

Inspired Destiny: Herbert Woodward Martin brings Paul Laurence Dunbar to life

by Teri Rizvi

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A passage about sitting in the peanut gallery from Paul Laurence Dunbar's novel *The Sport of the Gods* prompts the professor to gaze away from the text of his well-worn paperback and pick up one of his own poems.

In a quiet, rich voice, Herbert Woodward Martin recites the first few lines of "Here," words inspired by a trip to a historic downtown theater in Grand Rapids, Mich., purchased by two of his former students:

Beyond the point where the exquisite marble left off,

The narrow stairs in this old theatre have become

So narrow that only one body may pass.

High above everything, only birds can speak.

The air here is thin as frayed threads...

Martin tells the class when he climbed the stairwell to the upstairs gallery, he spotted rows of dusty wooden church pews. "I said, 'Oh, my. I knew exactly what this was. This is where the colored people sat when they came to the theater. That was during the period of segregation. When Dunbar writes, 'They sat far up in the peanut gallery,' that's exactly the way it was.

"So, I made a poem out of it."

The six students in English 490, *The Legacy of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, have little inkling how Dunbar has inspired — and shaped — their unpretentious professor's own poetic genius and destiny. As he goes over the syllabus for the term, he mentions a date or two when the class won't meet. What he doesn't share is that he's booked on some campus or theater somewhere in the country performing his popular one-man show, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: The Eyes of the Poet." Black Entertainment Television once dubbed him, "English professor by day, Paul Laurence Dunbar by night."

Dressed in a turn-of-the-century morning coat, striped trousers and kente cloth, Martin "borrows" Dunbar's voice to bring the poet's verse to life. At times, he exhibits the spiritual frenzy of a preacher. In other moments, he delivers Dunbar's humorous refrains with the rat-a-tat speed and perfect timing of a comedian. The energetic Martin, who just turned 72 and officially retired a decade ago, still juggles about 50 engagements a year on top of teaching the occasional class, writing more-than-the-occasional poem and helping to care for an extended family that includes his mother-in-law and grandchildren.

Martin's calendar these days is booked, and the phone continues to ring following a resurgence of interest in the long-dead poet. This year marks the centennial of the death of Dunbar, a Dayton native and the first African-American poet to gain prominence in modern times. The prolific writer penned 12 books of poetry, four others of short stories, a play and five novels before dying Feb. 9, 1906, of tuberculosis at the age of 33.

On the eve of the anniversary, Martin finds himself traveling to Yellow Springs for a National Public Radio interview in the morning, giving a talk at Central State University on the oral traditions in African-American literature in the afternoon and driving to Otterbein College for an evening performance of Dunbar's works with Top Brass. "Will I be alive at the end of all this hullabaloo?" he jokes.

Ironically, Martin has been performing Dunbar's works for as long as Dunbar lived — after spending nearly four decades studiously avoiding the poet. As a youth, he bore an uncanny resemblance to Dunbar. His classmates in Birmingham, Ala., taunted him about his looks and demanded that he intervene on their behalf and ask their teacher to quit making them memorize Dunbar's words.

"When I was younger, I had horned-rimmed glasses and looked very much like him," he says, repeating a story chronicled in Ronald Primeau's biography, *Herbert Woodward Martin and the African American Tradition in Poetry* (2004, Kent State University Press). "The association didn't sit well with me. For me, it was a matter of suppressing him."

In an essay, "Reluctant Heir," Martin recalls how it was not easy to be a look-alike because he felt like a second that would be sold at bargain prices," according to Primeau's biography.

That attitude started to change in 1970 when he was hired by the University of Dayton's English department to teach poetry. His office overlooked Woodland Cemetery, where Dunbar was buried, and he began to delve with curiosity into his life and works. In 1972, he wrote personal notes to poets and scholars around the country, inviting them to the University of Dayton for a three-day Dunbar Centennial Celebration marking the anniversary of the poet's birth. He concluded his pitch with these words: "So I send out this appeal, no matter what your stance is, to come to Dayton, and let us raise our voices and make stately music."

Poets Alvin Aubert, Nikki Giovanni, Michael S. Harper, Etheridge Knight, Gloria C. Oden, Raymond Patterson, Sonia Sanchez, Lorenzo Thomas and Alice Walker showed up and participated in a marathon reading of Dunbar. Martin's feelings about Dunbar changed dramatically when he heard Margaret Walker read four of the poet's dialect poems.

"She read Dunbar like I had never heard Dunbar read. You could have heard a pin drop," Martin remembers. "It was astounding. She had the dialect and the rhythm either in her blood or under her fingertips. She read him with such grace and dignity that I had to go back and reread him."

Back in the classroom in the Jesse Philips Humanities Center, Martin starts the class with a question, "How does Dunbar capture character using dialect? How does he capture humanity?"

Sensing that the students are struggling with dialect, he gently probes them, pointing out the effectiveness of using words in the way people of the time uttered them. "Dunbar deletes certain vowels and consonants when he writes the dialect down. The problem with novelists before Dunbar was that when they built the characters, they sounded like white characters put into black skin. ... The dialect comes from the way the slaves heard people using the language."

Picking a passage from *The Sport of the Gods*, he cries out in a sing-song voice that no longer startles the students.

"That's why I really like him. It's almost like he is Dunbar," says an appreciative Neil Craft, a senior English major from Dayton.

During a television interview in January, Martin muses whether the use of dialect hurt Dunbar's early reputation. "Dunbar elevates the language. He, in some ways, was faulted for writing in dialect. Many of the Negro elite at the time thought he was perpetuating stereotypes," he observes. "We don't look at Toni Morrison and say she shouldn't be writing in the way people talk. Novelists can get away with it."

Martin calls Dunbar "a prophet." In the poem "He Had His Dream," Dunbar "anticipates Martin Luther King Jr.'s great sermon. It's amazing that Dunbar, with some sort of prophetic sensibility, taps into that." In the upbeat, humorous poem "A Negro Love Song," Dunbar "anticipates the rhythm of our music today. Again, he's prophetic."

Martin, whose own literary outpouring includes six volumes of poetry, plays, opera libretti and literary criticism, has earned a reputation as one of the nation's premiere Dunbar scholars while serving as the University of Dayton's own poet-in-residence. In 1992, he found a 40-page unpublished play, *Herrick*, written by Dunbar. Since then, he's discovered other unpublished works that have shed more light on the poet's brilliance. In 1996, he served as librettist for the Dayton Opera Co. premiere of *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground*. In 2002, Martin and Primeau, an English professor at Central Michigan University, co-edited *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, a 305-page volume of Dunbar's previously unpublished and uncollected short stories, essays, poems and dramas. In 2004, Martin selected the poetry and wrote the introduction to *Selected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, published by Penguin Classics.

On the centennial of Dunbar's death, Martin hints he'd like to retire the traveling one-man Dunbar show and replace it with a performance of another celebrated black poet and writer, Langston Hughes.

"2006 seems the right year for a kind of farewell. It would be a nice marking point," he says. "I heard (television commentator) Charlie Rose say, 'I don't know what I'd do if I retired, this is what I do.' In some instances, that's right. This is what I do, but it's time for someone younger to step up, someone as enthralled and enamored (with Dunbar)."

"Someone said to me, 'Why aren't you reading more Herb Martin?'" he says, gathering his books for class.

Later this year, Kent State University Press will publish a collection of Martin's poems called *Inscribing My Name: The Selected Poems of Herbert Woodward Martin*.

Martin's poetry has been inspired by Dunbar, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, but he writes in his own distinct voice. Like Dunbar's long-ago penned words in "The Poet," Martin continues to give voice to "the world's absorbing beat."

In *Final W: The Cancer Files*, Martin chronicles in lyrical language his mother's journey with terminal cancer in a series of 30 poems. He writes in a voice that transcends race to capture a common humanity.

Still, Dunbar's influence echoes. "In the *Log of The Vigilante* and in shorter single poems I have ventured into the territory of dialect and vernacular language because I felt the narrator in the poem was more effective with that particular linguistic choice," he says.

"I happen to think that a poet exists — if he or she is any good at all — outside of all those categories like race, gender, religion, nationality or socio-economic standing," Martin says.

A century after Dunbar's death, the words ring prophetic.

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Coming to together in joy

On a frigid, sunny Thursday morning in February a couple hundred Paul Laurence Dunbar aficionados marched to the poet's grave in Woodland Cemetery to "come together in joy, commemoration and celebration," as one local pastor so aptly described.

A native son of Dayton and the first black poet to gain preeminence, Dunbar would have been proud to see the audience that appreciates his work today — black, white, young and old all gathered together to pay tribute to his legacy 100 years after his death of tuberculosis at the age of 33.

"We celebrate Dunbar but also reflect on his life as a learning experience. It's not how long you live, but how well you live," said Dayton Mayor Rhine McLin.

A century after Paul Laurence Dunbar's death, the University of Dayton and numerous other regional organizations spanning the arts and education are marshalling their creative energies and producing numerous public events to celebrate the poet's life and work. The year has been dubbed Celebrate Dunbar!

In February, two nationally known poets, Nikki Giovanni and Michael S. Harper, returned to Dayton for the tribute. Both participated in a University of Dayton celebration in 1972 that marked the centennial of Dunbar's birth.

In a year chock full of events, the Dayton Contemporary Dance Co. will premiere a new dance work inspired by Dunbar's poetry and life. Dayton Opera will reprise *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground*. The National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center has mounted a yearlong exhibition, while Wright State University's Dunbar Library is displaying first editions of his books through June 30. The University of Dayton and Sinclair Community College are offering seminars and classes on Dunbar's poetry. There's even a Dunbar checkers tournament for third-graders.

"Our goal is to increase visibility of a Dayton gem who is truly a national treasure," said Paula Cosby, community development coordinator for Wright Dunbar Inc., who co-chairs Celebrate Dunbar! with Anne Pici, writing program coordinator in UD's English department. "We are a group of community organizations committed to ensuring that an important pioneer gets his due. We're encouraging and making it possible for the community — and beyond — to celebrate his life. We think it's so important that we brought the resources of our institutions to the table and came up with an incredible yearlong program."

Herbert Martin, UD's poet-in-residence, will bring Dunbar's works to life in a free performance at the Wright-Dunbar Interpretive Center on March 25. "Dunbar elevated the language," Martin said. "Dunbar wanted to fly with words, while the Wright brothers wanted to fly with machinery."