

SMALL PRESS LEGENDS: S.A. GRIFFIN

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S.A. Griffin lives, loves and works in Los Angeles. He drives too fast, sleeps too little and thinks too much. His heart is a wheel that breaks for cubist impulse. He believes that God is an ambidextrous cheeseburger that paints mustaches on the moon while the sun cries Mary. Married to a wonderful librarian from New Jersey, proud father of a son who says hello to the world with his wild guitar, and owned by three spinster cats, his life has been the journey of the book less travelled by, which really has made all the difference. Co-editor of *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (Thunder's Mouth Press, Firecracker Award), Griffin has been publishing and editing poetry on his Rose of Sharon imprint since 1988. He is a Cadillac wrangling Carma Bum progenitor, rolling with that gang of literary misfits on the road and off from 1989-2009. Named Best Performance Poet for the *LA Weekly* by Wanda Coleman. Griffin is an active member of the curatorial staff at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center in Venice, California, and in July of 2011 became the first recipient of Beyond Baroque's Distinguished Service Award. A practicing slacker, in 2010, he created The Poetry Bomb, a 7 foot tall, former Vietnam era practice bomb converted into an art object and then stuffed with almost 900 poems from around the world in an effort to create civil disagreements, the project culminating in The Poetry Bomb Couch Surfing Across America Tour of Words 2010 between

April-June of that year. Widely anthologized, his most recent collections of verse are *Numbskull Sutra* (Rank Stranger Press) and *They Swear We Don't Exist* (Bottle of Smoke Press). In October of 2011 Griffin was honored to edit and write the introduction for *All Your Misplaced Utopias* by Scott Wannberg published by Bottle of Smoke Press shortly after his friend's passing.

A.D.: *Do you remember the first time you put your words on paper?*

S.A.G.: The first time I put my words on paper I probably was a teenager. The first things I tried to write were prose.

A.D.: *Whatever happened to those writings?*

S.A.G.: I have no idea. It's interesting because one of the earliest things I wrote was a prose piece for school, a piece about flying, and I had never flown in my life. I turned it in and the teacher was kind of ecstatic over the piece, she said that the imagery was fantastic and I got an A on it. I started writing poetry right about the same time, and the early poetry which I did is horrible because most of my early education was all classic poetry, so I was writing everything in classic form, and what most of us do is, we copy the masters, so I spent a lot of my time teaching myself by copying the masters in terms of poetry and most of it is pretty bad. It rhymed and it was stupid stuff.

A.D.: *Do you remember your first publication ever?*

S.A.G.: I really don't know what my first publication would be. Some of my earliest poems that were ever published would probably all be in *Shattersheet*, but I don't know if I was published anywhere else before that. Was there something published when I was in college? Don't remember, but I was writing this really existential stupidity when I was in college, really horrible. What happened was, I was on the staff of the college journal and I had submitted some of my poetry, and you submitted anonymously. I was on the panel, and I gave them my poetry and they didn't know it was mine and they didn't even read it, and I watched them as it went around the table, they just checked it off, "no good," and they didn't even read it! I left, never came back. When they found out what happened, they gave me an "A" because they realized they'd fucked up. But it was good for me. See, in terms of writing, rejection is extremely important because you learn what not to do, and not that you're trying to please people, but when I began writing in the early 80s, I submitted poems to maybe fifty journals or something. I was rejected by every fucking one of them, and I said, "This is stupid, I just need to learn how to write and when I learn how to write well enough people will ask *me*," and that's pretty much the way that it's been ever since. I rarely submit anything to anyone.

A.D.: *So rejection was good at the time?*

S.A.G.: It was good. I come from a place that is a little tough and so rejection doesn't necessarily bother me because it's all part of the process and that's how we learn. We learn by falling down and getting up and so that's the way that I approached my writing. I needed to be good enough so that somebody would pay attention.



A.D.: *Despite constant rejection you kept on writing. Why?*

S.A.G.: Because I care about the writing. The publication was nice. Yes, it's a nice affirmation, but I was always much more interested in developing the craft. The real reward, and this is a raging cliché, the process is the great reward. When you're sitting all by yourself in the middle of the night and shit just comes out. It's a fantastic feeling and it becomes very euphoric. It is like a dream of flying and you're untouchable and you know it, it's a fantastic feeling that cannot be matched by anything else.

A.D.: *After so many years writing and publishing—and this is a cliché too—which are the highlights of your career?*

S.A.G.: One of the highlights would be going to the Water Espresso Gallery in Hollywood for the first time. I'd reached the point where I'd been writing for a couple years very, very earnestly. I was writing compulsively, I couldn't stop, and it wasn't very good but the point was, I was doing it. So I wanted to go to a reading and I wanted to put it out there to see what kind of response it would get. I went to the Water Gallery and there were a few people, maybe a dozen people, it was very geeky, but that's where I started hearing other people. For the first year that I read in public, I very deliberately read with no expression at all, because I wanted to make sure that the words were doing something, and so you learn how to (write) as a performer. You should learn how to read your audience very well and you can read the audience just by the way they respond, don't respond, how they shift in their chairs, or scratch their faces. And that's what I did that first time, that first year, I really paid intense attention to this.

The other thing that happened early on was getting involved in *Shattersheet*. That's how I learned about small press publications, how I learned about editing, how I became really connected to the Los Angeles community because *Shattersheet* was publishing all these people. So now I'm reading them and I'm finding out who they are, what they write about. The next thing probably would be forming The Lost Tribe, which is a performance poetry ensemble. They came out of the Water Gallery, the idea being making what we were doing as poets accessible to people, which really was the point, the accessibility of what we were doing: taking it off the page and making it more alive. The Lost Tribe fell apart and then reformed in 1989 ostensibly as The Carma Bums, which was the antithesis of The Lost Tribe, and then we "really" started touring, going around the country.

A.D.: *You keep talking about performing, touring and going to poetry readings. Do you think your career as an actor has had any impact at all on your writing?*

S.A.G.: It doesn't have much to do with the writing. One of the reasons I go by S.A. Griffin is because I did start writing poetry and I didn't want anybody to know—and it worked for a really long time—that I was an actor. I didn't want anybody to know I was an actor because I wanted people to be sincere about what I was doing as a writer. As a performer, yes, of course, my professional background has a lot to do with what I do as a performer. The

acting still to this day I don't think has much to do with my writing, it's pretty separate, but now of course people *will* know, it's all over the Internet.

A.D.: *Were there any other highlights after The Carma Bums?*

S.A.G.: Going to Denver to work on a Perry Mason movie of the week changed my life, which became the inspiration for *The Carma Bums*. I went to the Mercury Café for a reading and I read some of my poetry—this is '88, I think—and I met Ed Ward. Ed Ward came up to me after the reading and Ed is kind of one of the main movers and shakers there in Denver as a publisher. So what Ed did was, he took me under his wing and we hung out and partied a lot, and he introduced me to everyone in Denver. More importantly, he introduced me to—believe it or not—the Venice Beats because when Venice imploded here in Los Angeles they migrated to Denver. So Tony Scibella, Frank T. Rios, Stuart Z. Perkoff, they were all out there in Denver and they kind of continued on with what they were doing here in Venice in Denver. So even though we didn't really know about them here in Los Angeles (by the time I came along) they were alive and well in Denver, and so then through Ed I hooked up with everyone in Denver and then came back to Los Angeles, and then ultimately became very good friends with Tony Scibella and became directly involved with the Venice Beats here, and to this day I really kind of carry that forward in my own way. Then *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* was a big deal, and it was probably one of the worst experiences of my life creatively. However, it's out there and it works.

The entire book was created and edited via email, the Internet and telephones. Kaufman was in San Francisco, I was in L.A. and Neil Ortenberg, the Thunder's Mouth publisher, was in New York. Once the contracts were signed, to put it mildly, Kaufman and I just didn't get along. The first thing Kaufman said to me over the phone the day after we signed the contracts was, "My name should be first on the book." "Why?" "Because... I'm older than you!" "Good, I'm bald." It was all directly downhill from there. I had also struck a deal with John Martin to include Charles Bukowski in the book; but that got screwed all to hell jeopardizing friendships and reputations in the process. After that, I never worked with Kaufman on the project again, only Ortenberg, arguably the third editor. In all, I felt a tremendous responsibility to get the ball over the goal line, otherwise, it is quite possible that a lot of those lesser known poets that I had brought into the book wouldn't have made it, would not have been read or heard, and for myself, that is what the book was all about; providing a platform, giving voice to those small press, obscure voices in the greater world so that they too, could be a part of the conversation.

A.D.: *How come you got involved in that project?*

S.A.G.: I got involved in the project because Jack Micheline died, his passing being the true genesis of the project. What happened was, I wrote a eulogy. I knew Jack fairly well. I had produced a number of shows for him, some of the last shows he did in Los Angeles when he was alive. Jack would always

talk about being honest, and I when I had the privilege of hanging out with Allen Ginsberg, I wanted Ginsberg to tell me what poetry was, or what he thought poetry was. So finally, after a number of hours, the conclusion was that poetry is candor. And so with these things, when Jack died, I wrote an honest eulogy for Jack. It got published in a few places receiving quite a bit of very positive response, and Kaufman read it. Alan knew Jack Micheline as well, so Alan contacted me and we began a correspondence over email and then during the course of that correspondence I said, “Gee, I’ve always wanted to do an anthology of California writers like Jack who never got their due in life, that never really got recognized the way they should have.” Then Alan responded, “Yeah, me too,” and that’s how it started.

Originally, *The Outlaw Bible* was called *The California Bible of Vulgarian Poetry* the idea being we were vulgar, unacceptable, and then it ultimately got pitched to the big boys and Neil Ortenberg and Thunder’s Mouth picked it up. The title got changed to *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* and it became national as opposed to regional. We were contracted to have it done within six weeks from beginning to end. We were supposed to collect all the material, get all the rights, edit everything and have it done within six weeks, but it took about a year and a half.

A.D.: *After talking about the highlights of your career—and this, yet another cliché—were there any downfalls, any low moments where you thought writing was not your true crutch?*

S.A.G.: Because of why I do it, I don’t think I ever really had those moments. I never did this to make money, I never did it to be famous. I did it because I literally couldn’t stop myself. I had to be writing. I don’t know why, still to this day I can’t explain it, it was just something that triggered inside of me and I had to do it. So no, I don’t think I really had moments where I’ve really sat down and thought, “Why am I doing this?” I might say, “Who cares?”, but writing when I do write for me is a pleasure, it’s probably more than a pleasure. It’s self-affirmation because I enjoy the process so much and nobody fucks with me. See, as an actor people fuck with me, whatever else I do somebody is gonna fuck with me because that’s a business. This is not my business. I don’t care what anybody thinks about me from the outside, I can tell you from the inside. It’s not a business. If I never make a fucking dime, I don’t care. So therefore, this expression of the process for me is really pretty much nothing but pleasure and it’s very exciting when it goes well. It’s a very solitary thing, but you’re experiencing it, that’s all it matters. And I do believe that it’s something that comes through you. You get out of your own way and it just comes through you. It’s an odd sort of sense of responsibility, it is as if, “Yeah, I’m doing it, but there’s something else coming through me.” I just learned how to move my fingers well enough that when it speaks to me it comes out okay.

A.D.: *After having your poetry published in several small press magazines such as Shattersheet, what moved you to put out your own little magazine?*



S.A.G.: I think it's just more of a natural progression than anything else. Most of what I do as a publisher has been trying to reach out and be a part of the community, create community and help myself and others to be a part of the dialogue, whatever that dialogue might be. I do think that on some level, as a poet, you're always trying to be a part of whatever that dialogue might be.

A.D.: *Which was the first magazine that you ever put out?*

S.A.G.: The first magazine that I ever put out was probably the broadside with Rafael Alvarado, (*Sic*) *Random Vice & Verse*. It started out as something called *The Piece of Paper*, and I think Garth Grinde was involved in it along with Berndt Reigel. *The Piece of Paper* lasted for about a year or something, then Rafael kind of took over and he brought me into it, and over time it became a periodical and we dropped "random" so that it was now (*Sic*) *Vice & Verse*. We did it as a broadside for about eight years and then for about a year and a half we did it as a magazine.

The thrust of the magazine, the core the magazine was always poetry. However, my thrust with (*Sic*) *Vice & Verse* was to reflect the symbiosis of the arts and even the sciences, but specifically the arts. We always had poetry, fiction, art, photography, reviews and it all came together in the same magazine. I think we did a pretty good job of it actually it got a great response. Rafael and I had a big falling out. Once the money got involved shit changed, I was pretty much putting all the money into the magazine. We weren't really making any money off the revenues, we were getting freebies, books, and coffee and shit.

A.D.: *Didn't you even break even?*

S.A.G.: It was free, we gave it away. A part of my sickness is that I want to give everything away. All these things I produced over the years, all these hundreds and hundreds of readings and events, I've never taken any money for the readings, ever. The Carma Bums trips too, since I had produced all of them, T-shirts, everything. So I've lost money, I've more than likely lost thousands and thousands of dollars over the years. But I did it willingly, and I have always had a good time doing it.

A.D.: *That's interesting. Why do you think the small press has been bringing out so many books and magazines knowing beforehand that even breaking even was a long shot?*

S.A.G.: Number one, I don't think most people understand that. When they get involved they think, "Oh, nobody's really done this right, I'll be the first person that will do it really right, I'll show everyone how to do it," and they burn out really fucking fast. They last a couple of years at best and they're gone. You see them come and go all the time here in Los Angeles. People get off the damn bus and they say, "Here I am, I'm gonna change the world," because that's what you do, you have a tiger by the tail. So that's number one, people think that they're going to reinvent the wheel. The other thing that happens is, what motivates you, why you do this. So for most people—and I won't judge it and say there are right and wrong reasons—the reasons that they would do something won't sustain them.



Most of the people that succeed in small press do it because they just have to do it. Some people do make money in small press, and more power to them. But like with myself over the years, in regards to the publishing, I've kind of broke even. There are a few things that I've done that really sold and I've actually made money on. People want to be heard. They want to be part of the dialogue, they want to be in on the conversation. People have a need to be heard and seen.

A.D.: *Are you saying it's an ego trip?*

S.A.G.: No, it's not an ego trip. In other words, something is happening all around you and you just want to be heard. This is "my" opinion, this is how I think *we* could do something. This is what I think is "going on." Art reflects life. I think it does, whether you like it or not, whether it's populist or not. I think that art in general does reflect what's going on. As any sort of creative person, as you compulsively fall into it, I think that's what you do, you absorb what's going on, you wring yourself out with it. I think that's why, generally speaking, small press exists and why it won't go away because it's the only way that we can contribute and be a part of the conversation. But, yes, there's a lot of people, and you could even argue the majority of people that get involved in anything, whether small or large, there's a lot of ego involved.

A.D.: *What's your take on the if-you-scratch-my-back, I'll-scratch-yours philosophy that seems to pervade most of the small press?*

S.A.G.: That certainly exists, no doubt about it. Why is it any different than it's been throughout history? Who are the first people you turn to? Your friends and family. Going all the way back to that Water Gallery reading, and the Lost Tribe guys, and those people who are still with me today, they become the core of what is it you do. Because, yes, they are the first people that you publish. When we did *(Sic) Vice & Verse* the core group of people that we leaned on always were our friends because, why are they your friends? You agree with them, on some level you have agreements. Why do you have agreements? The agreements aren't just personal, but they're also professional, they're also creative. We want people to hear them, like early on we published Eric Brown, Scott Wannberg, Doug Knott, Ellyn Maybe, Mike Burner, Mike Mollett, Rafael Alvarado, Laura Laurel Ann Bogen, Linda Albertano, all these people that were around us that people might've known here in this community, but we wanted to get out there into the greater world. Also, what I always tried to do as a publisher, especially in the form of the magazine, I wanted to bring together the known and the unknown. In other words, small people that nobody knows about married to the people that people really did know about so that they would pay attention. We still try to do that to this day.

A.D.: *Some magazines clearly belong to a literary movement, and others, as *The Outsider* back in the day, do not mind mixing styles and schools. How do you feel about this?*



S.A.G.: I don't think we ever had a school of poetry that we could basically put ourselves into. The only thing that I probably wasn't publishing was formal poetry, in other words, the old, rhymy stuff.

A.D.: *What you did in high school?*

S.A.G.: Yeah, what I did in high school. I would suggest the reason is, it just didn't float my boat or what was being sent to me was just not very good because it was so much about the need to follow form and so little about the content that most of it didn't work. For me what was important was that it spoke to me. I couldn't care less who wrote it, I couldn't care less what school they belonged to. I really cared about what they were writing, what they had to say. Generally speaking, yes, most of it would be open verse, confessional, Meat, Beat. Mike Bruner, who is at Georgia State University where he is involved in rhetoric and communication theory, has been trying as an academic to name us, name what it is we've been involved in. It's hard to name what you're doing as you're involved, very difficult to name something as it's happening. Sometimes it happens, it's pretty rare, but generally it's an afterthought. We can look back and we can find commonalities that we could put a label on. The idea is to bring these voices together as one thing and present it to people so that they get it out of their head that they have to belong to a school, that they have to basically be one thing. So for me to bring people together and to inspire disagreements which can bring about real agreements drives a lot of what I do in terms of the community forum. Me personally, as a poet, not necessarily so, but as a publisher, as an organizer, as a producer, it really means a lot to me that I can bring different people together and hopefully they can disagree on something.

A.D.: *Out of all those voices that you tried to put together, did you look up to any of them? Did they have a long-lasting influence on your work?*

S.A.G.: Oh, absolutely. My friends and my peers have probably more influence on me than anybody else. Outside of the names that we all know, like the Beats and Charles Bukowski, in terms of the people that I've published that nobody might not really know that they've come to know: Scott Wannberg, Ellyn Maybe, Laura Laurel Ann Bogen, Wanda Coleman, Dennis Cruise, Harry Northup... the list is pretty big. I do think that they have an impact on people outside of the community, especially Ellyn and Scott, they really broke in big time, Laurel Ann has too, and Laurel is a teacher as well. We have a number of great teachers here in Los Angeles who are poets: Holly Prado, Jack Grapes, Gerald Locklin, Laurel Laurel Ann Bogen, and Austin Strauss. These people have extended what they know into the realm of teaching and they have had a huge influence on many people that have come up, like some of Laurel Ann's students, Brendan Constantine and Claudia Handler. As a child you fantasize about what you're going to be when you grow up and who you're going to be running with and who you might really be as a person. Although I might not ever reach those fantastic goals I had as a child, I've gone so far beyond those goals because when I see who I get



to run with, who my friends are, I'm just blown away that anybody would call me poet. It really is mind blowing to me.

A.D.: *In which ways does small press matters and makes a difference? Do you think some of the authors who hit the big time such as Charles Bukowski or Wanda Coleman would have become similarly successful without their small press "education"?*

S.A.G.: I think small press obviously matters because it exists. I would argue that the majority of people that read poetry are involved. When you put it all together, each of these little pieces, it's huge. And it's not just here in America, it's around the world. I think the reason small press really does matter and gets the response it gets is because ultimately it's probably more honest than the larger publishers. The larger publishers are involved in money, and not that money is dishonest by its nature, money has no nature. People do. And so a lot of it is groomed for success and so they would not be interested in much of what we're doing. We have success on the small press level, but we would never have success on a large scale because most people would look at it and say, "What the hell is this? Who are these weird people? What are they saying to me? I don't understand." So I think small press then matters to the small world, which is ultimately the greater world we live in.

A few years ago I interviewed Mary Kerr who is a documentary filmmaker in the San Francisco East Bay, she made this documentary about the Beat art/poetry scene in San Francisco and Venice. I interviewed her about the film and it was the first place I ever heard this -the Chinese refer to it as "wild history": We live and we write about our wild history, the honest history, the history as we experience it, and because it's unfettered by the big press or the publishers it remains fairly honest. It's the people's voice, it's the people's history. We have a responsibility to be a popular voice of the people, and I think that's exactly what we do. We provide the wild history and so we fill in all those great gaps that the big publishers have no interest in at all because there's no money in it. There's no real money in small press, but there are many rewards. Right now there are these kids that are doing something called *Guerrilla Pamphlets* and they're all high school kids and we're directly involved with them. They're publishing the works of all these poets, like the most recent issue has Scott Wannberg, Jason Ryberg, Billy Burgos and Dan O'Neill, who is a cartoonist and artist who has one of the oldest cartoon strips in America called *Odd Bodkins*, and Dan lets me send them *Odd Bodkins*. The point is, if you can affect change on that level, even though people aren't aware of it, it's kind of like that analogy of the butterfly beating its wings on the one side of the planet and then it becomes a hurricane or a weather front on the other side of the planet. So that's really the satisfaction of knowing that we have small change and, again, collectively the small press becomes huge.

A.D.: *I gather from your words that the small press scene is very much alive here in Los Angeles. Do you think the digital age, where people read ebooks in their iPads and print books are becoming obsolete collectibles, will turn the small press into*

a really small, elite movement or even destroy it, however alive it might be in places like L.A.?

S.A.G.: The digital age certainly is becoming much more a part of our lives and will ultimately bring about the demise of print, and I do think it's happening, there's nothing we can do about it. It becomes an economic question. I think economics will basically push in the direction where pretty much everything will be digital. It's gonna be kind of that future world where you hold something in the palm of your hand and that will be "your world." Everything will be realized this way, and as the character of the human experience changes and goes into this technology, people won't even remember a fucking book. They won't even care about a book, it's already happening. Not in popular literature. Danielle Steele will always be here, they'll always print her books and put them in the airport. The same thing with Stephen King. But in this world we're talking about, yes, I agree with you, the books themselves are objects, they're artifacts. Mostly they will exist as art, not really as literature.

A.D.: *Does it bother you as an author?*

S.A.G.: Not really. Here's what's happening: in the 80s the DIY [Do It Yourself], and you can argue the mimeo revolution brought this about before, made it possible for anybody to be a writer and a publisher, and it really picked up serious steam in the 90s with xerography and stuff like that. This is exactly what's going on with the digital revolution. Everybody can do it. It doesn't mean it's good or bad, it just means there's more of it. The problem as you might say with the digital format is this: What happens to it? Five years from now, will exist anywhere? Will people be able to find it? That's one of reasons why I believe in print, because print will continue to exist and it will be transferred into other formats, it will be recorded digitally.

I think, too, that what's going to happen very soon is this: as our political landscape changes around the globe—it's happening very fast, things are moving at warp speed now, they are shifting very radically—what's going to happen is this idea of revolution, this idea of subversive, of alternative whatever. There's nothing subversive about the Internet. You turn it on and the whole world sees it. If you know anything at all about digital technology, you could hack it, you could steal it. There's probably nothing more subversive that I can hand you outside of a book. It's very personal, it's very sensual and then *you* can pass it on to somebody else and nobody knows where it's gone. To me our role as small press will be to continue to pass along the news in a form that cannot be corrupted, that cannot be stopped. But getting back your question on the other side, I don't see it as a bad thing. I can't. I can only see it as being what it is, it's an explosion of information and that might make it more difficult to ferret out the good stuff because there's so much to go through. So then, what do you pick and choose?

A.D.: *To me, it's a double-edged sword: the small press reaches a limited audience, and you would think that by publishing on the Internet you would reach more*

people, but there's so much information out there that I wonder if you actually reach a larger audience.

S.A.G.: I think you do reach more people on the Internet. What's happened on the internet is this—and I've been involved in the internet since the mid 90s: at the beginning the internet was literally like this great black place, this void, and you would wander through this void and you would find things, and just like anything else it grows, and now it's this overcrowded piece of real estate where you have to work to find what it is you want to find because it's too crowded. What's happening on the blogs and the Internet seems to be this: People are only interested in agreements. So therefore, again, to your point, how many people read it? A couple hundred? A couple of thousand at best? The people who don't agree with you don't care at all.

A.D.: *So it goes unnoticed.*

S.A.G.: It goes completely unnoticed. However, if I give you a book and you like the cover of the book, or it's a personal thing, you might be compelled to look at that book, but on the Internet everything has become very polarized. And again, part of my job or what I try to facilitate as a publisher, is to bring people together through disagreements if I can. I think the poem especially can really do that, it can facilitate disagreements because, like a great piece of art, it's cross-cultural, it's cross-generational. A great piece of art speaks for hundreds of years, like great literature does, too. It keeps living throughout the years and, generally speaking, it becomes even greater because it becomes that much more appreciated because people go: "Oh, I understand why people have been reading this or looking at this all these years." And again, with the internet the problem is, where is it going to be in five years? The life of digital information is a very critical thing right now because it's obvious that this explosion is here to stay and it's moving unbelievably fast, and in order to keep up with that information and store it in such a way that it can be retrieved again in five more years, what are we doing? So a lot of these people that are publishing only on the internet, I think we'll find in the next few years they don't exist anymore.

A.D.: *While we were talking, I kept seeing the Poetry Bomb behind you, but I deliberately refrained from bringing it up as one of your career highlights because I thought it would be a singular topic to end this interview. Could you please elaborate a bit on what the Poetry Bomb means?*

S.A.G.: For many years I just wanted to take a real bomb and fill it full of poetry, I don't know why. It was after 2001 and after the twin towers incident when I really started moving on this. After many years, in 2009 in the middle night I went on Craigslist, I put the word "bomb" in there and four hits came up. The first one, I sent the guy a message saying, "If you still have this, please call me first thing in the morning," and he did. So for \$100 he delivered it to me. It's a little over seven feet tall, a Vietnam era, MK240, one hundred pound practice bomb. It's a real bomb, a practice bomb, what that means is it didn't have any ordnance in it, and they would drop it so that they would



learn how to hit a target. So this was really utilized, it's got flat surfaces, it's got bent fins, it was really used, which is extremely important to me. It took me about five or six months with the help of a number of people to convert it into the art piece that it is. What I've done is, I've collected poetry from all over the world from everybody that wants to be a part of it, and I put it inside the bomb. So there's about 900 poems in there now from all over the world, people from literally three to ninety, all walks of life, all religions and beliefs, in America people representing wars from World War I to the present, living and dead, the ashes of seven humans and two dogs. Then I took it on a five-week tour around the entire United States last year [2010]. It took me five weeks. I traveled almost 11,000 miles. The point of this piece is really this: I use poetry as a way to hopefully bring people together and get them to disagree. During the performances, first I would let other people do their reading. They would do an open reading - primarily stuff that they wanted to put into the bomb. After they did the open reading then I would do my presentation, talk about what the object was and how it happened and then I would read poems from inside the bomb by other people. That is primarily what I did, share the poems of other people.

A.D: *Was it well received or did they think you were nuts?*

S.A.G.: Of course! Some people thought I was nuts. Most people believe that everything must have a real reward, that you must be making some money. I guess you could argue, I'm just selfish, it makes me feel good, but the real point to the bomb was when I would do my spiel, at some point I would point to the object and I would say, "War, the art, artifice and artifact of war were created to invent and enforce agreements. Hopefully, what I have created is something that will inspire disagreements. If we don't learn to disagree right now we are lost forever. We won't exist." The other thing I was telling people is, "Anybody can do this, please do something." That's what I said at the end of every show, "Do something, don't wait for somebody else to do it. You can do it, please do something." I was really trying to inspire people through poetry to create, to write at the very least, to do something and become active.

