

## SUPPORT THE EDGE!

Zigi Lowenberg

I will always remember this. I was 18 years old. I was going to City University of New York at Queens College. I was the only one to show up for a breakout session as part of a career fair on campus. Leading the session was a woman film director. 1977. A rare breed. She told me the story about how one day she was riding in a limousine going to the Oscars—the documentary she directed had been nominated—and how the very next morning on another set, as a production assistant, she was getting coffees for the director and crew. She emphasized how that was the nature of the business.

I am both the executive producer and chief dishwasher of my artistic career.

A defining moment occurred a couple of years ago on a walk in Oakland with a longtime artist friend. I was sharing where I was at vis-à-vis having worked on the UpSurge! jazzpoetry project for a long time. I was explaining how I had recently pulled back from self-producing, and how Raymond, my husband and creative partner, was calling it my SR phase—for semi-retired—with some affection and annoyance mixed in. How in NYC I hadn't yet reinvented myself, hooked onto another project.

My friend listened intently. She said she wanted to make sure I knew that I had accomplished a great deal. That UpSurge! was important, and definitely had an impact in the Bay Area. She reminded

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me that you can't measure success as an artist in terms of how much money you make, or how many tickets you sell at every performance. You just can't quantify it the same way as you may measure success in other fields.

That walk and talk with her was another turning point in rethinking and reclaiming my abiding connection to UpSurge! and my role in it; seeing its history as beautiful and accomplished in its unique way.

Artists are cultural workers. When previous civilizations are examined, dug up—displayed in museums and studied in libraries—it is mostly their arts, their cultural products, physical objects and their ideas expressed in poems and plays that are what remain. 'ARTifacts' from a culture.

We are not just the attractive force of an economy—we are the barometer of the health of a society, a feedback loop on the status of our civilization.

As artists, we are accountable to our own authentic voices, otherwise our voices dry up on us—become tinny—ring a tone not our own. Someone else is ringing our bell.

Manufacturing a cultural commodity for the market is not the essence of making art. Sure some of it is highly polished and great craft; we love it all; but we need the forward, daring, challenging creatives—those who call attention to new depths to mine, new works that then become part of the future canons of creative expression. Think Picasso, Coltrane, Gertrude Stein. Support the edge!

Finding a creative partner. I grew up in a family that had a passion for the creative arts. My uncle was a painter and commercial illustrator. My Dad painted, my Mom is an avid art appreciator, and my big sister is a talented painter and mixed-media artist. I was encouraged to be creative but there was also a great deal of hand-wringing about artists not being able to make a living. The ritualized hand-wringing has become a meme and has fed into all my successes and failures—the coasting and the bumps along the journey. As the creative path curved, my creative focus evolved from

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theater, to film and video, to painting, and then primarily to performance poetry.

From the outset, Raymond was a major supporter of my pursuit as an artist. When he met me I was concentrating on painting, and though he had his particular tastes and hadn't spent much time looking at visual art, he was eager to accompany me to an opening, and celebrate with me when I had pieces in a couple of art shows.

Raymond was immersed in three passions of his own: radical politics, poetry, and jazz. During the first year we were together, he started a jazzpoetry ensemble and named it UpSurge! He became the influence in my creative expression conversion from mainly painting—to performance poetry. I had been journal-writing for decades, sometimes including poems or starts of poems. One I shared with him for a Chanukah present. It was about our cross-cultural love. Here's an excerpt:

*“Sharing cultures is like tongue-kissing the planet.  
Mingling my Jewness in your Africanness ...”*

Raymond invited me to perform the poem with him in UpSurge! for a new production that a collective of artists was producing in San Francisco. The collaborative project was called “Spread Love.” Raymond wrote a poem on the theme and we conjoined the poems. We did the production with jazz instrumentalists and a choreographer/dancer friend for a two-weekend run. That was a turning point. I became hooked on performance! I remembered how I had found earlier acting experiences electric—that immediate energetic exchange between an audience and performer. Years later, that joint poem, “Chromatology,” became the title track of UpSurge!'s second CD. The mysterious and surprising trajectory of the creative life of the artist and the work.

*“In 1995, Raymond made three decisions ... first, he invited  
Zigi Lowenberg to commit to performing with him and*

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*share his vision of what the group could become. Second, he decided to collaborate with world-class jazz musicians. And finally, he articulated his goal of having UpSurge! perform at jazz festivals.”*

—Doug Edwards

Jazz Programmer at KPFA-Pacifica, Berkeley, California

Contributing writer, *Jazz Now* magazine

Raymond and I then established UpSurge! as a legal partnership. I was now a co-leader of our ensemble. He and I were having weekly brainstorm “business meetings” that would go on for hours. We covered everything from how to promote, get gigs, design T-shirts using our band name, file taxes, review our previous outings, find professional services that could help guide and mentor us, seek out vocal and acting teachers, performance training, and prepare ourselves for taking it to the next level. We wanted to get our first recording done, and after several attempts at live recording, we gathered our resources and went into the studio. We had uncovered an amazing treasure in our midst—our saxophonist had some serious record producing experience. Richard Howell signed on to our project as the producer. A saying that became our joke was, “nobody knows what a producer does.” But we quickly learned. He became the piper of our unruly band and samurai of the board along with his cohort mix-master, the good DR. Richard was our chief midwife. *All Hands on Deck*, our first CD recording, was born.

*“UpSurge! is truly radical—it takes the performers and audiences back to their roots. Raymond Nat Turner and Zigi Lowenberg perform jazzpoetry using the spoken word as a form of musical storytelling. All Hands on Deck is their long-overdue first CD. The title cut is their poetic and musical tribute to the great jazz pianist McCoy Tyner. Sitting in the audience during a Tyner concert, Zigi scribbled notes on a napkin which eventually became the song-poem ‘All Hands*

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*on Deck. 'She says it's part of art begetting art.'*

*"UpSurge!'s fusion of poetry with music carries on the traditions of the Langston Hughes and Charles Mingus collaboration of the 1950s, the great 1970s group The Last Poets, and master poets Amiri Baraka and Allen Ginsberg. The spoken words always fit perfectly with the jazz, gospel and blues."*

—Reese Erlich

Producer and host, *Jazz Perspectives* on National Public Radio

We kept our marathon-like business meetings going, even through the rough spots of our relationship; whether we were together or not, our commitment to UpSurge! was solid. A couple of years later, we started on a second CD. And somewhere in the middle of that, Raymond and I got married! Recording independently took all of our resources and then some. But as we persevered, we also grew a loyal group of folks who became supporters of UpSurge!

Being with a creative partner helped me work harder on the art in all aspects. I was focusing on one medium longer than I had with other art forms. I was learning to navigate my balance between Allen Ginsberg's "first thought, best thought" and the value of revision, revision, revision. It was not just my expression anymore. I couldn't give up on an idea or a goal. Now I was accountable to a shared vision and goals, and endless tasks to get done after and around the day jobs. We completed our second CD recording on our own Abolition Media label and Chromatology was born.

*"East Bay jazz-poetry ensemble Upsurge! has just delivered a new disc containing 15 tracks of well-executed and captivatingly conscious music. They take the Gil Scott-Heron formula and turn it on its ear. I was really impressed with the production values and above-par musicianship. Very cool and engaging release from this East Bay institution, which also just won the Best Poet or Spoken-Word Performer*

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*Award of Best of the East Bay 2003.*”

—Royce Seader

Bay Area **BUZZ**

Doing political poetry, we have worked on stages to support radical ideas and the good fight—perhaps being marginalized as a “hot potato.” We weren’t fully embraced by the non-profit cultural organizations, who were careful about their funding, benefactors, presenting too radical. This especially hit us after 9/11/2001, while we were finishing up *Chromatology*, which released in 2003. We were distinctly against the wars and had performed at anti-war rallies. Though much of our work did not address those themes directly, enough of it did, and we had acquired a certain political reputation.

*“Raymond and Zigi’s poetry examines, highlights, and often satirizes the injustices of society. Delivered with passion juxtaposed with bebop and the driving urgency of swing, their words illuminate and communicate like coherent jazz solos.”*

—Doug Edwards

Working across cultural lines presents its double edge. I am Jewish-American. Raymond is African-American. We have had a mix of ethnicities in our ensemble at different times.

For some situations, we are not ‘Black enough.’ Raymond’s poetry often challenges the Black bourgeoisie. His co-leader in this jazzpoetry ensemble is not Black. Jazz, and even poetry with jazz, have a distinctly African-American historical lineage. We are crossing lines. On the other hand, when trying to play at venues for Jewish audiences, we’re not ‘Jewish enough,’ or too Black, too challenging, and more pointedly, not unconditionally supportive of Jewish causes, i.e., Zionism and Israel.

Funny how this goes. Our wedding was a great mix of traditions. It was co-led by a woman rabbi and a Nigerian theater director, with

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our friends as our jazz orchestra. Our invited guests defined it as a very “African-American wedding” (if they were Jewish) or a very “Jewish wedding” (if they were African-American). The dancing, from the Hora to the Electric Slide, was amazing. Oh, and our Soul Train line ...

So, socially, we have the great benefit of partaking in life’s bounty at many tables, yet professionally, it has also proved to be a liability. We had heard through friends who sit on boards of non-profit cultural organizations that it would be more of a fit to book UpSurge! if it were an all-Black group, or that maybe our messages are too radical. Perhaps in NYC it will prove a different experience for us.

*“An ensemble that earns its exclamation point with dynamic performances that capture the soul, humor and off-the-cuff inventiveness of a cascading saxophone solo.”*

—Andrew Gilbert

*Contra Costa Times*

I spent 11 years co-facilitating 41 community dialogue groups with Raymond in our friend Mary Webb’s living room in Berkeley, on “Race, Racism, and Ethnicity in the U.S.” She and Kate Meyer have made a film *Living Room Revolution: The Race Dialogues*, a short documentary that has appeared at film festivals. Over the eleven years, I thought of this work more as a long-term community-building/social justice project than a creative arts project. But, upon reflection, I see that my learning to facilitate and grow with this community had a significant impact on my creative life, and our poetry and performances informed the group as well. Sometimes it was a place to recite a poem to open the conversation topic, putting the praxis of poetry to work. We also formed lasting connections and grew our audience.

Currently I continue to write poems and perform in UpSurge! NYC, the latest configuration of our ensemble. I also find occasion to present my poetry solo or with other musical friends. I am partic-

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ularly attuned to new collaborations, experimenting with artists in different media.

And there is always working on the craft. I have been blessed with amazing teachers and mentors. As I have evolved as a performance poet, and have published in terms of our recordings, my challenge has been to see myself as a poet on the page—to appear in print publication, poetry journals, a chapbook, or even a collection of my own.

Just recently, I have had two of my poems published in an online poetry journal, Rabbit and Rose and another on the aadunanotes blog. I am grateful for this breakthrough; it is another step for me.

I would enjoy something in print. I still love paper. An artistic poetry book or journal. It is something I want. And there are steps along the way with much to learn.

One of my latest projects is part craft practice and part exploration, with an eye toward publication. I call this almost daily practice, my found subway poems.

Composing found subway poems interests me right now—the tug of narrative and the play of resistance. Teasing out narrative among found words, snatched phrases. How we love stories, or want to make a point. Express our outrage, our disbelief in the latest currency of manufactured language. Re-crafting words into irony, glimpses of faith, even triumph. Critical Subway Literacy. My subway fortune-cookie poetry of the absurd decoupage. My DIY MFA. FREE TUITION. APPLY NOW.

I have arranged 108 found subway poems so far ...

*Author's Note: My creative life would not be in blossom without friends and family, especially our parents, here and gone. I honor Raymond Turner Sr., William Greene, Caffie Greene, Alvin Lowenberg, and Ellie Lowenberg.*