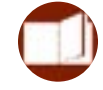




THEATER



MOVIES



BOOKS



MUSIC



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ART



DANCE

# arts



## we've got soul

BELIEVE IT. R&B IS ALIVE AND WELL ON THE DOCK OF THE BAY. by Kevin Berger

**M**eshell Ndegeocello has the presence of a boxer, the faith of a preacher, the heart of a poet. This past May, in a rare club appearance, the East Bay singer strolled onto the stage at Bimbo's, a slow, deep funk brewing behind her; a striped wool cap, pulled down over her forehead, gave her the look of a woman under pressure, ready to burn. She fixed her eyes on the crowd. "Gonna play some new shit for you tonight," she said. She began to sing—a leathery tenor, riveted with anger. "You sell your soul like you sell a piece of ass," she intoned, beats churning, tempo rising. "Remember what Jesse used to say: 'I am somebody.'" We were under her spell, willing to follow her down any dark street.

And we were an extraordinary retinue: white, straight, black, lesbian, brown, yellow, and gay. We were men in tailored suits and women in silk gowns, guys with gray ponytails and girls in floppy flowered dresses. How magnificent, I was thinking, as the deep, dark funk was gathering steam on stage, to be dancing alongside

WHILE THE OLD SCHOOL HAS SOLD OUT TO MADISON AVENUE, AND TODAY'S SOUL-POP KIDS CARE ONLY ABOUT MTV, LOCAL SOUL ARTISTS ARE KEEPING THE TORCH OF OTIS REDDING BURNING.

Meshell Ndegeocello shows off her lighter side.

people who are not me. Not an hour before, I had been reading a biography of Herman Melville, where I came across these lines from his novel *Redburn*: "American blood... is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand currents all pouring into one. We are not a nation, so much as a world." Lingered over those sentences one minute and then living them the next transformed the show into one of those special nights when all of the planets seem aligned. And, of course, the music knocked us out in all the right ways.

For Ndegeocello, the gig was a coming-out party for her fourth album, *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape*, a musical collage of hip-hop and soul, a lyrical farrago of radical politics and dreamy sex. For me, it was a heartening return to soul, a musical field from which I've strayed since Prince lost his mind, somewhere over the *Graffiti Bridge*. To my unending delight, I've discovered that Ndegeocello defies current record-industry conventions and puts genuine soul back into pop music, as do Oakland's Ledisi and San Francisco's Mar-





tin Luther. They've inherited the maverick wind of the Bay Area, which first blew San Francisco's Sly and the Family Stone onto the airwaves, and later Oakland's Tony Toni Toné and En Vogue. These three bands, you could easily argue, virtually created the mold that has been used to stamp out an assembly line of hit makers in the past decade—Boyz II Men, Destiny's Child, and the rest of the soul-pop kids who dominate MTV and popular radio stations like our KMEL and KYLD.

I started wondering about new soul music only a few months ago, when on a whim I grabbed the indispensable James Brown collection *Star Time* from my shelves, dusted it off, and put it in my car. It sat there for days alongside recent albums by New Order, Bob Dylan, Radiohead—typical middle-aged rock critic stuff—until one evening on a drive to the Oakland coliseum I popped it into the CD player. Somewhere around High Street, creeping along in traffic, as one musically taut, emotionally explosive song segued into another—horns charging, rhythm guitars riffing, Brown pleading—I thought, “My God, where are the artists like this today?”

It's a genuinely rare experience to hear the pure genius of old soul music these days. It can only happen in those Zenlike moments when your mind is free of the noise and clutter of the mass media. For all practical purposes, the nostalgia industry, made up of classic-rock stations and overwrought Hollywood movies starring Meg Ryan, has ground the gears of soul music into dust by overusing them to create a cheap and easy magnet for audiences. Early soul artists were robbed of royalties by double-dealing managers and music publishers, but how many more times do they need to be repaid? Can the money justify the damage they've done to the joy and romance of their songs by selling them to Burger King? I would like to tell Stevie Wonder that whenever I hear his once-blissful “Superstition,” I'm sickened, as it now is nothing

more than a jingle of rampant consumerism, the sound track of a commercial to sell a \$30,000 SUV, a Buick Rendezvous.

One of the problems with contemporary soul is that it is the sound of the marketplace, music designed to fit a specific demographic niche. I realize it sounds crotchety to complain about the streamlined beats and bubblegum melodies of Usher and Brandy, which are written for teenagers, to whom radio stations and MTV can sell Pepsi and Sony PlayStations. But I have the same trouble with the light jazz or acoustic soul or whatever that languid-tempo music is called that is supposed to appeal to people my age, who, apparently, have been robbed of all their sentient brain cells by adulthood. The first Sade album in 1984 was a refreshing blend of exotic rhythms and airy melodies. But I don't hear any real distinction or style in Erykah Badu or India.Arie or Alicia Keys (although I like the last few songs on her monster hit album, *Songs in A Minor*, when she gets way jazz weird). Mostly what I hear is a producer in the studio saying, “Let's use brushes on the drums in this song, alto sax, and wind chimes. That way, we're guaranteed to be played on quiet-storm radio stations.”

You'll hear no such complacency on Ledisi's vibrant *Soulsinger*, or, for that matter, on her album of sinuous jazz standards, *Feeling Orange but Sometimes Blue*. Instead, you'll hear the magnetic personality, dynamic tempos, and bold social declarations of Aretha Franklin and Marvin Gaye, artists who didn't write for market niches but for people of all colors and ages everywhere. As a vocalist, Ledisi, who has sung for years with Beach Blanket Babylon, ranges far beyond the MTV hit makers into the rarefied lands of Sarah Vaughan. But it's not her technique you notice when you hear her live; it's her smile and passion, which light up the room. On *Soulsinger*, Ledisi sings fearlessly about domestic abuse and even incest, but, remarkably,

## BERGER'S JULY MUSIC PICKS

### Ledisi

The local soul diva shows her sultry ways with pop standards on most Monday nights at Mecca and gets down and funky at Cafe Du Nord most Thursday nights. BOTH IN S.F.

### Mingus

Amungus Not only do they tap the soul of Charles Mingus, they remake the bebop master's tunes in the hip-hop image of our times. And positively groove live. JULY 3, YOSHIS, OAKLAND.

James Brown He's 69 years old, and age won't mean a thing the moment the Famous Flames rev up and the Godfather burns through the tightest soul ever. JULY 17, SOLANO COUNTY FAIR, VALLEJO.

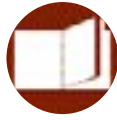
Neville Brothers They are the living history of New Orleans soul, and—as their brilliant, world-beat-influenced album *Yellow Moon* shows—so much more. JULY 18, THE FILLMORE, S.F.

she never sounds heavy-handed. Rather, she comes across like a bighearted inner-city counselor, with nothing to offer but common sense and compassion. Ndegeocello, I might add, who at times breaks her connection with listeners with sententious moralizing and hazy metaphysics, could take a lesson from Ledisi, who knows the beauty of a simple metaphor and light touch.

Similarly, Martin Luther's rockin' soul, punctuated with rap and turntable scratching, ventures deep into the bowels of urban injustice, as only a musician who grew up and still lives in Hunters Point can. But on his 1999 album, *The Calling*, and his recent *Rebel Soul Music*, Luther always emerges on an uplifting note, even with a laugh, with some sweet melody and wicked little guitar riff that evoke Donny Hathaway and Jimi Hendrix, his spiritual mentors. “Ain't no love, ain't no trust in our own community,” he lovingly sings. “The darkness that you keep inside must one day find the light of day.” As a vocalist, Luther sounds on one song as velvety as Barry White, as jovial on another as funk master George Clinton, who makes a guest appearance on the new album's “Pimpmobile.”

“I represent the Frisco bay, where the best are made, independently bred, and I refuse to be played,” Luther raps on *Rebel Soul Music*. It's a playful line, but it speaks volumes about him, Ledisi, and Ndegeocello. They simply won't “be played” by the rules of the fragmented marketplace. They are determined to transcend the spiritually empty trends of the time and follow the borderless and color-blind music in their hearts. Only months ago, I figured soul music had been left for dead. But now I'm here to say, at the risk of sounding like a charter member of a Bay Area booster society, that soul music is alive and well in our backyard, played by three artists with their eyes on posterity, just waiting for us to join them on the dance floor.

Kevin Berger is the executive editor of San Francisco.



# the un-beats

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI AND HIS PALS AREN'T THE ONLY BAY AREA POETS, JUST THE NOISIEST. by Cynthia Haven

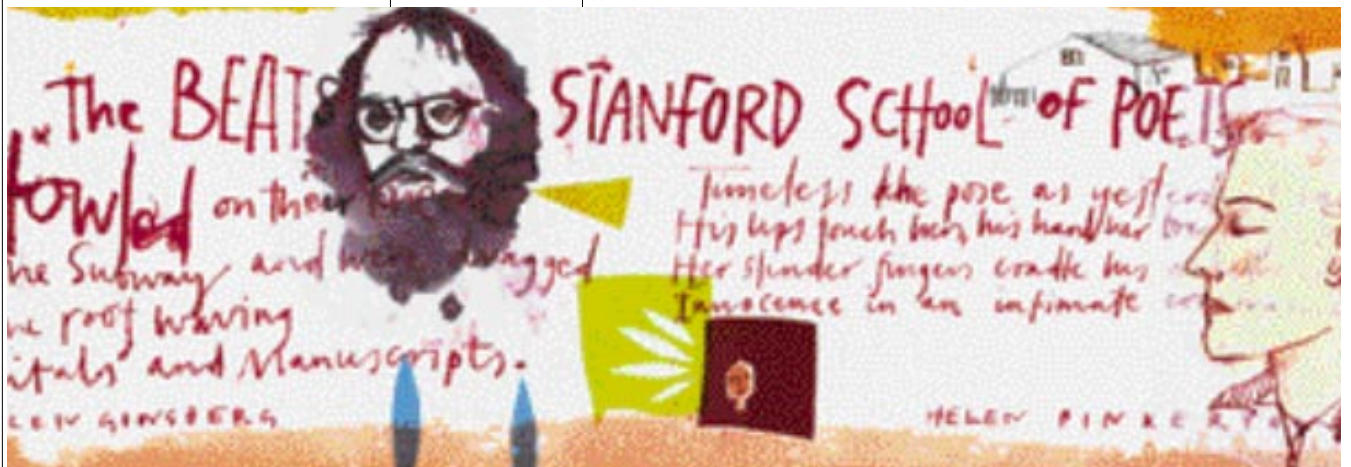
Ask a random group of people to tell you three local poets, and more likely than not you'll hear names like Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, McClure... In San Francisco, a single group of poets dominates the popular imagination: North Beach's wild-eyed Beats of the 1950s and '60s. Allen Ginsberg, their most celebrated deity, once described

THE POINT IS NOT TO BEAT THE BEATS. BUT THE STANFORD POETS' WORK IS RESTRAINED, ELEGANT, AND METRICAL—EVERYTHING THAT BEAT POETRY IS NOT.

Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, and Diane di Prima) overshadowed at least one local poetry movement whose work is arguably more sophisticated and of greater literary merit. So it is gratifying to see the publication of Helen Pinkerton's first book of poetry available to a general audience, *Taken in Faith* (Ohio University Press). Palo Alto's Pinkerton is now 75, and her

Review, as well as in the United Kingdom's *Listen* and the prestigious *PN Review*. In the former, she shared pages with such poets as Adrienne Rich and Philip Larkin—in fact, according to Pinkerton, every poet in that issue became famous except her. She didn't strive for publication and name recognition, insisting that a poet must choose what he or she wants to be, "a careerist or a serious writer." Serious writers don't worry about finding an audience; they worry about writing.

Her lifetime output is small; most of her poems hit the bottom of her wastebasket. But then, she rarely gets a rejection slip. A typical example of her work is a poem for a new mother inspired by a painting by Flemish artist Dieric Bouts, *Virgin and Child*, at the California Palace of the



his new way of writing poetry thus: "All you have to do," he said, "is think of anything that comes into your head, then arrange in lines of two, three, or four words each—don't bother about sentences—in sections of two, three, or four lines each." A gifted poet, Ginsberg sells himself short; "anything that comes into your head" understates his improvisational, incendiary imagery. In fact, no one is likely to have the tsunami impact Ginsberg had on several generations of poets and readers anytime soon. But it's hard to be a follow-up act to a man who performed the literary equivalent of taking off his clothes and burning them in public.

The Beats (the best-known poets among them include

book is an eloquent reminder of an influential group that has been tagged—when it is mentioned at all—the Stanford School of Poets. Their work is restrained, elegant, classical, and insistently metrical, everything that Beat poetry is not.

Pinkerton is not a new discovery. She taught at Stanford University after getting her M.A. there in 1950 (with time off for a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1966 and two babies). Her poetry has been privately read, circulated, and appreciated for years. Her limited-edition, fine-press *Error Pursued* (1959) and *Poems 1946–1976* (1984) were well received. Her poems, moreover, have occasionally appeared in the finest American literary journals, such as the *Paris Review* and the *Sewanee*

Legion of Honor:

Timeless the pose as yesterday's caress.  
His lips touch hers, his hand her breast. Eyes lowered,  
Her slender fingers cradle his nakedness:  
Innocence in an intimate communion.  
Now when I see you hold your newborn son  
As if the same sight filled your eyes, I bless  
Whatever keeps us so.  
Although some say  
Lust informs all love, others say grace ranges  
Downward, perfecting love through all its changes.

Recently, Pinkerton told me she had also been discouraged by the lack of craftsmanship around her,



the spirit of “anything goes.” In such a climate, publication can be a tinsel crown. (She became a Melville scholar instead.) Half a century ago, while she was quietly penning her formal, elegant poems in Menlo Park, all hell was breaking loose in San Francisco, where Ferlinghetti’s obscenity trial for publishing Ginsberg’s landmark poem “Howl” caused an international furor in 1957. The poem famously begins “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness / starving hysterical naked” and later, in a litany of incandescent self-pity, talks of those who “howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts...” Thus began a literary era characterized by celebrity and by poetry as protest and self-expression. Many lesser spirits took up the beat of Ginsberg’s bongos, the whine of his Hindu-inspired harmonium, and we’ve been in an era of do-your-own-thing ever since.

So Pinkerton’s life of scholarship and thoughtful strolls through museum galleries will not be to everyone’s taste. It may smack too much of the cloistered academia that the Beats tried to rattle. God knows we can use the flamethrowers, too. The Beats opposed the pretentious, the obscure, and the dull, and we could stand another such shaking. But it’s been difficult for others to compete with a poetry so youth-oriented, so instant in its impact, so immediately accessible—especially when they’re creating poems that may not grab you in a single line, that may yield richer meaning on subsequent readings or even over the course of years.

The bigger issue is that such noisy movements roll a heavy rock atop others of more durable worth, such as the group Pinkerton is associated with, the Stanford School, led by poets Yvor Winters and J.V. Cunningham from the 1930s to the ’60s. (Cunningham left for Brandeis in 1953.) Many of America’s leading contemporary poets were influenced by Winters in particular, among

them former poet laureates Robert Pinsky and Berkeley’s Robert Hass, as well as Donald Hall, Donald Justice, Philip Levine, Timothy Steele, and San Francisco’s Thom Gunn, who recalls Winters saying, “We must never lie, or we shall lose our souls.” Other protégés and colleagues included N. Scott Momaday and Winters’ wife, Janet Lewis (author of *The Wife of Martin Guerre*). In 1971, literary critic and Beat advocate Kenneth Rexroth wrote admiringly of the Winters circle, “As a group there had never been anything like them in the history of American poetry.”

And through their students, Winters’ influence has reached Stanford’s “grandchildren,” Southern California poet Leslie Monsour, for instance, and Dana Gioia, who just won an American Book Award for his third book of poems, *Interrogations at Noon*. (Gioia is also this magazine’s classical music critic.)

As Pinkerton, who edited Winters’ *Selected Poems*, describes the Winters gospel: “The feelings and emotional associations evoked by the words should stand in a rational, comprehensible, and just relationship to the statement.” In other words, the Stanford School downplayed emotional exhibitionism and self-indulgent expression. The group has been accused of excessive clubbiness, and Winters himself was notoriously controversial and cranky. After all this time, though, their brilliant poetry and the arguments for it should stand on their own merits. But that brings up another point.

If history is the story written by the victors, it’s significant that in Ferlinghetti’s 1980 book *Literary San Francisco*, Yvor Winters gets one reference in a summary list (and his first name is misspelled “Ivor” in the index), Thom Gunn is mentioned only in the caption to a group photograph, Lewis and Momaday don’t rate any mention at all, yet umpteen pages are given the Beats and the “Howl” trial—one gets the feeling it is the central event in postwar history.

## HAVEN’S BAY AREA POETRY PICKS

**Robert Horan**  
*A Beginning* (Yale University Press) is a musical, magical, and very offbeat read by the late Bay Area Activist poet.

**Robinson Jeffers**  
*Yvor Winters*  
Two formidable poles of local literary sensibility in the last half-century. Try *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Stanford University Press) and *The Selected Poems of Yvor Winters* (Ohio University Press).

**Weldon Kees**  
*San Francisco’s compelling, enigmatic Kees should be better known, and The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* (edited by Donald Justice, University of Nebraska Press) is just the ticket.

**Kay Ryan**  
*Ryan, who lives in Marin County, is a good living addition to these historical hits. Look for Say Uncle* (Grove Press), her briefest-of-brief, whimsical poems.

Our perceptions of literary San Francisco seem to have been shaped most by the movement that eventually caught the times and gained ascendance, and then chronicled itself. The Beats had the considerable energies of Ferlinghetti and City Lights Books at their disposal, an enviable megaphone for any movement.

I have stressed the Stanford School because Pinkerton’s book brings it to the fore, but I might also note Carmel’s Robinson Jeffers, whose postmortem recognition is only now reviving after decades of neglect, yet whose thoughts on time, nature, and mankind seem more apt with the years. I might also have mentioned the Activists, under the late Lawrence Hart, a maverick Bay Area poetry instructor. W.H. Auden selected two of Hart’s disciples, Rosalie Moore and Robert Horan, for inclusion in the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets in the 1940s. Like Pinkerton, Moore continued publishing into old age; she died at 90 in Petaluma last year.

Pinkerton’s survival and triumph may be another indication that it’s time to look again at our cultural legacy. The point is not to beat the Beats but rather to stress that the Bay Area has a literary history as variegated as our landscape—a story that’s as passionate, iconoclastic, and defiant of literary fashion as the Beats themselves, a point they should appreciate even though they became the fashion. Let us, by all means, give thanks for the generous, inspired spirit of Ginsberg et al. But let us move on. And let us, please, distinguish between celebrity and artistry, and not suppose that the best of the latter will survive without our vigilance and nurturing.

Cynthia Haven is a literary critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and other publications.