

POETRY FOR PEACE

Roy Johnston once played music in the military ... his creative juices now flow in the service of tolerance

By PATRICK S. PEMBERTON
ppemberton@thetribunenews.com

LeRoy Johnston had it all mapped out for his three boys: Kenneth would be a doctor, Tom would be an engineer and Roy would be a lawyer. Appeasing their father's wishes, Tom became an engineer and Kenneth went into public health. But Roy was more interested in poetry and music than law. And when jazz great Woody Herman heard him play clarinet at a gig one night, Roy's pre-law days at UCLA were numbered.

"He said, 'I've got a spot open if you want to go ahead and do it,'" Johnston recalled. "I said, 'Well, let me call my dad ...'"

As Johnston relates in his new book of poetry, "Seeds of Tolerance" (\$10, New Artist Press), Dad was a tough cookie from Hell's Kitchen in New York. A shipyard worker and amateur boxer, he preached the values of self-determination. Yet when it came to his sons, he figured he knew what was best for them.

So when Roy told him he was going to quit school to play in a band, LeRoy wasn't pleased.

"You're going to be a complete failure," he told his son, disgusted.

Johnston would prove his father wrong, becoming a successful jazz musician who toured the world. Later, he would become a college-level educator and a consultant who helped nonprofit organizations survive.

Poetry of the present

While Johnston's life is full of interesting stories, his poetry deals mostly with the present — what he calls "the wonders of now."

"I don't really see myself getting into real retrospective stuff," he said from his See Canyon home. "I like contemporary stuff. The fresher the better."

Old poems about music and traveling are stored in his garage, where the general public will never see them. The poems from "Seeds of Tolerance" might have met a similar fate, except that Johnston thinks poets have an obligation to speak out when they perceive a wrong. And right now Johnston is hot about what has happened in the Middle East.

"I got really pissed off about this administration and the war, to be frank with you," he said. "And that's when I really said I wanted to get some stuff published and get it out there."

His political poems speak of poor leadership, failed policies and an ill-conceived war that has led to "shameful killings." The conclusion for Johnston is quite simple: Peace can be attained if we just talk it out, solving our differences through words, not battle.

"He's asking us to choose peace," said Kevin Patrick



TRIBUNE PHOTO BY DAVID MIDDLECAMP

Roy Johnston kept his poetry to himself until the start of the war in Iraq, which compelled him to make his voice heard.

Sullivan, past county poet laureate who hosts the Corners of the Mouth poetry series. "He's reminding us that we have the information we need to make the correct decisions, but we're not making them."

While the war in Iraq constitutes much of the subject matter here, there are a few poems about events in Johnston's life that helped to shape the poet. But you won't find a lot of introspection, personal revelations or inner thoughts. "I'm not a confessionalist," he said.

The few autobiographical poems in this collection focus on Johnston's music and parents.

Musical youth

Both Johnston's mother and father were born in Jamaica, though they actually met and wed in New York. Johnston was a young child when the family moved to Southern California, where his father found work in the shipyards.

"He wanted to be in World War II," Johnston said, "so he always tried to join all the services, but he couldn't get in because of his asthma."

LeRoy Johnston eventually became a civilian Naval ship-

yard worker and wound up in Hawaii. When Pearl Harbor was bombed he helped drag men to safety, losing part of his hearing as a result.

While his toughened father made firm plans for his kids, Johnston's mother was the more supportive one, encouraging him to try different things.

At 5, Roy started playing music. Poetry would come a year later.

"I used to write little ditties for my family — usually my mom or dad," he said.

While he would continue to do both, music became a priority, and Johnston would hit it hard.

"I wanted to be the best clarinetist in the world," he said. "In high school, I practiced five to six hours a day. Then I was assigned to the bathroom by my brothers and sisters."

Living in Southern California, he began to get noticed. He played parties for celebrities like Charles Laughton and Elsa Lancaster. He worked for 20th Century Fox and NBC, performing in the John Wayne movie, "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," and the TV show "Bonanza."

EXCERPTS FROM 'SEEDS OF TOLERANCE'

By Roy Johnston | New Artist Press | \$10

The Past

*Who am I to live in the past?
Who are we to walk in the shadows of memories?*

*We stand behind the curtain of life
when it wants to draw upon us
the miracles that are the wonders of now.*

Come Back Peace

*Oh peace where are you?
What are you hiding for?
I only see your other side,
producer of tears
and broken-torn bodies
shaken souls, frozen
and shattered through miles
of thoughtless time.*

*Come place your blanket
on the ripped frozen ones
and lead the new blinded
to an awakening of virgin stretched light.
The center of the universe
is waiting for us,
soundless in this body
for a new music
not yet reached.*



"You've got to make a living," he joked. "You've got to eat."

After touring with Woody Herman, Johnston decided to join the service (more time to practice than at school, he figured), where he became a member of the old Glenn Miller Air Force Band. Other big musical highlights followed, including stints with the Atlanta Symphony, the New York City Ballet and the Tommy Dorsey Band, before he decided to devote his attention to academia. Johnston, who has a master's degree from Juilliard and a doctorate from USC, rose to associate dean at the University of Southern Mississippi and dean of the Boston Conservatory.

Central Coast muse

When he left higher education, Johnston returned to Los Angeles where he was a consultant to nonprofit organizations for many years.

When his wife landed a job as a Cal Poly fundraiser two years ago, the couple moved to San Luis Obispo.

Today Johnston dedicates much of his time to poetry, both writing and attending poetry events.

"He's made his presence known," said Sullivan, who sees Johnston regularly.

While music dominated his professional life, Johnston has mostly retired his clarinet to its

case. Occasionally, he takes his instrument out — sometimes to play for fellow poets during readings — but he claims to be a little rusty. (During this interview, he played a soft, soothing jazz piece — something that could have helped create a mood for an old noir film.)

In the past, he has composed music to accompany art. But music doesn't impact his poetry much.

His poems are semi-abstract but not so much that the message is lost. They seldom take on narrative forms, yet they promote a goal — usually encouraging peace and good deeds.

"If we can just all think about doing something for somebody else every now and then ..." Johnston said, letting his thought trail off.

Even though his poetry rails against the Bush administration, Johnston doesn't want to choose sides. In fact, he said, he'd rather promote unity, which requires concessions to be made.

"I just think that we all have to be a little bit flexible," he said.

For Johnston, tolerance is the key to peace. But it has to start early, which is why he symbolically choose an old photo of his two children, Rachel and Tyler, for his book cover.

"We should be looking at tolerance at a much younger age," he said.

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