

Black Sparrow Press—an Odd Bird

In 1966, John Martin, a 35-year-old Californian businessman who was struck by the poetical genius of Charles Bukowski, one day drove up to the poet's home and offered him \$100 a week if he would quit his postal job and become a full time writer. To be able to publish his work, Martin founded Black Sparrow Press.

At first, he kept managing an office supply company, because he "had a wife and a child," as he told Carl Williams in an interview. For a year and a half, Martin only printed Bukowski but soon expanded to other writers. Since then, the firm has grown a bit and, in 1986, it moved its office in Southern California from Santa Barbara to Santa Rosa.

It still publishes only what Martin likes, and that is mainly non-commercial writers. Without advertising or grants, the firm has become one of the most respected independent publishers in the world. Nearly ten years after Bukowski's death at age 73, he remains one of Black Sparrow Press' best selling authors. "His sales are better than ever," Martin declares.

Black Sparrow has also become known for the artistry of its volumes, for their impressive elegance and high quality paper. Martin's wife, Barbara, who became disappointed with the printer's artwork in the company's first five books, took over designing these books.

Besides Bukowski, Martin has published contemporary writers like Paul Bowles, Tom Clark, Robert Creeley, Andrei Codrescu, Fielding Dawson, Ed Dorn, William Everson, Edward Field, Paul Goodman, Charles Reznikoff, Ed Sanders, and John Yau. Many of these are widely unknown, but for the initiated reader, they are our time's answer to earlier French modernists like Gide, Proust, and Valery. Black Sparrow Press also has published classical works of D. H. Lawrence and the *Blast* magazine, which was edited by Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound and has become seen as their manifesto.

Talking about Bukowski, Martin said to Williams, "[W]e had a kind of agreement where I, with his knowledge, put aside every year a certain amount of material, and I have enough for at least three or four more books." The author's latest imprint has become a huge success, and Black Sparrow Press is launching it with the slogan, "Bukowski lives," alluding to his self-portraying theme as a martyr. "We've done two since he died. We did a book of letters and a book called *Betting on the Muse*, which is a big 400-page book of stories and poems."

For a many of us, the name Bukowski has become more connected with

casual style poetry than with anything else, and surely the poet will live on. Says Martin, "I've got at least 1,000 poems that have never been published [...]. We're just doing a new book right now, called Bone Palace Ballet. He thought of the world as kind of a bone palace, beautiful on the outside, but filled with failure and the remains of those who had gone before on the inside."

Bukowski's work definitely belongs on the outside of that imaginary world.

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