

A Portraits & Roots Interview Replay



David Meltzer, Michael Rothenberg and Terri Carrion

In August and September of 2009, David Meltzer, Michael Rothenberg, Terri Carrion and I enjoyed several engaging, thoughtful, and sometimes hilarious discussions on poetry, with the primary focus always on ROCKPILE. ROCKPILE was a troubadour-inspired collaboration between poet, musician and essayist David Meltzer, and poet, songwriter and editor Michael Rothenberg – to perform poetry, composed on the road, with local musicians in a 10-city, 18-gig, 8-week tour beginning in October of that year. Those interviews, and my *Pacifica Tribune* review of a pre-road performance sampling in Pacifica, California, created this interview which ran on my then online magazine *BASSO* (*Bay Area Artists Sing Out*). These three artists are such a thrilling ride into the very beat of poetry, that I decided it was time to republish this story on Portraits & Roots. It is dedicated to the wonderful David Meltzer, who left this world on December 31, 2016. Long may his voice reign!



Revvng ROCKPILE

Pre-road advisory with David Meltzer, Michael Rothenberg and Terri Carrion

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Written by Jean Bartlett
September, 2009

Poetry readings can be the stuff of empty chairs and time slowly ticking away, that dry hack that echoes from the back of the room.

This is not ROCKPILE.

Sometimes, in this world, there is something that passes beyond the walls of the self, something that flows through and out of flesh, blood and bone creating, without apology, and in turn giving us all permission to do the same.

This is ROCKPILE.

Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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ROCKPILE is intense, wild with words, celebratory – it is even for people who never, ever go to poetry readings. It is a happening.

ROCKPILE began some months back as poets and friends David Meltzer (renowned Beat poet, novelist, essayist, musician and so much more) and Michael Rothenberg (poet, songwriter, editor of Big Bridge magazine online at www.bigbridge.org, and also so much more) discussed the importance of reconnecting poetry to its fundamental social and cultural role, and the relationship of poetry and music to the troubadour tradition.

Terri Carrion (poet, fictionist, nonfictionist, photographer, assistant editor and art designer for www.bigbridge.org), took this idea of David's and Michael's and made it real through The Creative Work Fund Grant and the support of The Committee on Poetry.

"ROCKPILE is the idea of mixing it all up, musicians, poets, artists, let's all get together and create," Terri said. "Here we are, alive, with physical bodies and voices and we need to connect on that level, not just in the brain."

This is ROCKPILE.

Michael explained that ROCKPILE relies as much on the movements of those who attend as those who perform. It is a collaborative celebration of creativity and the creative spirit.

The official ROCKPILE journey begins on Thursday, October 8, when David and Michael step on stage at the 295-hot pink leather-seated Billy Wilder Theater in the Los Angeles Hammer Museum, 7 p.m., to do a poetry and music ad lib groove with: Theo Saunders on piano, Johnny Lee Schell on guitar, John B. Williams on bass, Joe Sublette on saxophone and Debra Dobkin on drums and percussion.

That's the official start of ROCKPILE'S 10-city, 18-gig, 8-week tour. However, there were two pre-tour gigs. The first Pre-Ramble was in April at Bird & Beckett's in San Francisco. The second Pre-Ramble took place on the 29th of August at the top of a Pacifica mountain in Northern California – and I was there.

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The Sheldance Nursery in Pacifica (www.sheldance.com) sits high above the great surge and fall of the world's largest ocean. Born of 1950s architecture, the Nursery's greenhouse gardens overflow with exotic bromeliads and orchids. Spanish Moss and Maiden Hair ferns drape from the ceilings, and around the weather worn windows, which look out past the rolling hills and cypress, to where seagulls disappear into the mist. At the far end of one of the five greenhouses full of strange and beautiful plants, is a performance stage where a stone lion quietly sits and waits for the next event. On the evening of August 29, David, Michael and Terri were joined on this stage by the San Francisco-based psychedelic rock and protopunk band, The Rabbles. Like its predecessor, this ROCKPILE Pre-Ramble was not a rehearsal. It was a full-on "troubador" performance test to help measure audience reaction to spontaneous poetry and music in motion.

The crowd that gathered was friendly. They elbowed and winked at each other. They breathed in the pulse of the event.

The bass-driven Rabbles launched into opening notes – thunderbolts of synergy, beautifully driven riff slides. Michael, in a black fedora and black satin *guayabera*, stomped his feet as he performed his poetry. Terri, in a platinum blond wig, button-pressed and keyed her amplified accordion with a rage. In the audience, eyes widened and bodies swayed in a collective groove.

This is ROCKPILE.



(jean bartlett photo)

Terri Carrion, Michael Rothenberg and The Rabblies lay down some art on the stage of Sheldance.

Michael: "Entertainment Vampire!"

Terri: "Bring your own provider. Makes all the sense in the world. All chatter, noisy brain compound."

Michael: "Three days, rain, mud-stained, white sheet sarong, barefoot mescaline snake ..."

Michael and Terri grab it all through voice and song.

Then David changes the tempo to the walking blues as he takes the stage. He saunter sings, "Bye-bye baby, why don't you pick up your mess," and his whole word thing moves like a dream wave.

ROCKPILE'S pre-ramble was transformative, a freeing of the sacred self.

There was thrilled silence and booming applause. There was chatter among strangers and text messages fired to friends to share the excitement and the moment. ROCKPILE grabs the soul and stirs. It should be supported. This writing is my ROCKPILE proclamation.

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If Yeats and Liszt came to town, wouldn't you go?

The list of collaborating musicians on the ROCKPILE tour is phenomenal.

Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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- In Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 17, 7:30 p.m. at the Outpost Performance Space, 210 Yale SE, David Meltzer and Michael Rothenberg perform with the Thunderbird Poetry Orkestra plus special guest Terri Carrion on accordion.
- In New Orleans, Louisiana, October 25, 8 p.m. at the Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center, 1618 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd., David Meltzer and Michael Rothenberg join Blodie and members of The Dirty Dozen Brass Band.
- In Washington D.C., November 4, 9 p.m. at Busboys and Poets, 2021 14th St. NW, David Meltzer and Michael Rothenberg will share their stage with Burnett Thompson & The New Columbia Orchestra.

(Back in 2009, this article sent readers to www.meltzerville.com for band and road details. It's still a great stop for a Meltzer journey .)

Some performers, David and Michael know from their own musician experiences. Others are friends of friends of friends. Many hear the limited size of the ROCKPILE grant making this journey tour possible and they offer to play for free.

"These are incredible musicians and they should be paid," Michael said. "But they are not taking much because they want to be part of this project. And they are so into it. One of the guys in D.C., when I told him how much we had in the budget he said, 'Let's start the conversation over again. When I ask you what it pays, tell me you don't have any money and it's a joint collaboration project and I won't be offended and I can say absolutely, I can do it. I don't want the money. You are not going to have enough money to pay us.' When I told him I was going to be somewhere else in that neck of the woods doing something, he asked if we wanted them to come play there too. Again, these are top musicians. The camaraderie of this tour and the people who are offering to participate and what they are willing to do it for is enough to kick our asses!"

"He means that in a good way," David laughed.



(jean bartlett photo)

Michael and David try on a thoughtful poetic pose.



(jean bartlett photo)

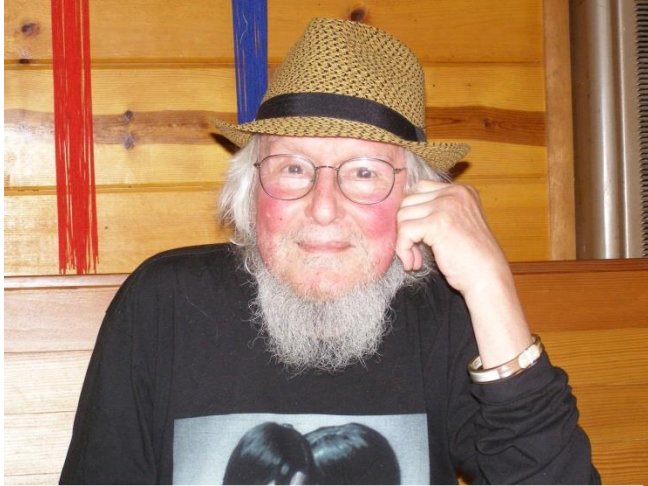
A moment later, the poets explode with laughter.

News of ROCKPILE has spread beyond what even the poets can track. Already they have been contacted to perform next year in Victoria, BC, London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Chile.

"We are challenging ourselves and we are challenging the musicians who are sharing the stage," Michael said. "At first I thought, David has been working with musicians for so long, let's just give him a bass drum and a trio and he'll just bebop his way in. But it is really happening and expanding. It's exciting to create on the spot!"

"'Spontaneous bop prosody,' that is a quote from Kerouac," David said. "That really defines ROCKPILE. It's improvisational, but it's like jazz, you move around that form where the give is."

The name ROCKPILE actually has its beginnings in a book by David called, *Rock Tao*. *Rock Tao* was a big prose book about music and the youth culture and it analyzed lyrics of songwriters such as: Chuck Berry, Brian Wilson and Bob Dylan. The book was set up in type. David still has the galleys.



(jean bartlett photo)

David Meltzer, September, 2009.

"I got a phone call from the publisher saying, 'We can't print the book. All these agents of all of these different artists are wanting so much money that it will just break the bank.'"

Shortly after that, David and his wife Tina got involved in the folk scene and the folk rock scene as musicians. And from that experience came another book about the making of their music and all the people involved in that journey. David called that book, *Rock Pile*.

"Part of that tale was doing interviews with survivors of that particular moment, from 1965 to 1970, who mutated from the folk movement into the folk rock and psychedelic rock movements," David said. "Record companies were coming into the Bay Area then to cash in on the music. That was what the book was about, making music in the 60s, talking to people

who survived the 60s. And of course there was the double meaning, you know, chain gang, and then just Rock 'N' Roll becoming a pile of caca!"

"So the birth of the new ROCKPILE happened," Michael said. "The times seem to be calling for it and we want to do something, now."

* * * * *

This traveling van of poets is newer to Terri Carrion than it is to David or Michael. David and Michael have known each other since 1992 and have traveled a great deal together as poets over the last seven or so years at campuses, bookstores and bars in such places as: Milwaukee, Chicago, Albuquerque, and at Duff's – the famous restaurant/bar which hosts St. Louis legendary River Styx events. They recently traveled together to Victoria, Canada to participate in the Pacific Festival of the Book.

"I met David at New College in 1992," Michael said. "David was Professor of Undergraduate Humanities and Graduate Poetics. But I had known about David since 1977 when a friend of mine gave me a *Broadside*, which is like a poster, with David's poem, 'The Blackest Rose,' printed on it. It's beautiful. I still have it."

New College, now closed, was a progressive, nontraditional San Francisco College, 1973-2008. David taught there from 1977-2007.

"I was a returning student entering a master's program," Michael said. "After a variety of first semester professors, I convinced the department head to sign David on as my only professor and thesis advisor."

"It was very hard to find a 'poetry teacher' who really knew the music industry," Michael continued, "or knew the dilemma of songwriting and poetry. You know, the questions about that, like is poetry song or is song poetry? He just taught me an enormous amount about a lot of things. He definitely appealed to my sense of the archetypal, the spiritual and the musical. David is one of the most knowledgeable people I have ever known in my life and he is not entrenched in the 'ivory tower.' He is real!"

Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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"A blowhard!" David laughed. "Michael was my mature student and obviously not a beginner. There was his role as an editor at Penguin Books for people such as myself and Joanne Kyger. He has edited these collections of Edward Dorn and Philip Whalen. He's done an amazing amount at Penguin Books and we have so many friends in common. I enjoyed Michael because he was ambitious and he was good. You know some people are ambitious but hopeless! How he and Terri have put this thing, ROCKPILE, together – it blows my mind."



Poet David Meltzer loving fun.
(jean bartlett photo)

Terri and Michael met in Miami.

Michael was there taking care of his ailing mom and eventually stayed on to take care of her estate after her death. He went over to Florida International University, just to see what the poets were doing. Terri was at the desk. She was working in the office, editing and designing the University's literary magazine, *Gulfstream*. Terri told Michael, "Oh yeah, I'm doing this poetry reading at this coffee shop." He went with her to the local Luna Star Café and they started hanging out.

"I was at the end of my MFA and things had really changed, everyone was totally career driven – get published, teach, move up the academic ladder," Terri said. "I thought the mindset was totally wrong."

Terri, who earned her MFA at FIU, where she also taught Freshman English and Creative Writing, started the reading series at the Luna Star Café. She was also Program Director for the study abroad program, "Creative Writing in Dublin, Ireland 2002." She and Michael have been together for seven years.



(tom devaney photo)

Terri Carrion and Michael Rothenberg, 2009.

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David, Michael and Terri have traveled together before (for those who think they will never last the two months on the road) from San Francisco to Joshua Tree National Park and on to Tucson, Bisbee and Albuquerque. Essentially they spent two weeks together, did poetry readings, and found an easy camaraderie. But they have individual needs, which they try to respect, to keep everything smooth.

For David that means when the day is done, he wants his own room in a motel with a TV set hooked up to the Turner Movie Classics.

"I don't have a TV and that's the only time I really get to clue into the madness of America," David laughed. "I really like the Turner movie channel, because I am a geezer!"



(jean bartlett photo)

Michael Rothenberg, lunch, September 2009.

"Once David goes into his room he does not come out until the next day around 11 a.m.," Michael noted.

"But because of this project, I've got a laptop," David said. "So we can Skype from the next room if necessary!"

It is important to note here that ROCKPILE is not just about the performances and the lectures and the after parties. It is also about documenting the trip, which includes a book to be put to press in late 2010. It also includes the ongoing documentation that ROCKPILE will put on line during their tour. Already they have vimeos from their pre-ramble ROCKPILE shows, and the night before the tour, David and Michael will both start blogging.

"I'm not a blogger," David said. "But I will, blog. I don't like the word itself. It reminds me of the sound you make before you hurl. You go, 'Blogggg!'"

"The thing about David is he absolutely just goes and goes," Michael said, shaking his head in admiration. "12 o'clock at night, after hours and hours of performing and partying with people, someone says, 'David, would you like to come back to our house for a night cap?'"

"And I say, 'Of course!'" David winked. "As long as I have morning coffee, what's not to like?"

"That's ROCKPILE," Michael laughed, "interaction with community!"

"In terms of not only cyberspace, but also wherever we are going, we will be drawing a community of musicians and poets," David noted. "Centuries ago, poetry became song, because that is how you could memorize the news and then go sing it and deliver the news. You didn't have type – or blogggg! It was the storyteller and the singer. This is a way of remembering. Because basically we are on the planet to remember, to bear testimony, to bear witness – no matter what. And everyone has their stories and they are theirs alone and if they don't tell them, we are bereft. We are lessened by not hearing that. It has nothing to do with the page. It has to do with breath, sound, ear, heart, riff."

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Terri Carrion is learning to play the accordion.

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"It is fun but it's heavy," she noted. "I took lessons when I was a kid, but I don't really have a memory of it – just me in a picture looking goofy. I was inspired to pick up the accordion after a trip to New Orleans and after seeing a video of an anarchist band in St. Louis. I just keep coming across these really amazing accordion people! It's very diverse. It covers a large range of music. It's such an odd thing and such a beautiful thing! And you just can't be too intellectual or sophisticated with an accordion! That appeals to me."

When she was a kid, Terri said she couldn't pick an instrument to stick with and decided to play baseball instead.

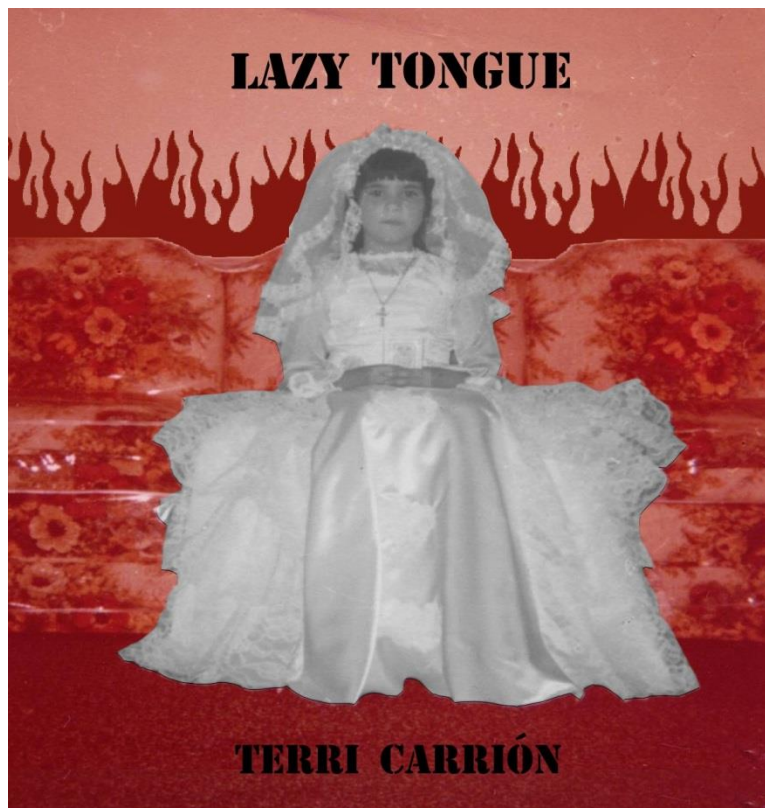
"I would go a year and a half on piano. I did flamenco dancing, ballet and guitar. But really, I ended up doing baseball and skateboarding. I was much more of a tomboy. I got a little bit of flavor of a lot of things. As you grow up, this helps you develop in a more diverse way. In this country, 'master of nothing, jack of all trades,' has a bit of a negative connotation. I think it is very cool to know a little something about a whole bunch of stuff."

The daughter of a Galician mother and a Cuban father, Terri said her thinking and her writing really comes from two worlds.

"I am a first generation American and my first language is Spanish. I learned English in kindergarten and then spoke English in school and Spanish at home. My mom still doesn't speak very much English. That does something to the brain, developing language skills bilingually and in two very different worlds. I think it definitely comes across in my writing, the way words come together."

Terri will read with ROCKPILE at several venues on the road. Both David and Michael, more accustomed to the reading experience, want her to read more. David cited Terri's chapbook – *Lazy Tongue*, published by D Press, summer of 2007 – as a marvelous presentation of prose poems about being an adolescent in LA.

"You read *Lazy Tongue* and immediately understand how good Terri is," David said. "She comes out of a different cultural historical context. The fact that she is Cuban American, that too comes into play with what she writes. It is a superb work. I think after this trip, we won't be able to keep her down."



The Title work from *Lazy Tongue* by Terri Carrion © 2007:

Suddenly, I'm in speech therapy, a mirror in my hand, a thin gringa hovering over my shoulder, asking me to repeat, *sarsaparilla, seashells, somersault*, while she points at her tongue to show where mine should be, because it's lazy, refuses to rise to that spot behind my top front teeth to form the perfect *S* sound, *snakes, sweat, stereo*, she is recording me now, so I can hear when I accidentally get it right, remember how it feels, do it again, *stupid, spic, soledad*, the gringa is persistent, says I must practice everyday at home, my tongue needs exercise, *skateboard, summer, Estevan*, my tongue is heavy, collapses from exhaustion, takes up more space in my mouth than before, like I've bit off too much of a Cuban sandwich, *saliva, sucia, stink*, I think of my mother buying cow tongue at the meat market, that big slab in the frying pan, *suspiro, somnambulist, system*, the gringa says that's enough for today, sends me back home, *stucco, stained glass, San Lazaro*—where my mother stands in the kitchen, slicing *cebollas* and singing those strange Galician songs with all the wrong kinds of *S*'s.

Terri said that at first, as a graduate student, she wrote fiction. "But my main character had no goals and didn't want to do anything! Which is totally not acceptable for a classic plot structure, you know, the quest and all that," she laughed. "So I ended up in a memoir class. My father had passed away the year before and so I wrote a story about my father and me called *Dominoes*. I found nonfiction to be much freer and more experimental. I sent the story off to a national university academic magazine and won the \$1,000 prize and I thought, this is kind of bizarre, wow. Now what?"



Michael said he relies on Terri's "instincts as a poet" and her "amazing eye." She works with Michael on his material all the time. "She has her own voice, her own angle and she is very original."

What does Terri think about being the "newest" member of this performance traveling team?

"I think it feels great," she said. "It is an endorphin release. It is fun. I'm very lucky, because this is a once in a lifetime experience to travel like this and create and hang out with great writers and artists and musicians – and just in the nick of time for my midlife crisis!"

"Terri is ROCKPILE'S Artistic Director," Michael said.



Poet Terri Carrion and her dog Chiqui.

(courtesy photo)

Terri thinks David's crutches should be glitterized for the road trip. Maybe some hot glued smooth studs and a little spray paint.

"I can have the 'Liberace' of crutches," David laughed. "I'll be styling!"

David's got forearm crutches.

"I have a blood disease that accelerated – blah, blah, blah," David explained over lunch at Oakland's Kotobuki Japanese Restaurant. "I've been getting my blood taken out for something like 30 years. My blood disease is called hemochromatosis and it is the exact opposite of anemia. It's like too much iron in the blood."

Once a week on the road trip, the trio will stop at what Michael calls "filling stations" where David will be "vampire-ized."

By taking out some blood, you fool the iron.

* * * * *

Some people wonder where poetry's place is in today's society.

"Poetry has never left and it is always part of everything," David said. "From the most obvious to advertising – they use language with the same kind of care as a poet. Certainly a return to a preliterate culture of hip hop and so forth goes back to an oral performance of poetry. It goes beyond the book and beyond the page as there was before there was a book – before there was a page."

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"What does poetry do in this culture? We have all been influenced by poetry, especially people who distrust it. For instance Marianne Moore, she wrote this poem, 'I too distrust it.' She was one of these wonderful early modernist American poets."

"We are raised up on: lullabies – poetry; skip rope rhymes – poetry. All kinds of things. We inherit this whole oral poetic tradition. We tend to think in rhymes, in meters, in rhythms and so forth. We never left it. It never left us. It's just how these things become sort of isolated."

"We've been in a period where everything has been isolated for purposes of exploitation," Michael said. "Whether it be universities or whether it is some sort of culture club, some kind of trend, a commercial trend!"

David paused for emphasis. "We are talking about the academy taking something that is so natural to all of us – and we all are poets in a way – and trying to rationalize it, and systemize it and this and that and it becomes like auto shop."

"And it gets them prizes and awards and public positions based on some kind of institution they created for themselves," Michael said. "I think about the whole thing of what we are doing, the synthesis of ROCKPILE, is what is the essence in my mind right now – it is the parties, the parties in New Orleans, it's the parties in Los Angeles. I don't mean a party, to go out and get shit-faced. I am talking about party in a communal social gathering a place where you break bread, a place where you listen to music, and you tell the stories, and you share culture and you celebrate. And it is ecstatic or thoughtful or whatever, but that is why it is happening and that is why it is going so well in terms of people responding to us, to ROCKPILE, because people know it is inclusive."

"I want people in the audience to feel included, not walk in and say/think/feel, 'Oh, this is poetry and I better like wear my Sunday best and sit down and go uh-huh and ooh and uh-huh.' I want people to hoot and holler and celebrate and say, 'That's Fine!' and 'That's Fun!' I want it to go beyond social clubs and racial clubs and academic clubs. I want it to be transcendent, so it is inclusive."

"We take what we are doing seriously, but we are not serious!" David smiled.

"Celebration is a big part of what ROCKPILE is about," Michael said.

"We are not starting a movement here," David said.

"We are enablers," Michael shouted. "We are saying, 'You can enjoy poetry too. You can take chances and improvise, too!'"

Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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"By example you create possibility, as simple as that," David said. "Robert Creeley, a great, great poet and such a good friend once said to me, 'In a sense, what we do best is give permission.' And I think that is what we are doing, giving others permission. People who want to do this need permission to get out of that cage. A lot of times Academies try to remove poetry from possibility. It's this primal stuff we all have and it is loaded with possibility."

"It's really about opening up to other people," Michael noted, "and giving each other the chance to *be*, without apology."

This is ROCKPILE – real artists, painting a real doorway with stanzas and strings, so that all of us can open 'our door' and dream. Performances are free and/or by donation. Free yourself. Treat yourself. Go!



(jean bartlett photo)

Lunch with David Meltzer and Michael Rothenberg, Kotobuki Japanese Restaurant, Oakland, September 2009.

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Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area arts and features writer for online and print media, which includes: *Pacifica Tribune*, *San Jose Mercury*, *Oakland Tribune*, *San Mateo Times*, *Contra Costa County Times*, *Peninsula Progress*, *Coastal Connections*, *Bay Area Business Woman*, *Marin Independent Journal*, *Twin City Times*, *Ross Valley Reporter*, *Making Everlasting Memories*, *BAASO*, *Catholic San Francisco* and *Portraits & Roots*. She can be contacted through her website: www.bartlettbiographies.com.

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