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Marvin Tate on 'The Amazing Mister Orange'



Marvin Tate's poetry collection, "The Amazing Mr. Orange," discusses heavy topics in an often mild, lighthearted way. (Nancy Stone, Chicago Tribune)

By Jake Austen

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Marvin Tate knows the exact moment when poetry became his calling. The North Lawndale native grew up in a home without a TV or radio, where the family entertained one another with songbooks and reading aloud. So it didn't strike him as notable when his siblings pushed him to memorize Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," a then-decade-old poem (it was published in 1959, the year Tate was born).

When his best friend, Rodney, surprised him on the Crown Elementary schoolyard one day by announcing Marvin was going to recite a poem, it took the shy, standoffish, stuttering youth by surprise. But as a crowd circled around him like in a playground fight, he made a more surprising discovery: As he recited those rhythmic, cautionary couplets, he didn't stutter, and his introversion disappeared.

Tate's new book, "The Amazing Mister Orange," presents poems written since 2006. Unlike the personal narratives in his first book or the bombastic material he presented fronting his late '90s-early 2000s experimental poetry/funk band D-Settlement, these are intimate vignettes. They're short, powerful character studies that use a poet's literary nimbleness to create narrative fragments that could pass as short stories.

"I've always been a storyteller," Tate says. "When I was about 6, me and my fraternal twin, Melvin, and my cousin Jerome formed a club called the Kooky Boys, and we would collect sticks and rocks and go between gangways, where I would tell stories to them all day. Imagining stories has always been a part of me."

The stories in "The Amazing Mister Orange" represent the most nuanced, moving work Tate has yet produced. Though it's often funny or absurd, the work's most striking aspect is the calm sense of melancholy consistent in every piece, presenting even homicides, orgies and bad karaoke at a mild temperature that is both soothing and disturbing. In the poem "Smoking Sexy," which quietly crescendos with a young girl's lackadaisically suicidal father succumbing to nicotine cravings, the delicate opening passage is a vivid, striking example of Tate's artistry:

Standing in front of a mirror,

a young girl practices smoking sexy.

Lips puckered as if the cigarette has soured,

eyes partially closed, hand placed placidly on hips,

like the old woman awaiting the return of an imaginary husband.

"Post D-Settlement I started getting more in touch with the words and the craft, and not so much focusing on the theater," Tate says. "A lot of the poems start in third person so that you immediately become a part of it. It puts you in the picture so you aren't a voyeur in my vignette. In my first book ('Schoolyard of Broken Dreams'), I truly wore the influences of (Amiri) Baraka and (Charles) Bukowski on my sleeve, but now I feel like in this book I have my own voice. I can call on those guys whenever I want, but the rhythm and the cadences have become mine."

In addition to the new collection, Tate recently released an album in which his lyrics and melodies were interpreted by Tim Kinsella, Leroy Bach and Angel Olsen. He's excited for future collaborations and to see what doors are opened by the release of the book and LP. But as much as he looks to the future, Tate hasn't lost touch with his first performance.

"I never stopped thinking about Gwendolyn Brooks," he says. "I even went to college looking for her. She had been at UIC with Haki Madhubuti, but when I went there they had left for Columbia. Then one day I passed her on State Street, and ... it's funny, years before I had read that poem on the schoolyard, and years later I would do readings with her and win the Gwendolyn Brooks Hands on Stanza award (from The Poetry Foundation, whose Poetry magazine first published 'We Real Cool')."

"It was inevitable that we'd meet. I think when your true passion unfolds, it just draws other people to you, puts them inside of your work. That's what I want to do, make the audience a part of what I do."

Jake Austen is editor of Roctober magazine and co-author of "Playground: Growing Up in the New York Underground" and "Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy From Slavery to Hip-Hop."

"The Amazing Mister Orange"

By Marvin Tate, Curbside Splendor, 60 pages, \$12

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