

A poet and his song

By Teri Rizvi

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When Herbert Martin was a child growing up in Birmingham, Ala., his classmates taunted him when he read aloud Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry.

The youth bore an uncanny resemblance to Dunbar, a Dayton native and the first black American to achieve national eminence as a poet. Because the schoolchildren had to memorize Dunbar's works, "they took out their dislike for poetry on me," remembers Martin. "Either I've repressed that or gotten over it."

Now himself a poet, Martin hears only applause when he reads Dunbar's work today. Well, "reads" is not exactly the right word. Dressed in a turn-of-the-century morning coat and striped trousers, Martin "borrows" Dunbar's voice to bring the poet's verse to life. At times, he exhibits the spiritual frenzy of a black preacher in a folk sermon. In other moments, he delivers Dunbar's humorous refrains with the rat-a-tat speed and perfect timing of a successful late-night TV comedian.

"I try to show that the dialect poems are accessible," says Martin, who became seriously interested in Dunbar's work in 1972 when he organized a centennial birthday celebration in the poet's honor at the University of Dayton. "Looking at his poems on the page, they seem really kind of difficult to read. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, there is a feeling in this country that dialect means that you are uneducated and unintelligent and to use it or speak it somehow makes you second rate or second class. (Mark) Twain has gotten away with it, but I think black people have been embarrassed by dialect."

The son of ex-slaves, Dunbar stepped in and out of dialect for effect, never losing his distinctly black voice. "In 'An Ante-Bellum Sermon,' he presents ideas about freedom in a very humorous, satirical way, but when he is extraordinarily furious, he moves just slightly to the right of dialect. He plays both sides of the fence it seems to me. He involves the reader in such a way that you cannot miss the point."

Juggling two "acting" engagements per week on top of his teaching load in the University's English department Martin has taken his one-man show to schools, libraries, and clubs around the state. He's even performed for the official Paul Laurence Dunbar Reading Club

in New Castle, Pa., and one Fortune 500 company -- the Mead Corp. Black Entertainment Television, a national cable station, has featured Martin as "English professor by day, Paul Laurence Dunbar by night."

Like Dunbar, whose notebooks contained several drafts of the same poem, Martin incessantly revises his work. The creative process starts before dawn. Arising early "before the house wakes," he scribbles out poems in longhand and slowly punches them into a word processor. Then he revises and revises and revises.

The University of Dayton's poet-in-residence for over two decades, Martin has published four books of poetry and a monograph on Paul Laurence Dunbar and is trying to interest a publisher in a book-length collection of poems about people with AIDS and a long series of poems called "Final W" about his mother dying from cancer. His poems have been published in academic publications and such national magazines as *Poetry* and the *George Washington Review*.

The words don't come easy: "When you look at that flat sheet of paper, it's pretty fearsome and awful to think that you're trying to create a world on a sheet of paper that's 8 1/2 by 11 to bring it (the poem) to life so that the reader feels the emotion," says Martin. "All of that is pretty worrisome, especially if you're calling yourself a professional. When one of my books comes out, I always think, 'well, here I am being foolish in print again.'"

Martin, also an accomplished Shakespearean and musical theater performer, says he often feels the same way when he's behind the footlights. Whether performing or writing he tries to rely on what he calls a sense of youthful arrogance. "If you begin to have serious and second doubts as you go on the stage, the audience is not going to believe that you are who you say you are," he observes. "I think readers can also recognize that lapse and falseness in tone."

At Scott High School in Toledo, Martin remembers writing a series of "really dreadful" poems that he claims to have "burned by my own hand and destroyed so they can't come back and haunt me." In the '60s he began reading his poetry in New York coffee houses. His work has run the gamut from militant themes to unrequited love, and he says he's still trying to find his own "voice."

At first, he says, "(TS) Eliot and (Ezra) Pound held sway. Everything I wrote in the early days had that echo. Slowly I began to write poems that could not have Eliot's or Pound's or anyone else's perspective.

"The voice I'm still trying to find is occasionally humorous, maybe even has a twinkle in it somewhere. It's serious, I would hope that it's highly lyrical and that much of my voice is informed by music and that it is in some ways elevated, not out of the reach of the general public, but not so low and mundane that everybody just sort of tramples on it and takes it for granted," he muses.

Not surprisingly, Dunbar, too, heard music in poetry. Says Martin, "It echoed in his work."