

ENTERTAINMENT

Burrs superb

Interview by Gilbert Bouchard

Regina poet Mick Burrs arrived for his Gateway interview a few Thursdays ago wearing his paradise tie, and lugging a shopping bag full of books and tapes. His tie was loud and blue with palm trees and surf named in honor of his latest collection of poems *The Blue Pools of Paradise*. Since a staff meeting was underway, we exited to L'Express, and over fruit juice and root beer we talked about poetry, life, and the eclectic choice of music on CJSR.

Burrs, originally from California, arrived in Regina via L.A., and San Francisco, and Vancouver, and Edmonton. His stay in Edmonton, from October 1969 to October 1973, was rather accidental since Burrs was sidetracked here on a trip to Toronto. He'd heard Hurtig Publishers were considering poetry manuscripts - they weren't - but he decided to stay here anyways.

Burrs is certainly no elitist and aims his poetry at the largest possible market.

"I refuse to be esoteric. I refuse to be vague. I refuse to have only a handful of admirers. A poet can keep his integrity and still reach a lot of people," he said.

Burrs sees his poetry reaching people with no experience in poetry with complete confidence that his poetry won't go over their heads.

He finds that his two strengths lie in lyrical poetry and narrative poetry - that is, narrative poetry with a lyrical side. He adds that in the last few years he has written more narrative poems than ever. Not only do narrative works dominate his latest collection, but he has experimented with the use of characters in his poetry.

"I became the character I was writing about, I became my own great grandfather, I put myself in his slippers," said Burrs.

Music is also important to Burrs' work. He explained how Edmonton was the

genesis of his musical-career. In fact, he and violinist Rob Penner (Calgary Philharmonic) recorded a tape entitled "Gold Rays."

Most of the songs were written while Burrs lived here in Edmonton, in what Burrs described as a long series of basement suites. The lack of sunlight in those rather dingy living units was the inspiration for the tune's title. Burrs described the tape as "part folk" and as "relaxation music, spiritual in the ecumenical sense."

But enough of that. Let's return to Burrs' poetry - in particular, his latest collection - *Blue Pools*.

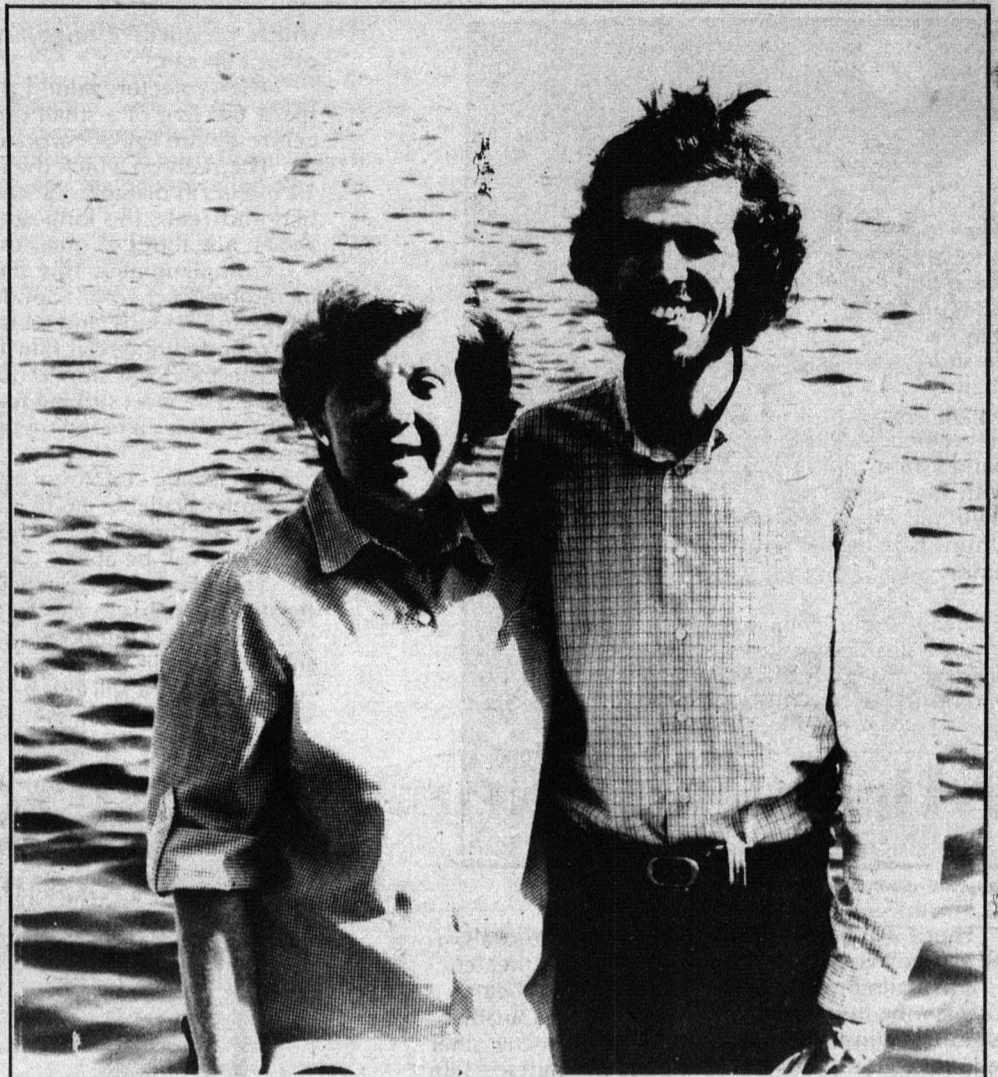
Blue Pools was written over a prolonged period of time, but Burrs felt that it still melded together quite well. The work is divided into two halves. Burr comments on this: "In the first half, everything is connected to my father, my father's family, and their trek from Russia to California. The second half is connected to my mother's relatives. It's a very tightly structured book."

Blue Pools won a Saskatchewan Writers Guild poetry manuscript award of \$1000 in 1983. It was submitted under its original title, *Names Leave The Stones*. Judges included Eli Mandel and Daphne Marlatt, and the 30 or so entries included a number of very fine Saskatchewan poets.

Names Leave The Stones is also the title of one of Burrs' strongest poems, and was reprinted in the March 1st Gateway review.

Blue Pools is Burrs' third volume of poetry. His first two were entitled *Moving in From Paradise*, and *Children on the Edge of Space*.

Burrs comments on their success: "I've been writing since 1966 and am now only starting to get recognition. I've been patient. After 18 years this is only my third book, but I've got over 600 published



Mick Burrs with his mother, Shirley Baran

poems. If a poem gets sent off and gets rejected, I don't send it off again very quickly. I take rejection very seriously."

Burrs credits his early confidence in his poetic abilities to two Vancouver editors, Milton Wilson (formerly of the *The Canadian Forum*) and Jim Brown (co-editor of *Talon*), who published his first few poems. Burrs puts a lot of stock in criticism, as long as it's positive: "There is a certain amount of illusion to poetry and it takes an editor to give you an honest assessment of your work. As long as it's not destructive, but

and his affection for the prairies seems both genuine and vast.

"The prairie is my adopted land. I've travelled across it many times, and I know the prairies are why my poetry is the way it is. If I'd stayed in Vancouver, even, my poetry would be much different."

Burrs moved to Vancouver because the west coast seemed natural after California. But while Burrs considers himself to be an urban writer, each center Burrs has moved to in the last 18 years has been smaller than the previous one.

"The smaller the urban centre I live in, the more intimate, and paradoxically, the more universal my poems become."

Fortunately, all the communities Burrs has lived in have had well developed writing communities.

"I've never written in a vacuum, and I've always been influenced by other writers," he says.

A list of these "other writers" influencing Burrs reads like a Who's Who of Canadian Literature. He's worked with, studied under or known Margaret Atwood, Steven Scobie, Pat Lane, Earle Birney, the U of A's own Rudy Wiebe, Bert Almond and Doug Barbour.

Mick Burrs seems to be a poet at peace - if not with himself, at least with his audience.

"Some people turn the reader into an antagonist. I have absolutely no hostility towards my readers, either veiled or overt."

SEEDLINGS

*I still dream about my father
who I've not seen for many years.
His body sleeps beneath the dark
in soil indifferent to his fate.*

*Awake I do not wish to see
what became of him: how his bones
outgrew his flesh, how his blood stopped
flowing into tears, into laughter.*

*Yet in the sunlit yard of my skull
he lives, bending down to show me
seedlings from which tall trees will grow
one day to sprout above us all.*

Burrs is a fascinating and complex man, and his poetry adds a new dimension to Canadian Literature. The next time you spend some time in a bookstore, wander over to the Canadiana section, and take a look at his writing.

The experience could be well worth the effort.

Live from Toronto . . .

DAVID WILCOX

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