



Most people write shit, they don't write poetry. They write what they are: insignificant self-conscious words that say nothing. You cannot lie in a poem. You cannot lie on a page. Either you have it or you don't have it. There's nothing to define what poetry is. It either has life or it doesn't.

Jack Micheline, 1987

Ten years ago, the musician Charles Gonzalez gave me a painting. The focal point is a large purple dog with long ears and snout. Only one of the dog's feet is touching the ground – it's not clear if it's running to welcome us, or scare us away. Behind it, a white house with a magenta peaked roof shimmers, reflecting the gleam of a full pink moon. The roof becomes a floating pyramid, the dog caught suspended: a sphinx. The cliché symbols of Home take on the archaic proportions of myth. The painting is signed 'Micheline '90'. It is the work of Jack Micheline, the artist-poet. In 1997 Gonzalez collaborated with him on an album of country songs – this gift from Micheline, to Gonzalez, to me, hangs on my wall and makes Micheline's work far more real for me than it had ever been before.

Unaffiliated with any group, Jack Micheline's poems and paintings belong to a marginal but strong current in late 20th century North American art: a trend toward direct articulation and clear statement. This reforming tendency was built upon the breakthroughs of Charles Sheeler and William Carlos Williams, whose impetus urged artists to leave the rooftops behind and speak, paint and sing from the streets. But unlike even his contemporaries on the fringe, Micheline continues to be the subject of an extreme neglect.

Micheline was born Harold Silver to an Irish-Italian mother and a Jewish Russian-Romanian Gypsy father in East Bronx, New York in 1929. As a young man, while working one of the many menial jobs that characterized his early life, he shared his writing with an employer who told him that it was a poem and he, a poet. In the 1987 documentary *Jack Micheline*, directed by Jesse Block, the poet explained what that revelation brought with it:

"I discovered something. The poems were affirmations. Poetry saved my life. It was so wretched, so poor, so down, so frightened, so insignificant, that poetry saved my life. Therefore poetry is not words on a page. Poetry is the beginning of being alive..."

His first book of poetry *River of Red Wine* appeared in 1957, with an introduction by Jack Kerouac. Dorothy Parker reviewed it in *Esquire*, noting that "there are good poems in *River of Red Wine*, powerful and filled with zest and sometimes touched with wild sorrow," but that "there is nothing whatever new about them"— which was in fact high praise, albeit unintended. The nascent Beat movement took notice: editors Hettie Cohen and LeRoi Jones published a poem of his in 1958 alongside work by Diane di Prima, Philip Whalen and Allen Ginsberg.

His early travels cast him as a citizen of the world, rather than of a single nation. Micheline identified more with the international bohemianism of a prior generation – Maxwell Bodenheim and Vachel Lindsay – than the media-savvy Beats that he was often anthologized with. The restless poet turned painter in 1961 on a trip to Mexico City financed by his patron Franz Kline, a New York art world celebrity – what a quaint notion that now seems – known for his barroom persona. The result was a series of paintings characterized by isolated motifs – usually a man or an animal – rendered on a monumental scale, in bright primary and secondary colours, in single brushstrokes, sometimes with words painted directly onto the image. This was to become Micheline's signature style.

Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s Micheline wrote two poems that provide an insight into his views of the art world and his place in it. Dated circa 1986 the first poem, entitled simply *Franz Kline*, is an encomium to fame:

The man
was too alive. So he sang songs in a bar. Drank his heart
out to death. Laughed and cried. Was a human. A big
human heart beating like a piston in a drum, like a
drummer and a saxophone player. A man of great
magnitude, of vision. A significant human being. Wore
nice sports coats with his dungarees. A man with class,
class of a prince. A prince of the soul, a prince of the
spirit. The prince without a kingdom but the streets of
New York. The Pennsylvania-born dreamer walking the
streets of the Village. Drunk, singing songs, falling on
his ass in Washington Square Park.

Evicted seventeen times for non-payment of rent. To
beg like a dog, like a rat, to survive. A great vision, a
great artist. Won awards as a figurative painter before
going abstract. He was the top banana, the man who
hit the home run, the man who never compromised, a
man who never sold out. A man who belonged to the
people, belonged to the poor people, to the rich people,
to everybody. He belonged to the whole universe. He
was part of the universe.

Ultimately what Micheline loved about Kline was his status. How poignant and personal then is the 1991 poem *Beauford Delaney in Paris 1964*, about the great African-American painter-in-exile who once welcomed a young Jewish acolyte into his inner sanctum.

In a poor section of Paris
I took off my shoes
Before I entered his studio
A stocky frail man
With a black moon face
We went to the grocer to buy vegetables
he cooked me a delicious meal
his studio was clean as a whistle
he went into his closet and took out
one painting after the other, he showed me
one beautiful painting after another
It was like entering a rare chapel
a unique mosque
a temple of the sublime
a house of spiritual endeavor
a high rising of the light
a deep religious experience
a moment never to be forgotten
one by one he showed me his paintings
one shot across the moon
one shot against the darkness of the night
one shot for a wild-eyed artist
one shot for man and mankind
one shot for genius
one shot for Aurora Borealis
one shot for the children of time
Live Live Beauford Delaney
One shot for the world

Micheline's self-taught style of painting, with its vibrant colours and repeated motifs, owes much to Delaney's sophisticated example. Their mutual identification with outsiders bonded them and Micheline remained on the fringes throughout his life. Speaking impromptu in the documentary *Jack Micheline* in the final months of Reagan's presidency, amid a recession and with the U.S. imperial project in full swing abroad, Micheline

anticipated the current trend of analysing the effects of market pressures on artistic production by a cool 40 years:

“I’ve been writing for about 30 years now and I have about 10 books published by small presses. The main book is called *North of Manhattan*. It came out with 1500 copies. It never was reviewed in San Francisco in *The Chronicle* or *The Examiner*... if anything major comes out on a small press, the bigger presses never pick it up and review it. So in a way, censorship in this country is as strong as it is in the Soviet Union. They even gave money for the small presses to publish, but the small presses didn’t have any distribution.”

At a time when even the most beatific of his contemporaries had become expert careerists, Micheline’s realness set him apart. It also put off his collaborators. “Micheline has not been easy to work with, and anyone who knows him will know exactly what I am talking about,” wrote Matt Gonzalez, his friend and editor, in an afterword to *Sixty-Seven Poems for Downtrodden Saints* – Micheline’s first major collection of posthumous selected poems. “In many cases he denied writing a poem I had discovered among his papers, insisting that he see the original before acknowledging authorship”, Gonzalez says. “Often I think Micheline disliked or criticized a poem merely because I expressed satisfaction with it.”

This fascinating element of Micheline’s character developed from his sense of responsibility to his vocation of Poet, and it also indicates why he has still not been recognized in the same way as others in his league.

Riding a train out of San Francisco in 1998, Jack Micheline departed this life to trespass on the beyond. We’ll never know, if it even matters, whether any downtrodden saints were waiting with open arms at the fare gates of Acheron to see the ragged lion across those dark waters and welcome him home onto the solid ground of Paradise.