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## **Abstract**

Perhaps it is fitting in celebrating Sterling Brown's eightieth birthday and career of great achievement to turn once again to his first published poem, 'When de Saints Go Ma'chin' Home.' It is a Big Boy Davis poem - the 'guitar-plunkin' singer of marching saints is Big Boy - and it is the only 'Big Boy' poem specifically dedicated to him.' The dedication reads:

(To Big Boy Davis, Friend.

In Memories of Days Before He Was

Chased Out of Town for Vagrancy.)

# 'When de Saint Go Ma'chin' Home': Sterling Brown's Blueprint for a New Negro Poetry

Perhaps it is fitting in celebrating Sterling Brown's eightieth birthday and career of great achievement to turn once again to his first published poem, 'When de Saints Go Ma'chin' Home'.<sup>1</sup> It is a Big Boy Davis poem — the 'guitar-plunkin' singer of marching saints is Big Boy — and it is the only 'Big Boy' poem specifically dedicated to him.<sup>2</sup> The dedication reads:

(To Big Boy Davis, Friend.  
In Memories of Days Before He Was  
Chased Out of Town for Vagrancy.)

Such a dedication has a way of bringing a smile to our lips; so much is afoot here in what is, for Brown, a typically mischievous way. Obviously, Big Boy was a character, a roustabout, a 'terribly unemployed dude' as Toni Morrison would remark. Evidently, however, he was much more than a colourful vagrant in the eyes of some, those folks including Sterling Brown, the author *and* persona. While Brown appreciates and often reveres the 'characters' in our shops and churches, neighbourhoods and towns, and while he often writes about them, he rarely if ever dedicates poems to them. This poem is dedicated to Big Boy because he was not merely a character but a friend and guide, not merely an entertainer but an artist, and most particularly because he was a singer and hence creator of community even though, in the eyes of the law, he was a man with no visible means of support.

Brown's dedication is therefore in some sense ironic: the town is not necessarily the community — especially as community may be consti-

tuted and defined by shared performances of expressive culture; the law is not necessarily the will of the people; the unemployed and allegedly idle are not necessarily bereft of direction and values and without employment of another kind. It is also a dedication that is sincere. Big Boy's example gave Sterling Brown a clear understanding of how to begin to create a written art which would not only portray or 'call the names' of the folk but also perform the didactic functions of communal expressive culture. Quite to the point, 'When de Saints' does not merely portray Big Boy — any more than Brown's 'Ma Rainey' merely portrays that great singer. Instead, it offers, through its evocation of a *communal performance* of 'When de Saints' inspired by Big Boy, a blueprint for a new poetry in what we inadequately call the folk manner.

Part I of the poem establishes Big Boy as a redoubtable storyteller and bard; as a figure who is something more than an entertainer. It also makes clear that his concert is a shared, communal, 'folk' event. The first stanza reads as follows:

He'd play, after the bawdy songs and blues,  
After the weary plaints  
Of 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul',  
Always one song in which he'd lose the rôle  
Of entertainer to the boys. He'd say,  
'My mother's favourite.' And we knew  
That what was coming was his chant of saints;  
'When de saints go ma'chin' home....'  
And that would end his concert for the day.<sup>5</sup>

One notices immediately that the 'we' used throughout is not a gratuitous, editorial 'we'. It is an aggregate or shared 'we' connoting terms like 'neighbours', 'kin', 'listeners', 'audience', and, more abstractly, 'performance group'. It refers to folk who will share in the chant, possibly by *being* 'saints' to be numbered (as we observe in part II) or by telling or singing of Big Boy in future recreations of 'When de Saints' such as the poem before us.

Like any other audience fully participating in the creation of a shared artistic event, Big Boy's gathering has certain expectations which he, as performance leader, must meet. The phrase '...we knew/ That what was coming was his chant of saints' tells us that the audience expects (and apparently is about to receive) a repetition of an orchestrated performance witnessed before. They don't want something new. The repetition of the old songs, the re-appearance of familiar, anchoring visions, and the reaffirmation of shared values are what they desire and, in some

sense, require.

In this regard, a phrase such as 'my mother's favourite' carries a special weight in that it advances poem and performance alike. As a written phrase, it suggests the generations 'in their song', bound by the repetition within community of song contextualized in performance. But it is also an example of what David Buchan terms 'received diction' — language which has 'accrued a contextual force'.<sup>4</sup> It is a coded message, a signal: the audience knows that it is to be quiet and respectful — this being the very way in which Big Boy wants it to join in. The glory of Brown's handling of all of this is that he is able to suggest in written art the full extent to which silence in a folk artistic event is voiced.

In short, throughout part I the emphasis is not on whether Big Boy sings 'When de Saints' well but on whether his singing re-creates the conditions in which shared performative events may fittingly close ('And that would end his concert for the day') and thus achieve artistic form. Part I initiates Brown's presentation of Big Boy's vocation — his work for and among the 'kin' in attendance. Every suggestion that he does his work well and has always done so ('Alone with his masterchords, his memories...') refers us back to the charge with which the poem began — that Big Boy is a vagrant — and renders that charge more and more ludicrous.

As suggested before, part II of 'When de Saints' 'calls the names' of some of the folk who'll be marching home. Once again, the communal aspects of Big Boy's performance are accentuated. Deacon Zachary, old Sis Joe, and Elder Peter Johnson are among those named or called, and one cannot help but imagine that Big Boy is weaving into his song — his song so set and familiar and yet so perpetually available for traditional acts of improvisation — the names of figures in the audience before him. These names may not have been in need of the call a year or two ago, but, apparently, they need calling now. We know that Deacon Zachary, Sis Joe, and Elder Peter Johnson are old. Perhaps they are sick as well and their time is nigh. Perhaps others, too, are in hurtful need of hearing their names called — of being listed in that number. The point is that Big Boy understands all of this, and knows what he's supposed to do to better their lot. This is why, when Big Boy calls for quiet, folks don't leave: though silent, they will share in the performance of 'When de Saints'.

As the section develops, we realize that all the 'saints' listed are either elders or children, and that Brown willingly runs the risk of creating 'plantation' stereotypes (Deacon Zachary's 'coal black hair' is full of 'hog-grease', etc.) in order to stress that Big Boy's roster of '...saints — his

friends...’ embraces everyday folk.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Stephen Henderson is quite correct to suggest that in this section Brown fashions an ‘emblem of folk society’.<sup>6</sup> But he’s up to other things as well, matters which have much to do with his increasingly specific ideas on realism in Afro-American letters. The image of the children amongst the saints is, for example, far more complicated than it initially appears. It is at once an image of youth at play — ‘Wid deir skinny legs a-dancin’ — and of youth in heaven, in death. They are, in Michael Harper’s powerful words, ‘brown berries torn away’. While we gain a certain solace from knowing that they are in heaven, we also can’t help but wonder about the quality of the world they left behind. The portrait of an elder, Grampa Eli, prompts similar thoughts:

‘An’ old Grampa Eli  
Wid his wrinkled old haid,  
A-puzzlin’ over summut  
He ain’ understood,  
Intending to ask Peter  
Pervidin’ he ain’t skyaid,  
‘Jes’ what mought be de meanin’  
Of de moon in blood? ...’

Grampa Eli has good reason to be puzzled. He’s a simple man perhaps, but he’s not asking a simple question. Since we can assume that he knows something of the folk beliefs associated with the ‘blood-burning moon’, it seems likely that what he’s really asking is why is there fear, violence, hate, murder? What kind of world is this? Why are people that way? The stanza begins with a stereotype, or something close to it, and ends with that type unpacked or torn apart. Whatever it may be, Big Boy’s chant is not a minstrel song.

While part II of the poem lists those who will be in that number, parts III and IV suggest who might be left out. Part III generally vilifies white folks — ‘*Whuffolks ... will have to stay outside / Being so onery...*’ — but justly asks what Big Boy is to do

With that red brakeman who once let him ride  
An empty going home? Or with that kind-faced man  
Who paid his songs with board and drink and bed?  
Or with the Yankee Cap’n who left a leg  
At Vicksburg? ...

His answer has just the right blend of reason and irony:

*...Mought be a place, he said  
Mought be another mansion fo' white saints  
A smaller one than his'n ... not so gran'.*

Part IV asks the even harder question of whether there are black folks who won't make the roster. There's an answer for that as well:

Sportin Legs would not be there — nor lucky Sam,  
Nor Smitty, nor Hambone, nor Hardrock Gene,  
An not too many guzzlin', cuttin' shines,  
Nor bootleggers to keep his pockets clean.

To this list 'Sophie wid de sof' smile on her face' is also added; apparently, 'She mought stir trouble, somehow, in dat peaceful place'.

These sections obviously suggest that Big Boy's heaven will be peopled with blacks and whites of a certain kind. For this reason, I think it is fair to say that they are the sections most responsible for various class analyses of the poem. However, I think it is a mistake to conclude, as Stephen Henderson has, that Big Boy's song must therefore be for 'his middle-class friends'.<sup>7</sup> Big Boy's vision of heaven — of a just world — is much more radical than that. Sis Joe and the Yankee Captain, Maumee Annie and the red Brakeman, the little children and the few guzzlin', cuttin' sisters and brothers who *will* be in that number constitute the *worthy*, not the bourgeoisie. In this regard, parts III and IV initiate Brown's contribution to the proletarian art of the American 1930s. A direct line can be drawn from the idea of the People put forth here to that which can be found in Brown's *No Hidin' Place* poems. Big Boy's selection of saints is also Brown's selection of an audience and subject matter for a new poetry by the American Negro.

The closure of the poem is layered in a lovely way. Part V begins,

*Ise got a dear ole mudder,  
She is in hebben I know —*

With these lines the song introduced as Big Boy's mother's favourite becomes rather fittingly a song about her and about meeting her in the 'restful place':

Mammy,  
Li'l mammy — wrinkled face,  
Her brown eyes, quick to tears — to joy —  
With such happy pride in her  
Guitar-plunkin' boy.  
*Oh kain't I be one in nummer?*

*I pray to de Lawd I'll meet her  
When de saints go ma'chin' home.*

Here, closure is achieved within the song itself. The mother joins the neighbours and distant kin already incorporated into the song. Embrace of all, but especially of the mother, occurs when Big Boy sings himself into the chant as well. With that, 'When de Saints' is fully sung, and a certain exhilarating vision of community in both this and another world is complete.

But closure must also occur within the performance of which the song is but a part. Hence, there is yet another section to the poem, part VI:

He'd shuffle off from us, always, at that —  
His face a brown study beneath his torn brimmed hat,  
His broad shoulders slouching, his old box strung  
Around his neck; — he'd go where we  
Never could follow him — to Sophie probably,  
Or to his dances in old Tinbridge flat.

The shift from Big Boy's song to the persona's narrative, or, from his voice to that of a persona speaking for Big Boy's audience, completes the frame initiated in the poem's opening lines. One effect of our attention being returned to the audience is that the primacy of the total group performance over and above an individual's singing of a song is once more underscored. Another is that the audience's story or tale of Big Boy enters into a kind of harmony with Big Boy's song, the grand result being that song and tale join together to suggest the full dimensions of an enduring communal performance. Indirectly but clearly, the charge of vagrancy with which the poem begins is further qualified as well. One part of the town chased him away; the other, with strong feelings in their hearts, watched him go. Surely, by the end of the poem we know that Big Boy has vocation as well as visible support.

## II: THE BALLADIC UNIT AS A WRITTEN FORM

Unlike many of the poets preceding him, including Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown rarely passed up an opportunity to improvise upon traditional forms for the purposes of written art. Examples of this abound in 'When de Saints', but the poem's first stanza is perhaps a special example in that it may be seen as a variation upon a traditional structural unit — the balladic unit — that is

larger and yet less apparent than those to which the writer of poetry usually turns.

In most instances, especially in Afro-American letters, the 'folk' poet focuses his or her attention on the traditional stanza, usually the quatrain readily found in balladry. Examples of this are easily found in the poetry of Frances E. W. Harper, Dunbar, Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks, to cite a few major authors. However, as Buchan has shown, the traditional balladeer frequently groups stanzas into pairs or triads which become the large structural units of a song, or, more precisely, of that song's performance.<sup>8</sup> The traditional poet never needs to say or otherwise indicate that a unit has been formed. The audience senses that this has occurred when a balance, antithesis, apposition, or parallelism initiated in one stanza (or 'verse') is completed in another. Since these stanzaic units often function synchronically within the ballad with comparably significant units of character and narrative structure, they are far more conspicuous to the traditional poet's audience than are the individual stanzas comprising them. The audience is therefore usually more attentive to stanzaic units than to stanzas, and hence more aware of how they assume the greater role in the building of the song or poem.

Brown appears to have had all of this fully in mind while composing the first stanza of 'When de Saints', which should be offered once again at this point:

He'd play, after the bawdy songs and blues,  
After the weary plaints  
Of 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul',  
Always one song in which he'd lose the rôle  
Of entertainer to the boys. He'd say,  
'My mother's favourite'. And we knew  
That what was coming was his chant of saints;  
'When de saints go ma'chin' home....'  
And that would end his concert for the day.

Within these lines, vestiges of two traditional balladic stanzas are easily found. The first quatrain is located within Brown's first four and a half lines. The second is found in what remains of the stanza after the caesura in the fifth line. While a precise construction of the two balladic quatrains is impossible, chiefly because there is no *ur*-text to retrieve and work from, it is safe to say that the first quatrain begins with 'He'd play...', and that 'He'd say' initiates the second. Here, without going further, we can see how the quatrains balance one another and begin to form a large stanzaic unit. The movement from 'He'd play...' to 'He'd

say' in and of itself completes a distinct pattern of repetition with variation. This pattern is further developed structurally when phrases of song are offered just before the closure of each stanza. In short, there is a basis in phrase and structure alike for the balancing, appositional construction of the vestigial balladic unit forming the core of Brown's written form.

What emerges here is a clear suggestion of written improvisation upon traditional art forms in which the writing artist has boldly decided to reproduce that art's structural logic instead of merely duplicating its meters, rime schemes, and signatures. In Brown's stanza, the vestigial balancing quatrains are best described as units of structure. They consist not so much of four strict lines as of four specific blocks of logic or meaning. Each quatrain adheres to an A, B, B', C pattern of development which can be charted as follows:

A: He'd play...

B: ...after the bawdy songs and blues,

B': After the weary plaints/ Of 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul,

C: Always one song in which he'd lose the rôle/ Of entertainer to the boys...

A: He'd say,/ 'My mother's favourite'....

B: And we knew/ That what was coming was his chant of saints

B': 'When de saints go ma'chin' home....'

C: And that would end his concert for the day.

Obviously, the phrases isolated above cannot be sung or scanned as conventional balladic lines. Moreover, when assembled together in Brown's stanza, they create nine lines, not eight. For some, these points would indicate that Brown is not working with the balladic model of paired quatrains. But that is not the case. Most certainly, the A, B, B', C pattern is a balladic pattern. Its presence as structure in Brown's stanza confirms that written poetry can be in some fundamental sense traditional or of the folk without displaying the outward trappings of traditional forms.

To write a stanza based upon the structural order of the balladic unit instead of the rime scheme of the individual ballad quatrain was obviously an extraordinary experiment for an Afro-American poet to undertake, especially in 1927. Brown assumed the challenge, and did so, I believe, for a high purpose. He wanted to create a written stanza full of folk expression (texts and textures) and direct reference to traditional performance (contexts).<sup>9</sup> He desired as well to write in such a way that reader response to his written art would at least approximate audience response to traditional performance. Finally, he also desired to fashion

yet another reply to those who argued that traditional forms could not spawn a serious Afro-American written art. Quite astutely, he saw that he could achieve all three of his goals if he could render the balladic unit as a written form.

### III: PRINCIPLES FOR A WRITTEN POETRY

Throughout this discussion it has been suggested that 'When de Saints' constitutes something of a blueprint for a new Negro poetry. More should be said at this point.

I think it is fair to say that when Brown came to the writing of poetry in the 1920s, most Afro-American poets, including especially those interested in creating a written folk poetry, were wrestling with two formidable and rather intimidating models. One, which we commonly associate with Paul Laurence Dunbar, asserted that a poetic line in the folk manner had to be transformed into 'literary English' before it was capable of rendering what Dunbar termed '...the world's absorbing/beat'.<sup>10</sup> The other model, displayed most successfully by James Weldon Johnson in *God's Trombones*, argued not so much for a literary standardization of the folk line as for its 'classicization'. Classicizing differed from standardizing in that while diction and often grammar were to be transformed, other 'folk' stylistic features were to be retained — or restrainfully simulated in new but clearly derivative rhythms, enjambments, and repetitive patterns. The following stanzas from Johnson's 'Go Down Death (A Funeral Sermon)' illustrate my point:

Weep not, weep not  
She is not dead;  
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.  
Heart-broken husband — weep no more;  
Grief-stricken son — weep no more;  
She's only just gone home

And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,  
And he smoothed the furrows from her face,  
And the angels sang a little song,  
And Jesus rocked her in his arms,  
And kept a-saying: Take your rest,  
Take your rest, take your rest.  
Weep not — weep not,  
She is not dead;  
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Johnson's '...Take your rest,/ Take your rest, take your rest' means much the same thing, and is intended to have much the same effect, as Brown's '...take yo' time..../ Honey, take yo' bressed time' in 'Sister Lou'. But Johnson would have rejected Brown's version as the less artistic of the two — or at least he would have done so in the years before he agreed to write the Introduction to the first edition of Brown's *Southern Road*.

Both models seem to argue that the act of poetic closure figuratively expressing the full form *and* range of the Afro-American poetic canon cannot be achieved without radically altering the traditional features of the initiating or calling line. According to the Dunbar model, for example, a line like Brown's 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul' must be standardized as 'I know what the caged bird feels,/ Alas!' before the Afro-American poet can venture a serious closing line such as 'I know why the caged bird sings!' or, 'The Master in infinite mercy/ Offers the boon of Death'.<sup>12</sup> In this example, not only is the traditional texture of Brown's line standardized (Dunbar's 'Alas!' takes care of that) but the contextual posture of the persona-poet is altered as well. Indeed, one might say that the new artist of the standardized lines knows a great deal about the caged bird precisely because he has forsaken a performance-centred artistic posture for a writerly pose within the romantic prison of solitude.

Several of Brown's early poems such as 'To a Certain Lady, in Her Garden' and 'Virginia Portrait' clearly show his admiration for the Romantic poets. But others, including all the Big Boy poems, make clear that he for the most part rejected the role of the artist as self-garreted prisoner. This meant, in the terms used before, that Brown decided to commit himself not only to initiating a poem *and* canon with lines like 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul' but to closing and shaping poem and canon alike with lines such as 'When de saints go ma'chin' home'. His point was nothing less than that 'When de saints go ma'chin' home' is a stronger line than the standardized 'The Master in infinite mercy/ Offers the boon of Death' or the classicized 'She's only just gone home'. That was a bold claim to make in 1927.

From all of this three major principles for a written Afro-American folk poetry seem to emerge, and all three principles are evident in 'When de Saints'. The first principle is that a poet need not abandon the 'received diction' generated by a traditional culture's art events in order to give written poetic stature to an artistic form initiated within that culture. 'When de saints go ma'chin' home....' completes Big Boy's performance and Brown's poem alike precisely because it is fully capable

of embodying and announcing a serious moment in each. A second principle is that while a writing poet cannot fully create a performance context in written art, he or she should not therefore assume that aspects of performance have no place in the written poem, or that the proper poetic posture for the writing artist is *ipso facto* a non-performative posture. Quite to the point, 'When de Saints' presents both an artist (Big Boy) and a poet (Brown's persona) who, in accord with the enduring aesthetics of performance events, share in the creation of interrelated, multigeneric artistic forms. Within the context of a specific communal performance inspired by Big Boy, the poet has been a true listener. When the poet in turn tells his tale of Big Boy, his song, and the performance mutually created by singer, song, and audience, his act of listening in the past achieves one of its prefigured fulfillments in art. Building upon this, the third principle asserts that a serious moment in written art can be a shared moment. A poet need not sing, as does Dunbar's model artist, 'From some high peak, nigh/ yet remote,' in order to evoke and sustain a fitting solemnity. As suggested before, Big Boy's quieting down of the boys schools us as to the great distinction between silence and solitude. His shift from 'I' to 'we' — apparent in the movement from 'muh soul' to 'de saints' — seems to confirm that the creation of silence can be an act of sharing voice. Brown's great point seems to be that the shared serious moments in communal performance events can be emotive and structural models for the shaping of comparable moments in written art. Put another way, performance aesthetics can abet the pursuit of written forms once the writing artist sees that he or she must emulate the performing artist *and* the performing audience alike.

The collection and vivid presentation of these principles in 'When de Saints' renders that poem a major cultural and aesthetic document of the Afro-American 1920s. It 'corrects' Du Bois's 'Criteria for Negro Art', complements Hughes's 'The Negro Writer and the Racial Mountain', and generally provides a point of view on Afro-American literature which was rarely offered by the chief movers-and-shakers of the Harlem Renaissance — the exception being, of course, Zora Neale Hurston.

In 'When de Saints Go Ma'chin' Home', Sterling Brown introduces Big Boy Davis and his song, and presents an idea for a new poetry by American Negroes as well. The poem calls for social realism in a written American art which doesn't just portray communities but creates them. It urges the Afro-American poet to discover and pursue a new and more honest idea of the 'serious moment' in written art. It calls for poems which Brown succeeded in giving us many times, and for performances

of poetry much on the order of folk events which Brown also has given us time and again. We expect certain preachers to give us their 'Dry Bones' sermon at Eastertime; we anticipate Big Boy's singing of 'When de Saints'; and we eagerly await each and every portrait-in-performance Brown offers of Sister Lou, Big Boy, Old Lem, Slim Greer, Ma Rainey, and the Strong Men. In this way, envisioned some fifty years ago, Brown keeps what we share alive.

## NOTES

1. 'When de Saints Go Ma'chin' Home' first appeared in *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life*, V (July, 1927), 48. It won the journal's award for poetry in 1928.
2. The other 'Big Boy' poems are 'Odyssey of Big Boy' and 'Long Gone'. 'Odyssey' first appeared in Countee Cullen, ed., *Caroling Dusk* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927); 'Long Gone' in James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931). All three 'Big Boy' poems were collected in Brown's *Southern Road* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932).
3. The text of 'When de Saints' used here and throughout this essay appears in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp.26-30.
4. David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.170.
5. I refer here to the 'plantation tradition' in *fin de siècle* American popular literature which Brown himself discusses in *The Negro in American Fiction* (Washington: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1938) and *Negro Poetry and Drama* (Washington: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1938).
6. Stephen Henderson, 'The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown: A Study of Craft and Tradition', *Black American Literature Forum*, XIV, No 1 (Spring 1980), p.35.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk*, pp.87-104. This section of my discussion is substantially indebted to Buchan's analysis of the Scottish ballad.
9. The distinctions Alan Dundes makes between folk texts, textures, and contexts are by now familiar to all folklorists, if not all literary critics. They appear in various guises throughout this essay. See Dundes, 'Texture, Text, and Context', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 28 (1964), 251-65.
10. See Dunbar's 'The Poet', *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1926), p.191.
11. The text quoted here appears in Arna Bontemps, ed., *American Negro Poetry* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1963), pp.2-4.
12. See Dunbar's 'Sympathy', p.102, and 'Compensation', p.256.

This essay is based upon a paper delivered at the Sterling Brown Festival, Brown University, 1 May 1981.