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Dynamite Voices: The Broadside Press of Detroit, 1985-1998

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DYNAMITE VOICES

BROADSIDE PRESS OF DETROIT

1985-1998

**Dynamite Voices:
The Broadside Press of Detroit
1985-1998**

**Exhibit Dates:
September 10 - November 21, 2001**

**An Exhibit in the Special Collections Library
University of Michigan Library
Ann Arbor, Michigan**

WELCOME

Welcome to this exhibit celebrating the acquisition of the archive of the Broadside Press by the University of Michigan Special Collections Library. The archive was acquired from Hilda and Don Vest, owners of the Press from 1985 to 1998, and includes correspondence, business records, grant applications, audio and video recordings, photographs, posters, and publications of the Broadside Press from its beginnings in 1965 to the present. The rich resource afforded by this archive, as the exhibit vividly illustrates, provides the opportunity to make a segment of history come alive for students and offers unparalleled documentation of the Press for scholarly study.

We are honored to add this archive to our growing collection of author's papers and the archives of Michigan literary publishers. During the year in which we are celebrating the 300th anniversary of the founding of Detroit we are happy to be a part of saving this important piece of Detroit history for future generations to use, enjoy, study, and interpret. Moreover, the Broadside Press stands almost alone in the U.S. as a black-founded, black-owned publishing enterprise, including political statements reflecting the Black Power movement and Africanization interests, as well as "color-blind" poetry centered on traditional themes.

This exhibit has come to fruition through the efforts of many people. First, Don and Hilda Vest were careful stewards of the Press's legacy of publications as well as the records and publications created during their tenure as owners of the Press from 1985 to 1998. Their interest in finding a place where these materials will be secure and available for study led to the archive coming to the University of Michigan this year. We are especially grateful to them for their generous gift of some parts of the collection, and to the Library's Endowment funds which enabled us to purchase the remainder.

The curators of this exhibit were Abye Bel Evans and Jean L'oup, assisted in design and organization by Kathleen Dow. Veronica Woolridge designed the case showing a timeline of Broadside Press

correspondence. Artistic work on the titlecase, posters, and cover designs was provided by Sandy Ackerman of the Library's Public Relations staff.

Please come in, spend some time with the exhibit, and enjoy a behind-the-scenes look at how the Broadside Press worked and the fruits of the labor of the many talented writers represented in its publications.

Peggy E. Daub
Head, Special Collections Library

THE BROADSIDE PRESS LEGACY

The early history of the Broadside Press is renowned for its association with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s and the careers of such poets as Gwendolyn Brooks, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Sonia Sanchez, and Audre Lorde. Oral history tells us that Dudley Randall began the Broadside Press in 1965 "with \$12 in a spare bedroom." Certainly his original aims for the press were modest - he wanted to ensure copyright protection for his poem "The Ballad of Birmingham," written in response to the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963.

From this simple beginning he soon began active collaborations with other poets and a regular program of printing poems as broadsides - single-sided 8.5 x 11 inch sheets with one poem on each. This inexpensive format made the publications easily accessible, a goal which was also furthered by creation of a distribution system within the Black community - bookshops, cultural centers, and the poets themselves selling their books at lectures, readings, and even on street corners. Dudley Randall also published several anthologies, chapbooks, and critical essays.

As Naomi Long Madgett writes, "These publications established the reputations of an impressive number of African-American poets now well known while providing a platform for many others whose writing was more political than literary." Providing this platform made an immeasurable difference in the lives of African-American writers, who now saw a means to disseminate their work outside of mainstream publishing. According to Melba Boyd, the founding of the Broadside Press "opened up the literary canon" and "changed the whole character of American literature." One of the notable changes was that Randall allowed his poets to "blacken the language." Beyond literary circles the Press attracted notice because it embodied one of the key principles of Black Nationalism: a Black-owned business created to serve the needs of Black people.

When Gwendolyn Brooks, the first Black person to win a Pulitzer Prize, left Harper & Row to become a Broadside Press poet, heads turned and other poets were eager to be published by the Press as well. The Press attracted more attention in 1973 when Audre Lorde's book from Broadside, *From a Land Where Other People Live*, was nominated for a National Book Award. Difficulties developed, however. Dudley Randall's bouts of ill-health and the increasing interest in Black poets among major publishing houses in the 1980s resulted in a decline in the importance and number of new Broadside Press offerings.

At this juncture, in 1985, Hilda and Don Vest came forward with new energy for the Press and a vision for how it might shift its focus. Hilda Vest, a poet who had worked with Dudley Randall for some time, convinced her husband Don, a personnel specialist for Ford Motor Company, that they could take on the Broadside Press and run it in their "spare time." The combination of Hilda's literary interests and Don's business sense enabled them to make their dream for the Press become a reality. From 1985 until they stepped down from the Press in 1998, they defined what is known as "Phase II" of the Broadside Press.

While Don Vest undertook the process of changing the Press into a non-profit entity (thereby making it eligible for various grants), Hilda planned programs to take poetry out into the community and open up more interest in what poets do. After all, Dudley Randall had told her bluntly when she and Don were acquiring the Press: "Hilda, nobody buys poetry." Hilda and Don Vest took on that challenge and became determined to get more Detroiters interested in and excited about poetry.

These new activities of the Broadside Press under the Vests' leadership included a wide array of programs aimed at the entire strata in the community. People of different ages, people of different socio-economic levels, people of different levels of education were all included in their outreach efforts. The "Poet in Residence" program matched poets (mainly Broadside Press poets) with specific libraries. There the poets worked with library staff in creating pro-

grams aimed at developing a greater, community-wide appreciation of poetry. Broadside programs also took poetry into non-traditional venues for literary activities such as homes for troubled and homeless youth, drug-addiction clinics, and veterans' facilities. The Vests reactivated the Broadside Poets Theater, working with Willie Williams to produce events featuring published poets performing their own works followed by "open mike" sessions.

Meanwhile, the Press's publishing programs were also continuing. The Vests first created catalogs advertising earlier publications, taking as their goal "to preserve and keep available the Broadside classics." Soon they were also adding new titles to the inventory. During their tenure the Vests concentrated on publishing the work of writers in the Detroit and southeastern Michigan area, including Michelle Gibbs, Bill Harris, Gloria House (Aneb Kgositsile), M. L. Liebler, Leslie Reese, Rod Reinhart, Al Ward, and others. In the words of one of their Broadside colleagues, the Vests "defined Detroit poets" in the 1980s and 90s. They also went outside the world of poetry to publish a cookbook (*A Safari of African Cooking*), a coloring book (*Island Images*), and oral histories (*Relections: An Oral History of Detroit and Crossing Generations to Reflect on the 1967 Detroit Rebellions*).

In 1998, when Don and Hilda Vest passed the reins of the Broadside Press on to a group of longtime participants and supporters, they could look back with pride at all they had accomplished. They had kept the name of the Broadside Press alive while gently steering a different course determined by the needs of their own time at the helm. One part of their legacy is the innumerable children, senior citizens, and ordinary people who were touched by their outreach programs. Another is the cadre of writers and readers who have benefited from their publications. The third part is the history of the Broadside Press embodied in the archive now at the University of Michigan.

Peggy Daub, Adye Bel Evans, Jean Loup

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