ETHERIDGE KNIGHT FESTIVAL COLLECTION, 1957-2012

Collection Information

Sketch

Scope and Content Note

Series Contents

Cataloging Information

Processed by
Nicole Poletika
October 2013

Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
William Henry Smith Memorial Library
Indiana Historical Society
450 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

www.indianahistory.org
COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 2 manuscript boxes, 8 OM folders, 3 color photograph folders, 3 OM photograph folders, 1 DVD box

COLLECTION DATES: 1957-2012

PROVENANCE: Eunice Knight-Bowens

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS: Etheridge Knight Jr. Papers (M 0798)


NOTES:
HISTORICAL SKETCH

The Etheridge Knight Festival of the Arts was started in 1992 by Eunice Knight-Bowens and her family as a tribute to her brother’s legacy and the arts community. A youth poetry component was added in 1994. The Festival began as an annual celebration bringing together local and national individuals who perform for the community and serve as mentors to help develop emerging artists. It stressed making arts available more broadly to all groups within the community.

On April 19, 2012, the Festival hosted the “Evening with the Legends” honoring nationally renowned legends Amiri Baraka, Mari Evans, Haki Madhubuti, and Sonia Sanchez. The event, held at the Indiana Landmarks Center paid homage to the life of Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000).

Biographical Sketch of Etheridge Knight, Jr.

Etheridge Knight, Jr. (son of Etheridge, Sr. and Belzora Cozart Knight) was born in Corinth, Mississippi, on April 19, 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.” Regarding incarceration, he further stated: “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 (Broadsid Press, 1968); Black Voices from Prison (Pathfinder Press, 1970); Belly Song & Other Poems (Broadsid Press,

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 colleges 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 him 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 the public 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, 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 recuperating at the Veterans 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.

On January 19, 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 March 10, 1991. He is buried at Crown Hill Cemetery.

Sources:
Etheridge Knight, Jr., Papers (M 0798) guide at the Indiana Historical Society; Etheridge Knight Festival of the Arts, Inc., http://www.ekfestival.org/aboutus.html
SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Etheridge Knight Festival of the Arts, Inc. was created to honor the poet after his passing in 1991. His sister, Eunice Knight-Bowens coordinated the event that began in 1992 and was incorporated in 1996 in Indianapolis. Much of the material contained in this collection pertains to programs and performances that were part of the festival.

The festival has hosted literary luminaries such as the late Gwendolyn Brooks, Eugene Redmon, Lamont Steptoe, and The Last Poets. Amiri Baraka, Mari Evans, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez were part of the twentieth anniversary celebration. The organization has evolved from hosting an annual arts festival to year round arts programming.

The collection contains six series, most of which pertain to the Etheridge Knight Festival and its events. They are: Etheridge Knight Festival Events; Correspondence; Etheridge Knight, His Poetry and Legacy; Publications; Awards and Certificates; and Etheridge Knight Family Members, et al. Contained within the collection are various formats of material (including DVDs, photographs, manuscripts, and printed materials) that examine and pay homage to Knight’s life. There are marketing materials related to the many programs of the annual Etheridge Knight Festival. The collection has a limited amount of correspondence written to or from Knight. From his name being included on a list of persons receiving a John Simon Guggenheim fellowship in 1974 to the dedication of the Etheridge Knight House at Martin University, the collection materials reflect the extent to which the poet’s talent was revered.
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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://opac.indianahistory.org/

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 1072).

5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.