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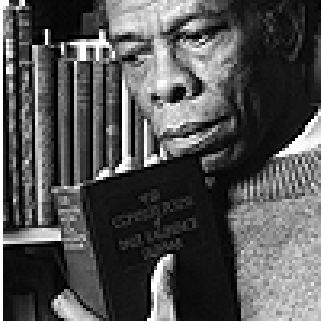
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Jump Back, Honey

01.07.2009 | Faculty

University of Dayton poet and professor emeritus Herbert Woodward Martin, 75, is perhaps best known for his unforgettable performances of Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems.

Dressed in a turn-of-the-century morning coat, striped trousers and wire-rim glasses, Martin "borrows" Dunbar's voice to captivate audiences and keep alive the memory of the first black American to gain national eminence as a poet.

But Martin's devotion to Dunbar's legacy may have come at the expense of his own. That's what publisher Naomi Long Madgett — Detroit's Poet Laureate — has said. But it's the combination of the Dunbar legacy and Martin's creative drive that inspired independent filmmaker David Schock to craft a documentary that reflects some of the breadth of Martin's own life and work.

"He is not only a scholar and an outstanding poet in his own right, but he has gone over and above that as a performance artist," said Schock, who was a college student when he first heard Martin perform in 1972. "He also has such humility and joy and really loves people."

The premiere of the documentary, *Jump Back, Honey*, is scheduled for **7 p.m. Jan. 16 at the University of Dayton's Kennedy Union Boll Theatre**. The showing is free and open to the public and features a performance by local jazz musician Willie Morris prior to the showing at 6:15 p.m. A second showing will be scheduled at 9 p.m. if necessary. Schock and Martin will be available to discuss the film at a reception following the premiere.

Jump Back, Honey tells of Martin's boyhood days in Birmingham, Ala., where he learned the art of storytelling sitting with his family around the heater in the middle room. It tells of his education in Toledo and his early years as a performer in New York City where he shared stages with Bob Dylan, Calvin Hernton, Allen Ginsberg and many others who went on to fame.

The film covers highlights of Martin's own distinguished career. Twice a finalist for The National Series poetry contest, Martin won many awards, including the Mellen Poetry Contest in 1999 for *The Log of the Vigilante*, a journal of slave captivity. His other published works include poetry, drama, opera libretti and literary criticism. His writings have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals. His seven published collections of poetry include *Galileo's Suns*, *The Forms of Silence* and *The Persistence of the Flesh*.

Sprinkled with performances of both Dunbar's poetry and his own, the film chronicles Martin's journey of first avoiding Dunbar (he was teased as a child for his uncanny resemblance to the famous poet), then forgetting about him ("There were no black writers in the high school textbooks at all," he remembers) to finally forging a bond that crossed a century.

After accepting a position as an English professor at the University of Dayton in 1970, Martin found himself teaching African-American literature.

"One day, the book I was using simply opened to the section on Dunbar, and I realized he would have been 100 the next year," Martin said.

With Dunbar's gravestone practically visible just outside his office window, Martin organized a centennial celebration for the Dayton native in the fall of 1972 and invited hundreds of poets to attend.

"That centennial turned out to be a lightning strike in the black arts movement," Schock said. "Many of those who came went on to tremendous careers."

Renowned poet Margaret Walker was among those in attendance, as was Nikki Giovanni, now a University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech. She and Walker later wrote a book together.

But when Walker read Dunbar's poetry in perfect dialect, it captured Martin's imagination, and he knew he had to learn to read the same way.

"Dunbar had fallen out of favor because of his dialect poems," Martin said. "People in the '40s and '50s didn't want to be associated with dialect because that hinted at not being intellectually astute or clever or knowledgeable, but there's a genuine reality in Dunbar's poems. You cannot escape the humanity of his characters."

In addition to performing Dunbar's poetry, Martin has written a monograph about Dunbar, arranged an opera using several of Dunbar's poems, discovered and published previously uncollected works of Dunbar and in 1996 was named The Paul Laurence Dunbar Laureate Poet of Dayton, Ohio.

"The Dunbar restoration is important to America," Giovanni says in the documentary. "I can go now to the black community ... and people still know Paul Laurence Dunbar. And it's Dunbar who's going to change how we look at ourselves. At some point, there will be a statue in front of the Dunbar house of Herb Martin saying, 'This is the man who brought this light to shine.'"

Jump Back, Honey is not the first biographical account of Martin's life. In 2004, Ronald Primeau, an English professor at Central Michigan University, chronicled Martin's writing and performing career in the book *Herbert Woodward Martin and the African-American Tradition in Poetry*. Primeau also serves as the new documentary's associate producer and guide, interviewing Martin throughout the film.

More about Martin and the documentary can be found at www.jumpbackhoney.com. The Ohio Humanities Council and the University of Dayton sponsored the production of the film.

The University of Dayton also hosts a Web site dedicated to Dunbar that features audio clips of Martin's performances at www.dunbarsite.org.

Jump Back, Honey is a departure for Schock from his usual fare, what he calls, "murder and mayhem." His documentary *Who Killed Janet Chandler* about a 1979 murder of a Hope College student was featured in a May episode of NBC's *Dateline* called "Conspiracy of Silence." The documentary led investigators to reopen and eventually solve the cold case. Schock's other works can be found at his site www.delayedjustice.com.

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