

## **A poet gives life to his fascination**

By Stephen Burd

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Enter the Paul Laurence Dunbar House here and you will find the original Remington typewriter that the turn-of-the-century black writer used to pound out his poetry, scraps of time-worn paper on which are scrawled early drafts of his 100-year-old poems, and a bicycle he purchased from his childhood friends, the Wright brothers.

Every so often, you may also discover in the house a man, wearing a morning coat and striped trousers, who bears a striking resemblance to the dead poet.

But Herbert W. Martin, a professor of English at the University of Dayton and a poet himself, is not Paul Laurence Dunbar; he just plays him on television -- in an educational video - - and in a one-man show for audiences at countless schools, clubs, and libraries across Ohio and the rest of the country. Dressed in late-19th-century-garb, Mr. Martin recites the poet's work, including his popular dialect poems, and brings Dunbar vibrantly to life.

### **'A star professor'**

As a child, Mr. Martin often was teased by fellow classmates about his eerie likeness to the poet. But it wasn't until Mr. Martin came to the University of Dayton in 1970 that his fascination with the city's favorite hometown poet began.

Mr. Martin's performances, which have made him a local celebrity or, according to the April 1992 *Ohio Magazine*, a "star professor," have also allowed him to get some exposure for his own work.

"I've made a rule that I will read maybe 35 minutes of Dunbar and during maybe the last 10 or 15 minutes, I will read two or three of my own poems, before answering questions about Dunbar," he says. "So I feel that it has been of some kind of a benefit for the both of us."

Mr. Martin does not mind that he has become better known for reciting Dunbar's poetry than for his own.

"I don't feel like I'm in competition with him, and I don't feel overshadowed by him, and certainly do not envy his short life," he says.

Dunbar died of tuberculosis in 1906 at the age of 33. But in his brief life, Dunbar, who is widely regarded as the first black person to achieve national eminence as a poet, was very

prolific, publishing six volumes of poetry as well as short stories, novels, librettos, songs, and essays. Mr. Martin recently found an original manuscript of a three-act play of Dunbar's that has never been published.

As a poet himself, Mr. Martin has had his successes. He has published four books of poetry, including the latest in 1980. The books focus on diverse subjects -- from the loneliness of the city to racism and the frustrations of being black in America to sexuality and love.

Mr. Martin has continued writing and has succeeded in publishing many individual poems, but he has had little luck lately getting his works published as books. "It has been a difficult time for poets to get books in print, especially with the recessed economy," says Mr. Martin, adding, "It would take a very long time to find somebody who spends their extra money on a book of poetry."

### **Competing for recognition**

To get books published these days, he notes, poets must enter contests, competing with hundreds of others for recognition. "The whole market seems to have swung to contests, so that means, in a small contest, they are likely to get anywhere from 200 to 500 entries, and only one book can win, when there are probably at least 10 there that would be good," he says.

It is a very different time from the 1960s when poets, including Mr. Martin, flooded the coffeehouses of New York City's Greenwich Village for public poetry readings. Then, publishers like Broadside Press hunted down young, aspiring black poets with the goal of getting them into print.

It was an exciting time, says Mr. Martin, who worked some of the same clubs as Bob Dylan. "The poets took to the streets, and they captured the American imagination," he says, putting their "pulse" on the concerns of their audiences. "And people started buying books of poetry like they hadn't done since anybody could tell in a month of Sundays."

Since then, he says, poets have generally focused more on the personal than on the political. And the public, he says, has generally lost interest in what poets have to say.

Still, Mr. Martin loves to write and feels that his next book contract is not too far away. He says he never lets himself get discouraged: "I think you are called to be a poet, like ministers are called to be ministers, and doctors are called to be physicians. Something touches you and says this you can do, and you can do it well."

### **What would Dunbar think?**

He has been shopping around three manuscripts for books: one about a man dying of AIDS, another about his mother's battle with cancer and a third titled *The Log of the Vigilante*, which chronicles the voyages of a slave-trade ship.

Sitting in the study of the Dunbar House, the room in which Dunbar composed much of his poetry, Mr. Martin wonders out loud what the famous poet would have thought of his poems.

"I would hope that he would like my poetry, but beyond that there's no guessing. Even if he liked only one or two, that would be OK," he says. "I guess I'm the only one who's supposed to like them all, since they are my children. Some are more successful than others, some are better constructed than others, some have excellent bodies, and no ideas, some have excellent ideas, and no bodies, so you have to take it like you catch it, as Dunbar said in one of his poems."

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