
Sounding a Canadian Icon: An Interview with bill bissett

Maidie Hilmo

A pioneer of sound, performance, and concrete poetry, internationally renowned Canadian poet bill bissett remains at the cutting edge of the evolving process of what poetry is in this digital age. His powerful, musical voice, often accompanied by the use of his magical rattle, enlivens his dramatic performances and energizes his audiences, who become part of every unique experience. Sound has been an important element of his poetry since the late 1960s. Deconstructing words into their component parts and sounds releases new and inherent meanings in his poems. Even on the printed page, he has developed his own unique phonetic

spelling that encourages readers to slow down and become part of the performance by voicing the words and sounds. Often the repetition of letters and syllables forms a visual pattern on the page engaging the eye in a complementary aesthetic experience. Since he is also an artist whose work has been shown at numerous venues across Canada, his published works often include accomplished line drawings. Philosophical and socially conscious in his push toward a more egalitarian society for everyone, bissett brings to all his creative endeavours a deep compassion for all living beings.

A list of his printed poems in books and journals alone fills several pages, and there are almost as many recordings of his performances in various old and new media. His latest publication, *th book* (Talonbooks, 2016), is mentioned in the following interview. His recent awards include the Pandora's Collective Distinctive Body of Work Award (2016), the prestigious Sheri-D Wilson Golden Beret Award (2014), and the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award (2007). In 2008, he received an honorary doctorate from Thompson Rivers University in recognition of his contributions to Canadian literature.

bissett's influence on Canadian literary, artistic, and musical culture is incalculable. He founded blewointment press in 1962, which first published early works by many of the literary figures who subsequently gained major prominence. He was also the lyricist and vocalist of the Luddites, an alternative rock band. He continues to help run the Secret Handshake Gallery in Toronto, which helps people with schizophrenia and also serves as a venue for readings by new poets and artists. He is a figure of national importance whose schedule of poetry readings across the country is as busy now as ever. Frequently a poet-in-residence, he has inspired many new generations of poets.

I previously interviewed bissett in 1986 and published that interview in *Essays in Canadian Writing*. Speaking together again thirty years later in Victoria, we tried a new approach. I asked him questions and he replied orally while simultaneously writing the answers on his iPad, using his own phonetic spelling. Then, after he left Victoria, we finished the interview by email. The result is that his answers are not only accurately recorded but also that the reader will likely experience bill's rhythms and thought processes directly while reading aloud.

Maidie Hilmo (MH): Where does your poetry come from? When you wrote the poems you contributed to the collection *For Kelly, with Love: Poems on the Abstracts of Carle Hessay*, I noticed that you responded immediately to the abstract paintings, and the words just flowed right out of you.

bill bissett (bb): i dont know wher th poetree cums from
that time with yu i feel n think th pomes came as much from me being ther with yu th beautiful littul hous n yr opnness 2 th idea that i wud feel his paintings 2 write abt them 4 me it was as much yr vibe n th situaysyun sumhow magikalee channelling n reseeving th empathee that th pomes wer cumming 2 me i felt i was writing th pomes with th paintings n with yu it was a veree speshul n prmitting specifik time thank yu agen 4 that

MH: Can you expand more generally on the genesis of your poetry?

bb: poetree cums 4 me from desire 2 xperiens th takilitee uv language 2 represent or say or not represent or not say n accenshuate th desire 4 form cumming in2 being fluid n

fleeting

lyrik poetree is evreething in
langwage distild 2 a few images
that make us think or feel th
mysteree n ambiguitee uv evree
thing n or idea
th touch uv th stroke th word or
lettr in th image th breth in th
image in th word

i think lyrik poetree is a neurologikul
propensitee

MH: Since you first began experimenting
with poetry, sounds, and images, I imagine
you were aware of being in the forefront
of new movements and styles of writing.
Which movements are you aware of
pioneering or being part of (e.g., sound
poetry and concrete poetry)?

bb: i was alwayze aware
i was in a moovment uv poets in
england spain france germany poland japan
brazil manee
countrees th konkreet poetree moovments
pioneering with manee
othr peopul n it all being
connekting with
sound poetree ivo vroom henri chopin bob
cobbing paula claire
bpNichol clive fencott sew manee
peopul bernard heidsick jackson mclow bob
cobbing henri chopin
had bin in2 it b4 bpNichol n me got
in2 it
we didnt kno abt our predecesors
n wer xplooring evreething we cud
challenging th stabilitee uv a lettr
say a trope dekonstrukting evree
thing we cud 4 a nu realitee
n we got 2 intl sound poetree
festivals
it was thrilling 2 meet them

sound poetree is first love with me as is
breking disrupting convensyunal meenings

n stances n tropes n stock
phrases

MH: Since your poetry is written out
phonetically, the reader almost has to sound
it out as well, making the reader also a
performer. Are you aware of that?

bb: i am aware uv th reedr potenshulee
sounding out words n i hope they
dew its all writtn 4 that

MH: Does it matter if what they derive from
a work is different from what you initially
conceived?

bb: it dusint matttr if th reedr derives
sumthing diffrent thn how i xperiens
th pome

MH: Is it just a matter of play, allowing
the reader/viewer to attach a meaning or
feeling?

bb: i like what yu say abt
play th process is mor like that
in that way art mirrors th prson
looking at it in part

MH: When you compose your poetry, do
you hear it in your head and think of its
possibilities for performance?

bb: i dew heer th pomes as i write
them n how they sound is sew
important 2 me

MH: How closely do you stick to the written
words and sounds when you perform your
poetry, or do you allow for variations?

bb: maidie whn yu describe th *improv*
variaysyuns in my reeding most def
th sound pomes chanting parts
uv song is xacktlee what i dew
unless ium in a band n thn i stik
2 th arrangements

MH: Has being in a band affected your life and work?

bb: being in luddites th alternativ rock band was wun uv th most wundrful experiences uv my life lerning n unlerning sew much

MH: Do you change and build on some poems after receiving feedback?

bb: n no i dont reelee change things up anee bcoz uv feedback i dont think sew not that ium aware uv i think its th othr prsons stuff if they dont get it n thats ok

MH: In breaking down language into its phonetic sounds, are you constantly discovering new meanings in letters and words that allow for surprising discoveries?

bb: deekonstrukting grammar n mor convensyunal meenings xploring mor phonetik spelling n sounds uv words sylabuls spelling brings abt othr n sumtimes nu paradigms n slowing th reeding xperiens 2 launch othr ideas not sout out or thot uv in mor convenshunul arrangements uv lettrs n words interrogating xisting meenings 2 opn thos up 2 nu undrstandings nu qwestyuns nu deepning awareness if sumthing unxpektid happns i go with it hopefulee wantid n nu diskovereez in arrangments uv lettrs n words clustrs bound n unbound in manee realms uv consciousness ium mor uv a lettralist thn a literalist tho ium qwite literal abt human rites n egalitarian societeez as th goal uv living xposing hierarkees as negativ n dangerous n healthee environments ar also a first caws pursuit

MH: I've noticed that you precede your poetry readings with a kind of ritual sound and dance using your rattle. Is it to affect the audience in some way?

bb: latelee i start th reedings diffrentlee thn i usd 2

now i start with short pomes narrativ with a point n a short sound pome n thn longr socio politikul pomes n cum 2 a longr sound pome n mor shortr politikul n environmental n prsonal pomes n thn sumtimes close with a chant song wheras i use 2 opn with a chant song its a diffrent kind uv approach n brings peopul in in a diffrent mor immediate way n ium sure itul change agen 2 sumthing els that seems mor with th immediate vibe bringing th pomes in with th peopul

MH: Was the rattle given to you?

bb: ths rattul i play with now n 4 sum time was givn 2 me by veree dere frends gerald n arlene lampert n they came upon it in th amazon

previouslee iuv had rattuls wch i hand paintid myself ths wun i seem 2 b not painting

MH: When did you start doing that?

bb: i gess i startid chanting with a rattul in reedings in th mid seventeez chanting can b sew helpful in releesing cognitiv bloks as all writing n painting can b releesing th stroke th image th shape th line th sound th manee tastes n levlv uv being its an amaying journee 2 b on n ium veree gratefulee 2 b on it

MH: Has computer technology opened up new creative possibilities for you?

bb: i preferrd quark i cud put lettrs on top uv othr lettrs not xaktlee like a typwritr but i cud ther wer devices availabul 2 dew a lot uv things chek narrativ enigma now i use word see *th book* 4 what i can dew with that sew far with work arounds i dont want 2 get in2 designism iuv alwayze typd my work

espeshulee in ths genre sumtimes
tho traveling i write stuff on papr n
writing spiritual n or metaphysical
pomes i tend 2 write them by hand
howevr teknolojee is wundrful 4 me

MH: Are you simultaneously also going
back to the origins of writing and images?

bb: n with lettrs they wer all originalee
piktographik yu can see that transisyun
with chinees writing th image in th lettr n
th lettr in th image

MH: How do you match up your poems and
your line drawings for publication?

bb: how th drawings ocur with th pomes
is a mysterious process its nevr
overtlee mimetik or illustrativ i dont
reelee know how it happns xsept
ium looking 4 th best drawings as
possibil 4 th space 2 not ovr
ride th pome or evn accent but b
th best i can find 4 that space
almost similar 2 moovee soundtracks
on its own yet sumhow enhansing
th pome like keeping companee
with th pome

MH: What role does humour play in your
writing, art, and life?

bb: a big role fr sure all th msplad
intensyunaliteez mr n ms undrstandings
competing desire alliance that turn out 2 b
meaningless th banana peel 2
slip on is evrewher we dont know wher we
cum from or wher we ar
going n our fluid identiteez ar mor multi
fasitid thn we like sumtimes
2 admit sew 4 these purposes n thos we
such n sew our leedrs nd our own
absurd n delisyus n dangrous n self limiting
ofn murmurs n choices
sew with writing poetree i like 2 prsue abt 7
approaches 2 poetree lyrik

romantic politikul his her storikal
metaphysical sound poetree konkreet vizual
poetree spiritual poetree naytur poetree 4
me thees multi approaches
work 4 sum wun els it mite not n thats ok
its onlee what ium dewing n
thats possibulee why ium mor amenabul 2
multi approach in living i
have taut in th mental health industree n
now enjoy being a volunteeer
n undrstanding on a dailee basis that is nevr
wun way uv dewing
things ther is mor thn wun banana peel 2
slip on in fact ther ar
a multitude uv availabul peels redee 4 us at
anee millisecond n all
thees send ups make humour out uv almost
all our intensyuns
almost all our egos

MH: Does humour always involve slipping
on a banana peel, metaphorically, revealing
our discomfitures or those of others, or can
it involve just unexpected positions?

bb: yes uv kours n various posishyuns
leonard cohens great album n all
our own lives

MH: Could you tell us about the Secret
Handshake Art Gallery in Toronto—what led
to its inception and what is its purpose? Is it a
multimedia art gallery and gathering place?

bb: th secret handshake peer support
network for peopul with schizophrenia
was creatid n foundid by jordan stone
legalee incorporated as a charitabul n not
for profit in 2006
i am th treasurer
n th signing prson n dew othr
work as well as galleree sitting
we ar all volunteers we ar a team
i love it n
trying 2 balans th volunteer work
with
time 4 my own work is a reel big

challeng sumtimes tho oft n its
organikalee eezee reelee always
dew whats in front uv us 2 dew
yes

most uv our membrs ar artists
paintrs musicyans writrs n at
our gala poetree reedings sum
writrs from othr clustrs or pop
ulaysyuns reed as well n we pay
sumhow sumtimes evreewun who
reeds n who shows in th galleree
we ar in our second clubhous now
its sew wundrful n amayzin

th work iuv bin dewing with th secret
handshake has helpd me grow intrakt n
appreiate n build n love
as duz happn with evreewun dewing
sumthing important 2 them they beleev in

MH: In your beautiful long poem about the
passing of your daughter published in *th
book*, did your daughter's speaking to you
in your mind help you to continue on your
earthly journey?

bb: yes a strongr sens uv we ar all
part uv each othr n th separatsyuns
hurt mor

MH: Is memory a stronger force than before?

bb: me mor ee each brain bunduling
evreething up it can whil it can
changing heddings constantee
n adding nu wuns n cross cata
loging th tiny librarians in our heds
filing n sorting all th time

MH: Do moments when you are aware of
the transitory nature of beauty help redeem
all the suffering? I am thinking of your
poem "lake on the mountain" in *th book*.

bb: yes lake on th mountain tells that storee
uv how we look 4 feeling

n if wer luckee we find it as part
uv our heeling

MH: As time has passed, I sense that your
Weltanschauung has deepened since you
were younger. What led to that change?

bb: abt th world view thing deepning
n changing sins i was youngr
specifikalee th world view deepning
i think thru disapointment wch
wunt dew that on its own its mor
th loss iuv xperiensd that in no
way i wantid 2 or see as redeem
ing a deepning sens uv how presyus
each moment is n how limitid our
specees is n th sumtimes wry hope
that we can reelee evolw
i live in hope but it is amendid
by loss n looking at human
behavyur worldwide thats nothing
nu i know n i try 2 beleev in mor
positiv possibiliteez evn with th
selfish behavyurs justified that we
can get bettr adapt n reset n readapt
sew manee uv our systems ar archaik
n antiquatid n block us as we can
block ourselvs
i think i always wrote abt ths
but diffrentlee n ther was always
loss

its a diffrent tone now at leest
ths summrs pomes
thanks 4 notising th changing
yu probablee see it bettr thn
me

ium still optimistik n loving
n hopeful
politikul changes 4 th bettr i
still beleev in
thanks sew much 4 notising all
thees things maidie

MH: Have you always lived existentially
or is that something you've learned to do
through experience and suffering?

bb: yes i always have n xperiens helps
i beleev we can create our own essences that
xistens cums first n with informd choices
we can help our nayturs find theyr wayze
in2 being we continualee ar dewing that in
sew manee wayze as we hopefulee keep
on wun moment n molecule at a time
making safe places 2 b

MH: Do you think people are divided
among themselves and within themselves?
Would more exposure to the arts open their
minds to more expanded ways of seeing?

bb: yes i remembr allan blooms great
book “the closing of the amerikan
mind” with refers 2 yr qwestyun
mor egalitarian edukaysyun n free
universitee edukaysyun wud totalee
help all our minds from closing

MH: Your poetry and art and music seem
holistic in approach. Is that something that
can be taught?

bb: yes definitlee tho agen i wud
suggest that evreething is in
parts n peesus not reelee wholistik
wholistik teeching can b confusing
as well as helpful bcoz th same
mind or brain needs 2 xperiens
contradiktoree ideas 2 bcum reelee
flexibul
wholistik living is accepting contradiktoree
ideaz
in ourselves n in life
without having to feel wun is rite n one is
wrong

MH: I think we are using holistic differently.
But we seem to be coming to the same place
by different routes.

bb: yes def n we share similar distopik views
uv th neer futur

MH: Maybe that’s why we both laugh so

much. The absurdity of it all becomes
funny. Even with all we don’t know, you are
still quite happy.

bb: yes def

MH: In what direction do you see your
poetry and art going now?

bb: in th direcksyun they want 2 n i try n follo

WORKS CITED

- bissett, bill. *th book*. Talonbooks, 2016.
Hilmo, Maidie. “Interview with bill
bissett.” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 32,
1986, pp. 134-46.
Hilmo, Maidie, ed. *For Kelly, with Love: Poems on
the Abstracts of Carle Hessay*. Treeline, 2014.