always had something in his pocket to write on. For him it wasn't a chore; it was a pulse," he recalls.

While for years he's helped run music and writing workshops at the Stage, his pay-the-bills day jobs have included teaching at various campuses around town — at Cal State Northridge and at Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design — and running his own record store, Final Vinyl, just around the corner, because, "Really, I'm just a frustrated musician."

Although many of the poems in "The Language of Saxophones" deal with his dream for his neighborhood and beyond, Daáood's poetry also wraps itself around the importance of making connections between legacy and self-pride; he doles out prescriptions — about how art can not just elucidate but heal.

The late '80s and '90s were a battlefield, says Daáood. From street violence to crack, the toll was innumerable. "That time was really hideous," he recalls. "We began buying into those concepts. People were fearful about even coming out their doors."

But art changed things. The neighborhood was reanimated as the World Stage brought poetry and music, the late Richard Fulton's original 5th Street Dick's brought jazz and nightlife and the neighborhood acquired a new glow. "Seeing people at 2 a.m. sitting on the sidewalk sipping cappuccino and playing chess, it blew away the stereotype that all here was terrible."

About the same time, youth culture was abuzz with rhyming couplets and metaphor — poetry slams and workshops, cascading freestyle hip-hop. As well, the little center became a political hub. "We'd just gone through the ugliness of '92, people began to revolt against the conditions and we were able to create a forum right here for dialogue."

Being an educator, an arts activist, the living definition of a community artist, Daáood understands the importance of presence on many levels.

"The arts develop our spiritual side in a secular way. The arts teach us something about ourselves and our environment. It's a different language. We need those things to slow us down."

When Elaine Katzenberger, editorial director at City Lights, first heard of Daáood from a friend on the performance scene in the Bay Area a few years ago, she was surprised that aside from two chapbooks and a CD, "Leimert Park," his body of work had barely been scratched at. Though City Lights publishes a wide sampling of work — fiction, nonfiction and poetry — the Pocket Poet Series, which includes work by Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara and Jack Kerouac, "is its own special

thing," says Katzenberger.

"There is an aesthetic applied. [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti started the series, and it bears his imprimatur, so I definitely had to pass this by him first, and he loved it," Katzenberger says. "So much of it has to do with Lawrence's original idea about what he wanted to publish, not just pretty poetry but revolutionary poetry, poetry infused with a political message."

Daáood's work fit that criterion. "Oral poetry is its own thing and it doesn't always stand up on the page," says Katzenberger. "His does."

"Kamau's work is a very clear representation of where he is and how he lives. There is dedication and history in it. The issues that he deals with are specific to the African American community but also speak to the larger community about oppression and empowerment and collective goals. My hope is to move him into different circles."

Being an artist who works out of the neighborhood from which he draws sustenance and inspiration is double-edged. Though he doesn't regret the hours he spent mentoring the neighborhood's children, he can't help but wonder if he didn't have enough time for his own.

"When other fathers were taking their kids to play basketball, I was taking my kids to arts shows and concerts. I was there but not always mentally." It works on him at moments, that urge to rewrite the page. Regret crosses his eyes briefly, like a cloud passing over the sun. He talks about pulling back from the Stage some, spending time with his wife, his five kids and four grandchildren.

There is his own work too, the recording, the producing and writing he hasn't gotten around to. "And all the living it takes to do it."

"Kamau can corral a sound into something unusual," says Outterbridge. "Make it another language. He suggests living is language. It is the way we speak and posture. The things we choose to hang on to. This is what makes the sun come out with such joy."

But the cost has been high. And what saddens Daáood is "the procession of loss on so many levels." Some physically, like actress Marla Gibbs who had taken over the theater. "She couldn't sustain it anymore. The [deaths] of Billy Higgins, Richard Fulton and Horace Tapscott. So on and so forth," he says, lowering his eyes for a moment. Sitting in silence.

Glancing at his watch he realizes there are things back home that await him. Back on the road, heading east. Down Slauson to Degan. But again, despite his resolve, he feels the tug. "Well, you better drop me off back at the Stage. I better stop in. See what's going on."

\*

Kamau Daáood

**Where:** Eso Won Books,

3655 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles

**When:** 7 p.m. Tuesday

**Contact:** (323) 294-0324

Also

**Where:** In performance with keyboardist David Ornette Cherry, Richard J. Riordan Central Library, Mark Taper Auditorium,

630 W. 5th St., downtown L.A.

**When:** 7 p.m. May 26

**Contact:** (213) 228-7025 to RSVP

---

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](http://latimes.com/archives).

**TMSReprints**

[Article licensing and reprint options](#)

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times