

Arts & Entertainment

Fred Wah: A complex poet

interview by Marg Ackerman

Fred Wah does not write pretty poetry. Reading what he writes means paying attention, working at it. There is movement within the lines, and a certain sense of incompleteness. When you finish the piece or close the book, there's a feeling that you haven't reached the end.

"One of the things I've resisted is the poem as a finished thing," Wah says.

The complexity inherent in Wah's writing has sometimes been mistaken by critics for intentional obscurity. His background in jazz and linguistics perhaps provides some insight into the foundations of his approach. Somehow he manages to achieve a certain open-endedness but with it a razor sharp precision. He speaks a lot about pushing, taking things to the edge. If this has led him to a place of inaccessibility, it's doubtful that it's intentional. What Wah engages himself in is far too difficult to leave room for such pretty pretensions.

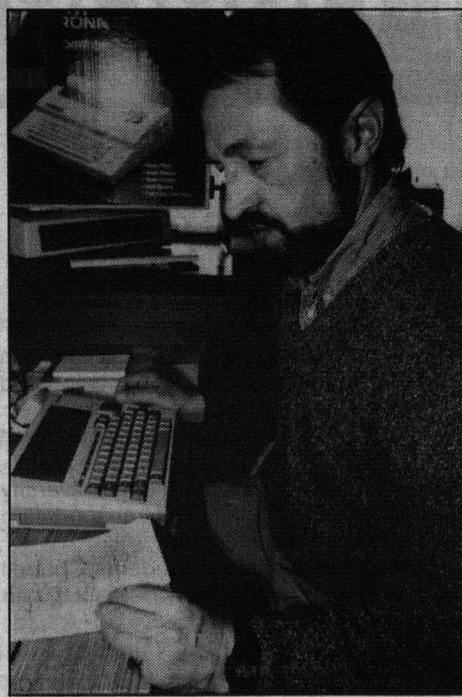
The Saskatchewan-born Wah has been writing poetry for more than 25 years. He's published 12 books during that time, none of which are excessively popular outside of literary circles. "My writing is not particularly pleasant to read," Wah admits. But Wah has chosen to leave pleasantries to others while he pursues his own interest in language and expression. Wah is attracted to the problematic, the difficulties of doing the art. These, he feels need to be shared with the reader: "It should be as difficult for the reader to read the poem as it was for the writer to write it."

His interest in jazz led Wah to take up the trumpet during high school, and when he enrolled at UBC after graduation, it was with the intention of studying music. Dissatisfaction with this endeavour eventually led him to change his program to English with the interest in writing initiated through attending a friend's poetry class.

"I think I turned to writing poetry almost out of frustration at writing music because it was so slow — structurally... and then to implement it was just as slow."

Wah realized quickly that he could use the same stance to write poetry as he had used to play jazz. He was interested in the unpredictability inherent in the music and sought to transfer this quality to the language of his poetry.

"What a jazz musician does is take a



Colin Northcott

U of A Writer-in-Residence Fred Wah will read from his works on campus on March 30th in Humanities Centre L3.

proposition, a series of chords, a melody, a rhythm and works within that while also working against it, to expand and enlarge it."

Wah's graduate studies in linguistics and literature at the Universities of New Mexico in Albuquerque and New York State at Buffalo assisted him in this pursuit of expansion. Readers with a knowledge of morphology and phonetics will understandably have a better appreciation of what Wah is doing in his work.

Though he admits he writes primarily for himself, Wah emphasizes the importance of community in writing. As is most art, writing is done in solitude but Wah sees it as not so much a solitary activity but rather one that engages others in a dialogue about the way we live.

"I think it's really serious stuff, that writing addresses the world, how one lives in the world, not how writing can put \$80,000 in your bank account. Using language, for me, is a way of discovering how to live."

As the current Writer-in-Residence at the U of A, Wah's primary activity is working on his own writing. Another aspect of his position though, involves assisting other writers who submit their work for him to critique. If possible, Wah sets up a meeting with the writer and

discusses the work in person. He prefers this personal discussion to mailing out a written response though he has done both.

Wah says he "loves teaching writing because it usually engages me with my own writing. The most prolific times I've had are when I've been teaching good students." He was the founding co-ordinator for the writing program at David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C. and has taught English, creative writing, journalism and publishing at various times during his career.

Though Wah does love teaching others to write, he doesn't think that aspiring writers should necessarily seek out the nearest creative writing class.

"Creative writing workshops can be a help or a hindrance to a young writer. Sometimes they can be somewhat overwhelming. A good workshop at the right time can be invaluable to a writer. Having the occasion to talk about writing is something that education can offer. I don't think you have to study writing to be a writer; I think you have to study to be a writer — anything!

"I think the whole notion of studying, reading, investigation, research, goes hand in hand with writing, but I don't think you necessarily have to study writing."

Music at the Heart of Thinking is Wah's most recent work and is notably different from work he's published in the past. It's a collection of 69 thems in which he is responding to a number of other writer's works as well as exploring the aesthetics of his own writing. This is Wah's approach to literary criticism, refusing to be bound by any precedent that has gone before. He is

less providing a critique here than he is exploring the relationship between himself, his feelings and the art he's examining. The project came out of his being asked to write "something on notation," the condition being that whatever he wrote would be printed, sans editing. It is doubtful that anyone reading *Music at the Heart of Thinking* seriously would put it away after one or two reads. It's very difficult but beckons you back, especially if you set it down in frustration.

Wah's current work is something he refers to as a biotext. He says the writing will be much clearer in this, partly because he's tired of the criticism of his past work but also because it's another kind of writing he does. The content will be biographical, though he will adopt his own form of what is biographical.

"As a writer I have a choice of focusing on the form and manipulating the biographical content to fit the form or I can use a kind of writing that will allow me to investigate the form of the biography."

As is his habit, Wah will "clear the deck of form" and create his own. He will continue to push, to ride as close to the edge as possible because it's the only way he can keep moving through the problems that present themselves in the writing. Fred Wah is not interested in repeating himself. Instead, he works always toward uncovering the as yet uncovered.

"One of the big problems for writers is that you find a successful voice or successful form and keep writing that year after year after year. I worry about that, about settling, about being too happy, too satisfied with what's going on."

Healey's Dinwoodie gig a winner

Jeff Healey Band
Dinwoodie Lounge
Saturday, February 25

review by Kevin Law

Few guitarists in the short history of rock have been able to make the instrument sing with an apparent voice of its own.

Only a few can really be categorized in that narrow field of players where man and instrument seem to become one, where the instrument itself, as played by musician, can create a soaring rush of emotion in the listener. Most music lovers have their favourite, and some, such as Santana, Hendrix, Clapton etc., are universal.

Such lofty considerations may sound pretentious, but they are necessary when evaluating guitarist extraordinaire Jeff Healey. Saturday's gig at Dinwoodie proved that Healey's hype is well warranted. His unorthodox method of fret-board execution, probably unmatched since the birth of Southern Delta blues, is the primary reason for comparison to the aforementioned guitar players. By placing the guitar on his lap, Healey has obtained the distinct advantage of five finger action on the frets (the principle addition being the thumb), leading to a wider range in his

use of vibrato and high tones.

Add to Healey's form and style a breathtaking amalgamation of some of the above noted members of the guitar "hall of fame," and you get an exciting contemporary guitar stylist who can knock your socks off with little apparent effort.

For a man said to have over 10,000 records, Healey's incorporation of such influences could be seen, heard, and felt as the tunes he played moved easily between punchy rock and roll, heartfelt blues, and improvisational jazz. Aside from the considerable respect Healey receives for his enormous talent, he also commands a viable stage presence by putting the audience at ease with a relaxed attitude.

Jeff Healey may be the guitar hero star of the hour, but the contributions of his other two colleagues cannot be overlooked. That such an enormous and exciting sound can be produced from a three piece combo is a tribute to the talents of drummer Tom Stephan and bassist Joe Rockman. It is equally exciting to watch a band so well rehearsed that with a flick of his wrist, Healey can command song tempo and execution like some concert maestro of rock.

All the positives combined, the Jeff Healey band truly provided an evening full of inspiration.



Ron Sears

Blind guitarist Jeff Healey at Dinwoodie last Saturday: The young Canadian is still finding his own voice, but the future looks bright.

The smooth harmony-fed country pop of opening act Jeffrey Hatcher and The Big Beat managed to keep the waiting audience happy in the interim. The band was tightly knit, giving substance to their upbeat, uncluttered sound that wasn't burdened with heavy, contemplative lyrics

Plaintive, simple vocals seemed to suit their infectious style. This Winnipeg band promoting their first album have the talent to make commercial radio's play list if they can come up with a couple of hits. Time will tell if we will hear more from Jeffrey Hatcher.