

Collection #  
M 0798,  
OM 0409

## ETHERIDGE KNIGHT, JR. PAPERS, 1955–2004

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Processed by

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5 March 2004

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23 June 2005

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Indiana Historical Society  
450 West Ohio Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

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### COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF  
COLLECTION:

**Manuscript Materials:** 4 document cases, 23 oversize folders, 2 cassette tapes, 8 videotapes (4 original videotapes and 4 user copies, housed in 1 document case)

**Visual Materials:** 5 folders of photographs, 1 box of color photographs, 1 oversize color photograph, 1 oversize photograph, 1 painting on un-stretched canvas

**Printed Materials:** 12 books

**Artifacts:** 5 artifacts

COLLECTION DATES: 1955–2004

PROVENANCE: Eunice Knight-Bowens, 2000, 2001, and 2005.

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS:

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2000.1052; 2001.0095; 2005.0259

NOTES:

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Etheridge Knight, Jr. (son of Etheridge, Sr., and Belzora Cozart Knight) was born in Corinth, Mississippi, on 19 April 1931. Growing up in Corinth and Paducah, Kentucky, he attended local schools and dropped out after the eighth grade. Knight joined the United States Army in 1947 and saw action during the Korean Conflict, where he was seriously wounded and developed an addiction to drugs and alcohol. After Knight's discharge from the service, he turned to crime in support of his habit, and in 1960 he was arrested for armed robbery. Knight was incarcerated at the Indiana State Prison from 1960 to 1968. In commenting on his transformation from soldier to convict to poet, Knight penned: "I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound, and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence, and poetry brought me back to life."

While in prison, Knight began to write poetry and submit his writings to publishing houses. He has been quoted as saying, "prison is my major metaphor." He further said: "In prison your superficialities are stripped away. You act and think as you naturally are. It does nothing to help people or rehabilitate them." Following numerous rejections from publishers, Knight received his first acceptance letter from *Negro Digest* editor Hoyt Fuller. Appearing in the July 1965 issue of the journal, his first published piece was a reflection on a major rhythm and blues singer. Titled "To Dinah Washington," the poem was written soon after Knight learned of Washington's death. Knight's talent also came to the attention of poet Gwendolyn Brooks during his confinement at the Indiana State Prison.

After his release from prison, Knight married fellow poet Sonia Sanchez. They divorced, and in 1970 he married Mary McAnally. Knight was father to her two adopted children, Mary TanDiwe McAnally and Etheridge Bambata McNally Knight. He also had one son, Isaac "Bushie" Blackburn Knight, with his third wife, Charlene Blackburn.

Knight authored five books of poetry: *Poems From Prison* (Broadside Press, 1968); *Black Voices From Prison* (Pathfinder Press, 1970); *Belly Song & Other Poems* (Broadside Press, 1973); *Born of a Woman* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981); and *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986). He has also been published in a wide range of periodicals and anthologies, including: *A Comprehensive Survey of Black Writers of America*, *The*

*Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, New Black Voices, New Canadian-American Poetry, and Black World.*

Etheridge Knight often expressed the importance of speaking and performing poetry. He said, "Poets are sayers, singers, and chanters." He referred to his writing as "poeting." Themes in his poetry included family relationships, prisons, life and death, love and connection, addiction, and incarceration.

He served as poet or writer-in-residence at several college campuses including University of Pittsburgh, University of Hartford, and Lincoln University (Missouri). He also worked with the Butler University Writers Studio.

Knight gave many poetry readings throughout his life. He began his reading career in 1969, when shortly after his release from prison, poet David Hall invited Knight to the University of Michigan. After the publication of *The Essential Etheridge Knight* for which he won a 1987 American Book Award, he began a 15-city tour to promote his book. He did poetry readings and/or led Free People's Poetry Workshops that were open to anyone in several U.S. cities.

The recipient of numerous awards, Etheridge Knight was the winner of the Shelley Award from the Poetry Society of America. During the 1970s and 1980s, he received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1972 and 1980) and the Guggenheim Foundation (1974).

In November 1988, Etheridge Knight was injured by a hit-and-run motorist in Philadelphia. He suffered a broken wrist and a hideous leg gash. A group of poets came together and gave a benefit for him. Returning to Indianapolis, he spent time in the VA Hospital.

In August 1990, Etheridge Knight was a featured writer at the Michigan Festival sponsored by Michigan State University and the Michigan Council for the Humanities. The following month, he collaborated with painter and sculptor Stephen Stoller, and produced "Fame and Freedom." The program was billed as "an event of the heart: the celebration of the life and body of work of two major American artists living in Indianapolis." Essentially an art exhibition and poetry reading, the Indianapolis event included music and dance. A booklet, "Freedom and Fame," was produced in conjunction with the event.

On 19 January 1991, numerous local and nationally known poets gathered in Indianapolis to pay tribute to an ailing Knight who was suffering from cancer. Over 700 people attended the program at the American Cabaret Theatre and heard poetry readings from Robert Bly, Samuel Allen, Christopher Gilbert, Galway Kinnell, Haki Madhubuti, Dudley Randall, Elizabeth McKim, Mari Evans, and Jared Carter. Etheridge Knight died in Indianapolis on 10 March 1991. He is buried in Crown Hill Cemetery.

The Etheridge Knight Festival of the Arts was started in 1992 by Eunice Knight-Bowens and her family as a tribute to her brother. A youth poetry component was added in 1994. The festival is an annual celebration bringing together local and national individuals who perform for the community and serve as mentors to help develop emerging artists.

Sources: Materials in the collection.

E-mail interview with Eunice Knight Bowens, 9–10 August 2003.

Please note: Some outside biographical sources are located in the first folder (unnumbered) in Box 1, along with the collection guide.

## **SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE**

The Etheridge Knight Papers are contained in four manuscript document cases, 23 oversize manuscript folders, 1 oversize graphic folder, 1 oversize photograph folder, two audiocassettes, four videotapes, and 22 folders of photographs. Much information about Knight's background can be gained from biographical and family history information contained in Box 1, folders 1 and 2.

While Knight was incarcerated at the Indiana State Prison during the 1960s, his mother sent him a typewriter that is

contained in the collection. The collection also includes some of his unpublished writings as well as several books—three authored by him and several inscribed to him.

Knight graduated from Martin University where he was commissioned its first poet laureate. A copy of his commission is in the collection. He participated in several poetry readings, collaborations, and conferences. There are many items in the collection that reflect those activities. Of particular note is a video program (VHS 1) of a Writers' Conference celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Broadside Press.

There are materials in the collection that pertain to family members Belzora M. Cozart Knight Taylor, Isaac Knight, and Eunice Knight-Bowens and poets Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lamont B. Steptoe.

Knight was a Korean War veteran. His collection includes a United States flag that was draped over his casket during his funeral. In 1991 shortly after his death, National Public Radio (NPR) aired a commentary on Knight's life and work. The poet was the recipient of several honors and tributes, many of them awarded posthumously. The NPR taped program and many of the awards are in the collection.

Etheridge Knight was the author and the subject of numerous articles in various periodicals. Many of these publications are in the collection and are arranged alphabetically from Box 2, folder 20 through Box 3, folder 4, and in OM 0409. A list of some of the articles and their locations within the publications follow the box and folder listing in this guide.

The collection contains a large acrylic painting (3' X 5') on unstretched canvas. It is painted with many bright colors. The design boasts several shapes including triangles and rectangles. It appears to have buildings and lush flowers. The letters "Eth" are painted throughout the cloth, and it is inscribed "Eth from Deta With Love '91." This may be a reference to artist Deta Galloway.

Knight-Bowens and her family worked with Martin University to develop the first annual Etheridge Knight Festival of Arts in 1992. The festival has continued with different sponsors at various venues. Its mission is to bring together local and national poets, and it especially targets youth and seniors. Festival materials are in Box 3. There are three videos related to the festival. VHS 2 contains the program for the 1993 festival held at the West End Conference Center. *Break Away*, a play about the parole of three female prison inmates, written by Leslie Sloan and performed during the 1993 festival is on VHS 3. A 30-second promotional video advertising the 1996 festival is contained on VHS 4.

## **SERIES CONTENTS**

### **Series 1: Etheridge Knight's Life**

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Correspondence from Etheridge Knight, 1970–1989	Box 1, Folder 3
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Correspondence, 1992–1999	Box 1, Folder 6

Correspondence, n.d.	Box 1, Folder 7
Images of Etheridge Knight in His Youth	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 2
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Etheridge Knight at Microphone during Prison Performance	Visual Collections: OVB Photographs, Box 1, Folder 1
Smith Corona Typewriter	Artifacts: 2000.1052
Images of Etheridge Knight in His Thirties	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 3
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Image of Etheridge Knight Relaxing in Chair	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 5
Images of Etheridge Knight and Family	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 6
Etheridge Knight and Family	Visual Collections: Color Photographs, Box 1, Folder 1
Images of Etheridge Knight and Eunice Knight- Bowens	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 7
Etheridge Knight with Family and Friends	Visual Collections: Photographs, Folder 2
Etheridge Knight – Last Days	Visual Collections: Color Photographs, Box 1, Folder 2
Etheridge Knight Writings, n.d.	Box 1, Folder 8
“For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide,” 1969	OM 0409, Folder 1
“Freedom and Fame” – E.K. and Painter Stephen Stoller, 1990	Box 1, Folder 9
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Etheridge Knight Poetry Readings, 1983–1990, n.d.	Box 1, Folder 10

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Butler University Visiting Writers' Series, 1990	OM 0409, Folder 2
Writers' Conference, 25 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Broadside Press, 11 August 1990	Visual Collections: Videotape Storage, VHS 1
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"Black Artists for the 80's"	Box 1, Folder 12
Martin University Commencement, 1990–1991	Box 1, Folder 13
Etheridge Knight's Commencement and Commission of First Poet Laureate, Martin University, 1990–1991	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 8
Etheridge Knight's Death	Box 1, Folder 14
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Flag that Draped Etheridge Knight's Coffin	Artifacts: 2000.1052
E. Knight Will and Testament, 1990	Box 1, Folder 16
National Public Radio Commentary on Etheridge Knight, 1991	CT 1510
"Presenting Etheridge Knight," (Poet Vision), 1991	Box 1, Folder 17
A Study Guide on Poet Etheridge Knight, 1993	Box 1, Folder 18
Tributes to Etheridge Knight, 1984–1999, n.d.	Box 1, Folder 19
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Dias Sculpture, Etheridge Knight House, Martin University	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 10
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## **Series 2: Knight’s Family and Colleagues**

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Eunice Knight-Bowens Presentation	Visual Collections: Color Photographs, Box 1, Folder 9
Images of Etheridge “Bushie” Knight, Sr.	Flat File: FF 13k, Folder 11
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Isaac “Bushie” Knight, n.d.	Box 2, Folder 2
Poet: Sonia Sanchez, 1990–1997	Box 2, Folder 3
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“American Drums” Synopsis by Mark Seiden	Box 2, Folder 6
“American Drums,” pp. 1–52, by Mark Seiden	Box 2, Folder 7
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Paper: “On Etheridge: A Perspective” by Seneca Turner	Box 2, Folder 9
Other Writings, 1984–1990, n.d.	Box 2, Folder 10
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Publication Advertisements, 1968–1993
Conference Programs, 1988–1998
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African American Artists and Literary People
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<i>Authentic Chicano Food Is Hot!</i> Trinidad Sanchez, Jr., 1990
Publications, B:

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Box 2, Folder 20
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*The Black Scholar: Word Within A Word*, Jayne Cortez, ed. (features Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, and Etheridge Knight), July/Aug.–Sept./Oct. 1988

*Black World*, “Birthday Poem,” Etheridge Knight, April 1976

Publications, C: Box 2, Folder 22

*Callaloo* (several poems by Etheridge Knight), Fall 1996

*Crossroads* (Etheridge Knight interview), Spring 1990

*Compartiendo De La Nada*, Trinidad Sanchez, Jr., 1989

Publications, D: Box 2, Folder 23

*Dangerous Toys*, Kevin Elmore, 1989

*Drumvoices Revue*, Fall-Winter 1992–1993

Publications, F-G: Box 3 Folder 1

*Fine Line That Screams*, Craig Czury Prison Writing Workshop, 1986

*First World*, “On Seeing the Black Male As #1 Sex Object in America,” Etheridge Knight, Winter 1977

*Free People’s Voice*, April 1992, n.d.

*George Washington High School: Awards Day*, 25 May 1983

Publications, K-P: Box 3, Folder 2

*Krankenhaus Kronicle*, 31 January 1962

*Negro Digest*, April 1970

*The Negro in American Life*, John Becker, 1944

*Pennsylvania’s Literary Network Newsletter*, Fall 1990

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*Reading in Indianapolis*, “Etheridge Knight: An Afro-American Griot,” Jay Lesandrini, 15–28 February 1990

*Reading in Indianapolis*, 15–30 June 1995

*Reading in Indianapolis* (Etheridge Knight Festival of the Arts advertisement), May 1997

*Shooting Star* (Etheridge Knight poems), Fall 1987

*Sunny Side*, November 1955

Publications, T-W:

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*Takin' It to the Streets*, 1985

*Way Station* (issue dedicated to Etheridge Knight), 1991

*Woodland Sketches*, Murray Jackson, 1990

*Write On...* (issue dedicated to Etheridge Knight), April 1991

Publications, A:

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*Arts Indiana*, "Free Singers Be" (Sketch of Etheridge Knight) Susan Neville, April 1991

*Arts Indiana*, February 1997

*Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, "National Black Arts Festival," 23 July 1988

Publications, C-I:

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*Corroboree* (memorial to Etheridge Knight), 1991

*Eyeball*, "1 Wing: For Etheridge," Eunice Knight-Bowens, 1992 (2<sup>nd</sup> biannual issue)

*Indiana Arts Commission Quarterly*, Governor's Arts Awards, Spring 1993

Publications, N-W:

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*Painted Word* (memorial to Etheridge Knight), 1991

*Poetry Week* (Etheridge Knight on the National Advisory Board), March 1989

*Wingspan*, Winter 1990

Publications, Books:

Printed Collections:  
PS3515.A3152  
O4 1990

Samuel Allen, *Every Round and Other Poems*, 1987

*Annual Survey of American Poetry*, 1986, 1987

Printed Collections:  
PS580 .A5

Conrad Balfour, ed., *The Butterfly Tree: An Anthology of Black Writing from the Upper Midwest*, 1985

Printed Collections:  
PS563 .B87 1985

Jared Carter, *Pincushion's Strawberry*, 1984

Printed Collections:

	PS3553.A7812 P56 1984
Ken Downen, ed., <i>Sour Grapes: An Anthology of Work in Progress</i> , 1985	Printed Collections: PS615 .S62 1985
Donald Hall, <i>Old and New Poems</i> , 1990	Printed Collections: PS3515.A3152 O4 1990
Etheridge Knight, <i>Belly Song and Other Poems</i> , 1987	Printed Collections: PS3561.N45 B4 1973
Etheridge Knight, <i>The Essential Etheridge Knight</i> , 1986	Printed Collections: PS3561.N45 A6 1986
Etheridge Knight, <i>Poems from Prison</i> , 1988	Printed Collections: PS3561.N45 P6 1988
Nikki Lee, <i>The War Is Over</i> , 1986	Printed Collections: PS3562.E33 W37 1986
Haki R. Madhubuti, <i>Killing Memory, Seeking Ancestors</i> , 1990	Printed Collections: PS3563.A3397 K54 1987
Ed Ochester and Peter Oresick, eds., <i>The Pittsburgh Book of Contemporary American Poetry</i> , 1993	Printed Collections: PS615 .P47 1993

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## CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog: <http://157.91.92.2/>
2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, M 0798).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.