

BACK COVER

THINK: POEMS FOR ARETHA FRANKLIN'S
INAUGURATION HAT

COVER

COMPILED AND EDITED BY:
PATRICIA SPEARS JONES

2009

Think:
Poems For
Aretha
Franklin's
Inauguration
Day Hat

MADE AVAILABLE THROUGH
BOMB MAGAZINE

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MERI CULP has published in a range of literary journals including Southeast Review, Apalachee Review, North of Wakulla, Snug, and Nomad. She teaches English/Humanities in Tallahassee, Florida. "Chain of Fools"

METTA SAMA aka Lydia Melvin is the author of South of Here (New Issues Press, 2005) and her writing can be found in Mentor and Muse (Southern Illinois Press) and Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, and Rewriting History (Oxford University Press) and journals such as Drunken Boat and Pebble Beach Review. She teaches at DePauw University and Goddard College. "Think"

PAMELA SNEED is author of Imagine Being More Afraid of Freedom Than Slavery, (Henry Holt 1998) and KONG (Vintage Entity Press 2009). As a performer, she has headlined the New Work Now Festival at Joe's Pub/Public Theater and received the 2006 Baxten Award for Performance. "Amazing Grace" and "Drown In My Own Tears"

PATRICIA SPEARS JONES is author of Femme du Monde (TiaChuca, 2006) and The Weather That Kills (Coffee House, 1994) and two plays commissioned by Mabou Mines. Her reviews and commentary can be found in BOMB, Calabar, Black Issues Book Review and tribes.org. She is a fellow at the

Black Earth Institute and contributing editor to BOMB Magazine. "Spirit in the Dark" and "So Damn Happy"

RA ARAYA is a Costa Rican born poet composer actor curator raising 3 young sons in the New York metro area. He produces and plays with his rock/jazz/theater band, flash-back-puppy.

SORAYA SHALFOROOSH has published poems and reviews in journals such as the Marlboro Review, Women's Studies Quarterly, Barrow Street, Columbia Poetry Review, and tribes.org. She was featured in The Academy of American Poets Emerging Poet series. "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)"

TARA BETTS is author of Arc and Hue forthcoming from Aquarius Press, Fall 2009 and she has poems and reviews in Hanging Loose, Callaloo, PMS and Black Issues Book Review. She teaches creative writing at Rutgers University. "Think" and "A Rose is Still a Rose" with Lauryn Hill.

TRACY CHILES MCGHEE is a writer and lawyer who practices disability-rights law in Washington, DC. Her works have appeared in anthologies and journals including Coloring Book: An Eclectic Anthology of Fiction. Poetry by Multicultural Writers, and Slow Trains Literary Journal. "Dr. Feelgood"

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THINK: POEMS FOR ARETHA FRANKLIN'S
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AUTHORS BIOGRAPHIES
 WITH FAVORITE
 ARETHA FRANKLIN SONGS

AKUA LEZLI HOPE is the award winning author of EMBOUCHURE and an artisan. She is working on new poetry, plays, fiction, her sax, crafts and art and struggles to overcome the singular and stark challenges of paralysis and poverty. "If You Don't Think"

CORNELIUS EADY is the award-winning author Hardheaded Weather (Marian Wood/Putnam), which was nominated for a 2008 NAACP Image Award. He is co-founder of cavecanempoets.org Cave Canem and teaches at the University of Notre Dame, and performs around the nation. "Runnin Out of Fools"

GLENIS REDMOND is author of Under the Sun. and other books and has been a finalist in the National Poetry Slam and is a past winner of the Southern Fried Slam. She is a Kennedy Teaching Artist and was inducted in the Mt. Xpress' Hall of Fame for Best Poet in Western North Carolina. "Bridge Over Troubled Waters"

KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER is the Poet Laureate of North Carolina, but she grew up in SW Georgia. She is the author of Coming to Rest (Louisiana State University, 2006) and several other acclaimed collections. "Think"

KEVIN SIMMONDS is a musician and writer originally from New Orleans who now lives in San Francisco. His journal publications include FIELD, Kyoto Journal and Poetry. His music has been performed around the US, in Japan, the Caribbean and the UK. "Rock Steady"

The Tilt

Even before that familiar
joyful, soulful sound took flight into the icy wind
Aretha announced that she was a gift
to all in attendance on that glorious day.

In the tilt of her platinum gray crown
and in the light that shone from its dazzling bow
stories were told of a land that has struggled to be free
but in this moment has found its sweet escape.

Now history wants to possess
that righteous hat as a beholden promise
pointing toward a more perfect union
but how on earth do you ask a Queen
to part with her chapeau?
For what higher design?

That we may all remember when
with style and flair
Aretha sang a freedom song
and we all joined in and believed.

As an African American poet who grew up in the segregated South, I know my Church Lady hats. My mother has several. So when Aretha Franklin stood at the podium wearing a dove gray wool ensemble and hat to match, I knew that this was her grandest gesture and her best tribute to the new President of the United States, the fulfillment of the Civil Rights Struggle, and honor to all the Church Ladies who made the day possible. Franklin's generosity of spirit was matched by that boldly trimmed dove gray crown.

In early February, via Facebook and the poetry grapevine, I gathered poems about Aretha Franklin's hat as a way to respond to political change and Obama's presidency. "Think" was picked as a favorite Franklin song by many of the contributors, thus the title. The poets are women, men, straight, gay, young, a little older, established and emerging, mostly Americans (African and otherwise) and a Canadian and Costa Rican. We were inspired by Aretha Franklin's singing "sweet land of liberty" wearing her diva hat as part of day of citizen power, political change, and natural splendor. Think.

— Patricia Spears Jones
April 27, 2009—Obama's 98th Day in
Office revised June 9, 2009

Aretha's Hat

Aretha's hat
 sober, subdued for
 this singular occasion of state
 between peace dove and battleship gray
 fabric again freighted with meaning
 purpose, duty, to notice this moment
 hold heat against 16 bitter degrees
 look good, grand, covered before
 nature's cold embrace for all
 adornments are frail in wintry discontent

this time of toxic breakdown
 the wide world was watching
 more than that sea of millions stretched
 listening, despite arctic air
 they were there witnessing
 as redemption is inaugurated

our queen of a deep abiding realm of sound
 crowned by Song as she unfurls
 her sturdy, enduring gifts voice again our
 hope and longing our passionate griefs
 determinations to be and the great unfolding proof
 that music articulates for spirit
 we chose hope this day
with freedom's holy light

bow wrapped presence, glitter edged wings
 angels of our better nature attend
 angle of their ascent upward ever, sing

"The Hat, So Apropos"

Her crown was fitting
 gray with sharply poised
 bow ready for flight
 appointed with sequins
 to signal beyond the launch
 pad we witnessed-a new
 regalia on the National Mall.

Standing in Lincoln's shadow
 the smoked syrup outpour begins
 across waves of people undulating
 past glowing obelisk. The airmen
 up front nod their silent amens,
 pristine punctuation accenting awe
 that marks victories won in ballots
 and minds.

What else could the ordained Queen
 of Soul wear to propel us toward
 the right side of history, land where
 our fathers died? No metaphors
 of planes, helicopters, butterflies
 or samaras will do when we become
 parishioners in the church we've built
 and sing gospels wrought from volumes
 of millions, dead and living, beating
 wings inside the gathered fists of voices.

A Little *Respect* Hat

The queen of soul in a
 Gray wool chapeau
 Heroic bow
 Swarovski rhinestones
 Hand molded, hand sewn
 Who'd believe Aretha's hat choice
 Would cause more buzz than her voice
 That her church hat, inauguration hat
 Maybe soon to be at Smithsonian hat

A little Respect hat
 Is now history hat

Aretha Franklin's Inauguration Hat

Look at that hat, my mother might have said,
 Sitting in that bunker the living room had become,
 Her favorite shows interrupted by the sight

Of this woman, who once sang my sister through
 One of her major heartbreaks—an I give then
 Take-away man

With a truth which rose through the house—I was too young
 To know which kind of truth, really, and my sister
 Was now learning the words-her belly would swell from it—

Ain't no way, aint no way, sang the girl who was slightly
 Older than my sister, old enough to teach it,
 Ain't no way, ain't no way

The needle scratched, and scratched again.
 It's not too far-fetched to think of it breaking skin,
 A rush of something toxic, tear-raising

Remember when she didn't want to tell us
 But told us by playing that damn record all day
 Over and over in her bedroom, that's the woman under

That hat I'd tell my mother, if she'd asked.
 That church hat.
 That black woman's hat.
 That testimony hat.

Symbol

The power of air and ancestors
flung History's door wide.

We could see *America becoming more Beautiful*,
a painting resembling King's dream
awakening on the lawn,
multi-colored hues cutting the cold.

How the crowd seemed bewitched and amused
more by Aretha's hat, than the song.

How the hat held the eye.

How the eye held hope,
a shape of wings perched and poised
to the sky predicting

A Change is Gonna Come.

God Bless Aretha and that Hat.

"Grand Sombrero"

Months prior, The Statue Of Liberty of voice
Walks by me, cane in hand
From her sound check in NYC

Grand piano

Never heard the Stars spangled as much as with Aretha's voice

So what do you say, in the pit of a ballroom
History just goes by

Grand Capitol Steps

Laid, cut, moved and now sworn on

"Y el sombrero?"

It reminds me of the sugar-cane walked
Of all the fields labored, tended, cut
And of the sweetness still remaining on brows

It is a worker's hat, a freed and duly elected hat
An I am here, here I was all along
I will be here again hat

Wearing Mr. Song

So what if her voice is just a half beat ahead of the taped
Strings swelling somewhat over the Mall, all these people
All this color, a dash of cold to keep everyone awake

And sing she did wearing a gray chapeau from Mr. Song
How righteous is that? The trim, just so.

How righteous is Aretha early morning, so damn happy.
A President who looks like a skinny version of her brother,
A second cousin, an old boyfriend. The helpful guy at the bank.

How can you thank the Lord better than that preacher from California
Who seemed to think he was at some crystal palace, the walls cracked
And crumbling under the weight of his bigotry? Truth be told,

She will have none of that. Oh no. She sings “sweet land of liberty.”
Voice crackles in places where once it climbed fearless of octaves

It is still her voice. She’s still Aretha. This is America.
And things do change. And change can come.

When it needs to.

I Praise

I Praise Aretha’s Hat
because nobody else
but Aretha could wear it,
nobody else with a hat
up there on the stage
that I saw
with the wind whipping round
like a whiplash,
an apron sash,

like a whole lot of ash
we are scattering now
to the wind
saying rise up you
dry bones,
you burned-down
to the ground slave cabins,
all of you out in the cotton fields
I saw
passing by
in my Mama’s big car.

I Praise Aretha’s hat
because nobody else
could wrap round
her head such a swag-
gering “Here I am
and you out there
listening
to me, you had
better be, too,
because
my country, ‘tis
of thee is the reason
I’m here, is the reason
all of us right here
and ready
to shout
it out: HERE!”

*for doris davenport,
on her birthday*

Bolt

No new filament
 but wattage amplified
 by the socket
 of a hat,
 the dull melody sent out
 by electric vibrato
 into the reflecting pool.
 Every body
 electrified.

polishing patent leather shoes, pumps
 wearing 2nd hand mink stoles and hats
 walking, strolling arm & arm with brothers, lovers, sisters,
 and children to church.
 I would like to think Aretha's hat choice was not random
 but an institution of some sort
 a symbol of us all and how far we'd come
 It was not a poorly planned and executed fashion faux pas
 but picking it out I would like to believe
 she had thought about a Sunday in 1963
 and those 4 little black girls bombed and killed
 at the 16th St Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama
 which caused Nina to pen the song "Mississippi Goddamn"
 I would like to say Aretha was very young but never forgot
 those little girls, their black patent leather shoes, fresh pink bows
 and their mother's sitting often beside them in church pews
 wearing hats just as similar and outrageous as the one she wore
 to Obama's inauguration
 No, Aretha's hat was not a mistake
 it was a deliberate fist up and shout out to a mass
 of hungry people demanding and working for change
 It was a way of Aretha kicking off her shoes, getting comfortable,
 bringing colored and
 real negritude to the White House.

Negritude

There were several conversations I had after September 11
 regarding a piece that I had written about the attacks on
 the World Trade Center
 where I say that the terrorists used our language
 911 was an emergency call
 a wake-up call
 By doing this I believe they were sending a very coded
 encrypted but blatant message
 trying to cut through the smog of American denial
 In response, some of my astute liberal friends asked if I thought
 the terrorists had chosen the date 9/11 on purpose
 which always leaves me incredulous
 Now, I don't know if I can do this, fast forward
 to Aretha as a soloist
 on the occasion of Obama's inauguration
 and the large grey hat she wore
 with a enormous bow out front
 though they are two very separate occasions
 one festive
 one not
 one criminal
 one not
 I want to say that neither the date 9/11
 nor Aretha's hat on Jan 20, 2009
 were random
 No, Aretha's grey bonnet was not a faux pas of fashion nor catastrophic choice
 such as the day she performed in white satin pedal pushers
 No, Aretha's grey bonnet on that cold wintry wonder of Obama's inauguration
 was a carefully designed shout out to hundreds, thousands of Black women
 and men who'd gathered at the Washington mall and
 monument decades before
 demanding equal jobs, equal pay, education
 fighting against a separate America
 one Black, one White
 Yes, Aretha's hat and bow was a shout out
 to a generation of Black Women church goers
 rising at 7, 6 am Sunday mornings
 getting their families together

Aretha's Hat

It's good to hit
 the second note hard

when you're a woman
 just to remind everyone you're here.

It also helps
 to know the word "hat"
 will be repeated
 long after that last held note,
 and its gray bow
 tied just so,

as though a gift
 you've been giving and giving,
 shines its place

and holds the world together.

Sizin'Up 'Retha's Hat

Consider the color:
 stone cold gray,
 I mean legit,
 damn near constitutional,
 in its inherent slate speak,
 its granite statue perch.

Catch that slant:
 groovin' on down
 to old school tilt,
 slip-sliding into the front row pew
 of rainy Sunday mornings,
 still holding that just right set.

Put on your shades:
 That girlish bow is serious
 in its natural woman status.
 Those scintillating stones, bordered, resolute,
 flash free only when 'Retha gives the word,
 looks skyward, shatters the soul.

Cue

My country tis of thee, sweet land of
 the hat, unaffected, bowed

This weather, that hat
 from every (yes) from every (sing it) from every mountain top

Not a flap in the wind, not a stretch of the skin
 but the bow bows

In event of a somber speech, look for the stars
 and bow

They say if we look in the sky, between Saturn and Regulus,
 a comet bows

What is it about the tilt of the trim and the drama
 of that hat

Ree Ree

Ree Ree

Ree Ree