



BEHIND THE MUSIC

Putting life to song, and song to life

AS TOLD TO MELISSA HALL BY PAUL BURCH



EACH YEAR, THE FALL SYMPOSIUM CULMINATES IN AN ORIGINAL ARTS performance commissioned by SFA. In 2018, we asked Nashville-based musician Paul Burch to compose a song cycle based on the life of the writer, bon vivant, actor, globetrotter, flaneur, and eater Eugene Walter (1921–1998). The result was *Trovatore: The Lives of Eugene Walter*, which premiered at the Symposium, performed by Burch and members of his band, the WPA Ballclub. SFA managing director Melissa Hall interviewed Burch about his creative process.

When you wrote *Trovatore*, how much of your focus was on Eugene Walter (his life, his story) and how much on the music you were creating?

What comes first: word or music? I haven't a clue. And any songwriter who might tell you otherwise is spinning a tall tale. The most honest writers I know would rather do anything than write a song. John Prine once said he'd rather walk across a crowded highway for a cold hot dog than *try* to write a song.

As for my process, in general, sometimes I write a lyric (occasionally an entire song top to bottom) with only a bare rhythm in mind. Sometimes I can 'hear' the music in my imagination. Other times, even two lines will evoke a scene I've never imagined until that moment.

In some ways, putting Eugene's life to music was easy since Eugene lived in locales that are known for very specific kinds of sounds—at least during the times he lived there. For this album, I first daydreamed about the places I wanted to write about and imagined for each a kind of cliché sonic curtain. For instance, a song about Eugene's days in Paris in the late 1940s and early 50s (during the time Paris was still rationing food and gasoline) I thought ought to have accordion, fast guitar, a loping jazz beat, and perhaps violin.

But the music is only half the trouble. There were challenges to writing about a writer. Eugene was quite detailed and articulate in his recollections. So I had

to step far back and try to see what he left out. In his oral biography *Milking the Moon* [as told to Katherine Clark], there is one glaring omission about his life in that Eugene never discusses the most important thing in life itself: loving another human being. To be loved and to love in return—what else is there?

To that end, the only person who dies in *Milking the Moon* is the poet Jean Garrigue. In my mind, the omission of

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love and the admission of the death of a woman, fellow writer, and colleague, told me Jean was an important person in Eugene's life. Whether they had an actual romance I can't be sure. But I chose to make the song "Jean Garrigue" reflect their closeness, a closeness I've seen and have felt between other writers and musicians. Knowing Eugene to be a sensitive person, it did not seem like coincidence to me that he should omit love and sex in his otherwise detailed story, but include the death of the most divine and mysterious Jean Garrigue.

Album cover designed by Susan Archie; photo by Joyce Fay

Another thing that writers will never admit to is that some of the best moments in a recording—moments that seem to “make” a performance—often come from accidents, innocent miscommunication, and the impossible lucky breaks that come from just stepping up to the microphone and hoping for the best. In other words, showing up—the secret, it seems, to success. So what comes first, words or music? The answer is yes.

Does creating a song set about a real person inspire creativity or hamper creativity? Eugene Walter’s voice, which is heard on the album, feels both evocative and at times stifling because of its singularity.

The advantage to writing about someone real is that you don’t have to make anything up! Real life is always stranger, sexier, more outlandish, and downright perfectly stupid in the best ways than most anyone else’s cold imagination.

If you find Eugene’s voice stifling, that may be because that *kind* of voice tends to evoke in us the image of a now-gone era of Southern (male) genteel politeness that often disguised a haughty indifference—or downright hostility—toward anything that challenged one’s orthodoxy. I think Eugene was an extraordinary person. But one could argue he used his very differentness (as an artist and as a man attracted to men and women) as a cloak with which he smuggled his way through otherwise compromising situations. That kind of self-awareness, a fear of verbal and social traps, does take its toll.

The nature of art, of course, is that the more vivid the individual and the closer

you adhere to the facts, the nature of the facts, and how those facts emerged from the goo of experience, more and more people will see themselves in that singular story. Maybe Eugene’s voice is a kind of mask. And a mask, after all, often says more about the person interpreting the mask than the person who is wearing it.

“How I Found Paris” is my favorite song on the album. I think it’s your playfulness with the word “found” that speaks to me. Do you have a favorite song (or two) on the album? What speaks to you in that song?

Even though none of the songs would have been written without first being asked to consider Eugene’s story, for me each song on *Trovatore* is linked to a person I know and for whom I’m thankful.

Since the record was finished, packaged, sealed, and delivered, the album has come to represent something else all together. My experience at SFA, the warm reception the album received, and the opportunities and friendships that came as a result of the recording and the concert, are all tied together now.

Writing the tune is a very private kind of happening, whereas recording a song is something I share with my favorite musicians. My sense of accomplishment primarily comes from writing something good enough that these fine musicians can, with just a small bit of direction and encouragement, make these stories seem real and better than I imagined. I’m grateful. It was made with love, and I hope it is received that way. Even if Eugene wouldn’t have liked it, I think he would have thought the effort no less than gallant. 🐦

SFA thanks the Cockayne Fund for underwriting the writing, production, recording, and performance of Trovatore. Type this link into your browser to listen at home: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1NoMALPgeDdpPwy6YUquXhoVf-gZvs9sJ>



Paradise By the Sea (*Mobile Before the War*)

(Words by Burch, Music by
Burch & Dennis Crouch)

Down in Mobile
We’re all crazy
The County Seat of Lunacy
Home to Carnival, Cotton
And the little Fire Ant
A man can be a woman
And a woman can be a man

In Mobile
When I was a boy in Mobile

Down in Mobile
Before the war
Life was quiet and all you heard
French, Dutch, and Portuguese
The air smelled like oysters
And fresh cut steel

Playing in the cool
Under the house
I’d hear porch gossip all around
Who died last night
Who got soused
Who went out a lover
And came home a spouse

Down by the docks
My granddad brought in
Food from around the world
Bananas, mangoes, guava, and plantains
If he caught a deep sea crab for supper
Why he’d call it a day

The bordellos kept the sailors
And the senators cool
To drink their moonshine and play games
of chance
Every neighborhood a little melody
Of colonial days of
Great Britain, Spain, and France

The Mobile I knew
Before the war was a paradise by the sea
Cat and Monkey kind of folks
Free spirits like me
What America might have been
C’est la vie

Mobile
When I was a boy in Mobile