

4-25-2015

Interview with Steve Luttrell

Steve Luttrell

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Recommended Citation

Catherine Fisher, "Interview with Steve Luttrell" (2015). *Makers@PPL: Stories in the Making audio interviews*. 2.
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Interviewer: Catherine Fisher
Interviewee: Steve Luttrell
Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine
4.25.2015

CF: We're here at the Portland Public Library. This is Catherine Fisher. I'm here with Steve Luttrell. You are going to talk with us about your process and product and making — and you make so many things, so would you like to start with the writing?

SL: Well, I make poems. Make is the proper verb to use in this instance. The poems are made from experience, from dreams, from emotion, from ideas—it's our fabric. My approach to making the poem involves these four elements. They constitute what I consider the poem to be.

CF: Why don't you talk a little bit about how you got started making poems. I've heard you talk a little bit about [your mentors], your mother, for one. Would you want to talk a bit about her, as well as other mentors?

SL: My mother certainly, because she read to me and that was the first time I heard language and heard words used to tell a story and yeah, I think at some point it must have begun with her. Then I had a teacher in high school that was very passionate about poetry and was a poet himself. He inspired me at 15, 16 to approach what at that time were the Beat poets and I was fascinated with the language. Since then, I've met other mentors over the years, other poets.

CF: For somebody who is not familiar with your work, how would you describe your poems?

SL: Well, it's composition by feel. It's influenced I think a lot by black poetry and the Beat poets and particularly Asian poetry. I try to say as much as possible with as few words as possible which is very Asian. A very Asian approach, by that I mean, Japanese and Chinese, particularly the Chinese Tang era, 700 AD, some of those poets – haiku, Basho, and that. Those are my influences.

CF: You also enjoy a strong amount of community in your poetry. Poetry-related community. I wonder if you'd like to talk about Portland as a place. About your making the poems in Portland and then, in broader terms, how you connect with others.

SL: Of course, Portland has a long history of poetry going way back, even well before Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, mid- to late 18th century. Poetry as an entity in Portland, as a community, is very well established and today, in the first part of the 21st century, I think it's as alive as it's ever been. It has, as most arts do, gone through trends and morphed into different forms than we had before. Today, performance poetry is very important for a lot of the young people and consequently we have a lot of young people in the area doing poetry slams, putting on poetry performance. So it's very alive, and community has always been important to the arts in general but to poetry as well.

CF: For your own projects – I know that you have published now for 25 years a literary magazine of poetry and art. Would you talk about that, both in terms of what it's like to be the publisher of a literary magazine journal, and also how you first connected with the community that creates the Café Review?

SL: The Café Review grew out of a series of open readings that we had here in the city in the early- to mid-1980s. People came to a little café on Spring Street called the Woodfords Café for an open reading. People would get up and read their poetry. It occurred to me that it would be a good idea to save some of this poetry because some of it was really good, and so I would go around at the end of the evening and collect the poetry that I wanted to save. It was in 1989 that we began the Review as a saddle-stitched 15-16-page publication. It had, at that time, no visual art, strictly poetry, and they were the poems that were read the evening of the monthly poetry reading.

For its first three years, the Café Review was a monthly publication. That became too untenable to maintain, so in year four, we switched to a quarterly publication, which we've maintained since then. The people who were coming to the café to read their poetry were from the community. One gentleman was a bookseller, the infamous Pat Murphy, others were teachers, were waiters, some were street punks. There was a wide variety of people from the community. That's how the Café Review got started. The original group consisted of Pat Murphy, Karen Douglas, Annie Seikonia, me, and a couple of other people. Then a year or so into it, Wayne Atherton, who is still working on it, became involved.

CF: And in the process of publishing the Café Review, you began to reach far outside of Portland, right? You started to contact some of the poets that you enjoyed and admired. How did you come to do that? How did that happen?

SL: I think it dawned on me that we couldn't continue to just— if the entity known as Café Review were to survive, we couldn't become too incestuous in terms of who we were publishing. In other words, we couldn't continue to publish the same poets, issue after issue after issue. We needed to open it up. It also occurred to me that, if we had recognized name poets, it would sell better in the bookshops. People would recognize the name of Robert Creeley or Denise Levertov or whomever and purchase the issue, and then discover the poetry of the community. That was a conscious decision to expand.

And in fact, we did the same thing with the visual, the art. The art became as important—and still is to my mind—as the poetry. We've printed amazing artists over the years, including Andrew Abbott.

CF: You're celebrating 25 years now of the Café Review, but at the same time, all this time, you have been publishing your own books of poetry. You've worked with some local letterpress artists and binders, and also had books published by other presses, too. Would you like to talk about the books you've created?

SL: I really have a great deal of admiration for printers and book makers. Primarily David Wolfe, Jeffrey Haste, Scott Wilson. They work to a certain degree in anonymity. They're artists inasmuch as they compose the type, set the type. The book then becomes—as the French poet Mallarmé says—a universe unto itself. These gentlemen—and there are

women that do it as well, I just haven't worked with them—the three aforementioned are printers. For example, David Wolfe is an artist, a true artist. He comes from a long tradition of printers that work with writers. The printer and poet historically have been symbiotic in their relationship.

CF: Tell me about your books, some of the titles?

SL: The major works are *The Green Man and other Poems*, *Conditions*, *This and That*, *Home Movies*. And most recently, *Plumb Line*. In addition to that, a handful of chapbooks. *Pemaquid and Other poems*, *Outside the Circle*, *The Vagaries*.

CF: *Plumb Line* is just now coming out, and this is a really big deal.

SL: Yeah, well it's the first time I'll have worldwide distribution, which is what I've always wanted. No one really gets involved in poetry to make their millions. Now I will have people I've never met, and probably never will, read my work. That's important.

CF: Was it difficult to choose the poems that went into the collection?

SL: Yes, it was. Well, you know, you get attached to poems because they come out of you and they come out of experiences that you remember and if one has a strong memory (which can either be a curse or a blessing) associated with the work, it's very difficult to separate it out. For me it was very difficult to choose the 87 poems that went into the new collection.

For the cover of this book, I collaborated with the amazingly talented artist Josefina Auslander, who is Argentinian by birth. The author photo was done by an extremely talented photographer, Hafid Laloui, from Casablanca, Morocco. They are both living here, part of this community, but their roots are in other countries. They're both friends and they did a great job.

CF: It would be incomplete if your testimony here did not include that other huge part of your creativity, which is music. You have been a drummer for...?

SL: About 50 years.

CF: What was your inspiration for that?

SL: These four guys from Liverpool. Like a lot of people my age, I just thought, if Ringo Starr can do it, I certainly can.

CF: You're a rock drummer, for the most part.

SL: Well, yeah, that's what I've done mostly, although now I'm working with some people that are doing what might loosely be referred to as American songbook. I hesitate to use the word *jazz*, but you know, American songbook, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole, some show tunes, that kind of stuff, which for me is a different experience. After all these years I'm doing something that my parents would probably consider music for the first time.

CF: One more question, only because it is also connected to music. You're a denizen of Congress Street in Portland and worked for a long time at two very iconic establishments that relate to both of your loves, right?

SL: Right.

CF: Firstly, as a teenager you worked at Recordland with Ruth Baker.

SL: The wonderful Ruth Baker. And then a bookstore. I love books. I was able to meet a lot of people as a result of having worked in a bookstore.

CF: Is there anything else you'd like to share about what you make or why you make it?

SL: Because we're sitting in the Portland Public Library, I'll say that the collection of my books—my catalog—is here in the Portland Room on the 2nd floor.

CF: Thank you so much, Steve.

SL: You're welcome.