

Keith "Red" Mitchell

Selected Poems 1968 - 1992

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Foreword

Red's words and music gave poetry to my life and to all of those who knew him personally or in performance. There was little difference in his persona on-or-off stage. He was always Red, engaged and genuine. He loved life and cared about the future of the planet. There was hardly a subject he hadn't touched upon, in a poem or a song. He remains a guiding spirit in my every day. For example, I think about the lines Red wrote to Benny Carter's tune, *Souvenir*, when he was trying to come to terms with Zoot Sims' death:

It's time to live
Not leave
It's time to give
Not grieve
So don't despair
Come share,
My souvenir

The poems included in this book were mostly written without music in mind. We included two of his alternate lyrics to standard tunes: *Funny that Way*, reflecting on his ability to laugh at himself; and *You Are* that he always dedicated to his playing and composing musician friends. Both were written at low moments in his own life. "Composer, compose thyself" was a repeated theme throughout his career.

The beautiful lyric he wrote to a tune by Swedish composer, Nils Lindberg, is included as the last poem. When he left the US for Sweden in 1968, he promised himself that he would learn to verbalize his feelings. Words first or music first varied from tune to tune. Some songs got lyrics twenty-five years later. The songbook will be published in Fall 1999. In music, Red always listened to the composers intentions and with his own lyrics and his poetry, it's very clear; he was a man of principle, integrity and love for humanity. An accomplished artist in search of truth and beauty, his works are the souvenirs he wanted so much for us to share.

I owe thanks to my dear friends, R.S. and Janet Baker, for the final editing of this volume. Any acknowledgments would be incomplete without an expression of thanks to the many friends of Red's and mine who have encouraged me to continue working on Red's many uncompleted projects. Any proceeds from this volume will remain a part of the Red Mitchell Memorial Fund.

--Diane Mitchell

SEEING RED HEARING RED

To Americans who know of Red Mitchell, bassist extraordinaire, only by hearsay, to learn he was also a poet may come as a surprise. Less so, perhaps, to those who know his playing from some portion of his vast number of recorded performances, especially if they are aware of Red's lyrics to three-fourths of his 122 compositions. And the fact of Red's poetry may still be news of a sort (a confirmation of a strong possibility) to those lucky to have engaged him in private conversation, noting the mirror relationship between his speaking and playing styles.

For Swedes, their awareness of the linkage between Mitchell's verbal and musical performance talents started, probably, in 1954 when he toured there with Billie Holiday and Red Norvo, and culminated with recognition by the Swedish Grammy Award committee in 1991. In part, their citation reads:

Firmly rooted in the immortal mainstream of jazz, having enriched Sweden's musical life for 23 years, on his new record he performs as pianist, master bass player and vocal artist; also as the author of song lyrics that are both fierce and full of love. Here is a virile poetry, an almost burlesque humor and a playfulness that is rich in both intelligence and heart.

Red's bass playing is instantly recognizable; fluid but exact phrasing, the precision and warmth of his time, his adroit employment of dynamics, his cleverly artful manipulation of tiny shifts in tone and timbre are at once the perfect expression of the man's inmost self and his intense linkage with the other players on the stand and the individuals, present or imagined, who make up his audience. He joyfully/dutifully insists on meeting the demands of expression and communication and unifying them.

As you can see, Red was a "both/and" type of guy--reflecting that in his playing, his speech and his verse. So who was this guy and how did he get that way?*

Keith Moore "Red" Mitchell was born in New York City September 20, 1927. Four years later he moved to a planned development, Radburn, a suburb of Paterson, N.J. There he was raised by his father (himself a "both/and" type of guy), William Douglas Mitchell, a meticulous electrical engineer who was an executive for AT&T but a lifelong devotee of opera and classical music who designed and built a pipe organ in his home, and his mother, Grace J. Mitchell, an ardent lover of nature but also a committed reader and writer of poetry. From a slim volume of her verse the following is reprinted, showing how early Red was Red:

REBELLIOUS REDHEAD
(Age 4)

Keith was a problem, Keith was a worry
Keith had been mad and sad and bad,
Keith *would* not mind, and Keith *could* not hurry
Keith did not care about fuss or flurry,
Keith was impossible--and he was glad!

White and sad he stood firm to defy
Parents lined up like a firing squad
His freckles glimmered like stars in the sky.
"I know I've been bad--a little--I try;
Would-you-all-please-remember-that-
I'm-not-God!"

As the saying goes, the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree. (Make that apples; Red's younger brother Gordon "Whitey" also became a bass player of considerable repute and then made a successful career as a comedy writer.) Red started with the ambition to be an inventor, went to Cornell on scholarship in electrical engineering (until drafted) but also kept studying piano and added alto and clarinet before switching to bass, which launched him swiftly on the path to fame, playing and recording with a massive number of top-rank jazz players in a wide variety of styles, then an extended period as principal bassist in the MGM studios before political disgust of several sorts and, above all, a determination to return to playing only jazz led him off to a 24-year stay in Sweden, returning to the U.S to live in Oregon (a kind of Sweden) for 10 months before his death on November 8, 1992, leaving behind the sheaf of poems that encapsulate the long arc of his life in its intensity and fullness. Nature or nurture? (Consider this: Red had two stepsons, Erik and Martin Afzelius--the first an electrical engineer who heads an interactive media firm in Sweden, with a #2 career as a dj, the younger brother beginning to make a name as a glass artist in Oregon. Raised apart, a natural son, Allan Zolnekoff, is an electric company employee and a city councilman in Southern California.)

That precious sheaf of poems consisted of a loose stack of handwritten manuscripts, leaving a number of questions for eventual editors. Of the 60 poems included in this volume, 24 were untitled. Why? Did they represent early drafts, to be titled only upon completion? Or was it deliberate? With a mind as sly but honest as Red's, it is also possible that in some?/many?/all? cases such omission was meant to

lead the reader directly into the poem sans preconceptions induced by a title. Our decision was to use the first lines as titles by repeating them in square brackets immediately above the poem. Then we noticed inconsistencies in punctuation and oddities in spacing between words. After repeated readings, we tumbled to what we assume was Red's intent: The wider spacings indicate the phrasing a singer or soloist would use to clarify the emphasis on certain words; his poems are addressed to the inner voice he hopes the reader hears as she/he peers at the lines, eyeballs used as hearing aids. That idea helped solve the punctuation problems, too. A few lapses of grammar and usage were silently corrected, along the way, leaving us (my wife Janet and myself) the toughie--setting the poems in some coherent order, since Red's stack seemed random.

It was tempting to cluster the poems topically--Jazz (with some mini-portraits of its players), Purely Personal, Public Policy, Philosophical Probing, etc. Another possibility was one long crescendo of tone, ranging from bemused unabashed sentimentality up to *fortissimo* outrage and ecstasy. But, after close re-reading of the poems and prolonged discussion, we finally settled on something close to the random order of the stack as found. Here's why: He had a drive to combine--nearly simultaneously--maximum attention to nit-grit existentialist perception of transient detail and maximum drive toward the Ideal and Eternal, aiming always to link those extremes. That's how he lived, on any given day being touched by and/or touching upon several of the topics, several points along the crescendo line, both ends of the maxima of precise mind and noble heart. Virgoan *kvetching* becomes a divine anger; through seeing red he becomes Seeing Red, aroused by a detected violation of our best personal and collective possibilities. This is matched by an equally intense celebration of the joys inherent in those possibilities, if and when realized.

Yes, Red Mitchell used both music and poetry as self-expression, but they become also tribal expression, the voice--or a voice--of our human tribe.

--R.S. Baker 5/15/99

*For a fuller portrait see, "The Return of Red Mitchell", a 23-page essay superbly crafted by the eminent jazz critic Gene Lees. It can be found in his *Cats of Any Color: Jazz Black and White*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.

Contents

Jazz	1
[So the world drives us nuts]	1
Rest ...	1
AAA	2
[The soul of a true classic bass part]	2
[The will to live in harmony]	3
Prayer	3
[How do you deal]	4
Sound & Soul	4
Profundity's My Racket	5
Fill King	5
[What makes you think that we're]	6
[They don't have to choose between]	6
To George Duvivier	6
[Managua Nicaragua following Cuba]	7
Mulligan	7
[I just cannot give her up]	8
A Sad Moment of Truth	8
[The greatest jazz-player--who is he?]	8
To a Jealous Person	9
[So Nixon is a millionaire]	9
[I just went in to stand]	10
[I'm betting my soul]	10
Blossom Dearie	10
Telephone Message	11
[To rhyme with good time]	11
Morningtime	12
[Don't be surprised if some]	12
[I miss Doctor King every day]	12
[The least I can do]	12
To You, CIA--You Screw Me My Way	13
Why?	13
[Computers and the Bible]	14
Marriage	14
[As you live and as you learn and]	14

Business	15
[Life is full of faults]	15
S.D.I. (Cosmic Economy)	15
It Takes Mistakes	16
Unity	16
[Sometimes the Years Protect Us]	17
Nobody's Perfect	17
For Mingus	17
Hatred:	17
Leaders	18
New York Through the Ears	18
[My only home is my suitcase]	18
Poles Apart	19
Ism Ism	19
Spies	19
[I'm roiling around]	20
[There's a needed word]	20
You Are	20
Aunt Mary's Gifts	21
Olfactory Satisfaction Too	21
Funny That Way	22
[Who you are]	22
Last Poem-October 1992	23
Music	23
As You Are	24

Jazz

Something less than perfect will do
But it must be perfectly you.

[So the world drives us nuts]

So the world drives us nuts
With its ifs ands and buts
But with God-given guts we can show it
We can live on the edge
Of the line and not hedge
And our balance might make us a poet

Rest ...

It can't be all bad and it
Might be quite lovely --
The rest we will get when we're dead
Just think of the millions of
Times that we won't
Have to wake up and get out of bed

AAA

Another rednose bites the dust
Another lifetime friend
These aren't the jokes
Coke causes strokes

With bleeding brains and heart attacks
And who knows maybe cancer
How many more
Will lose this war
Before we find the answer?

I guess I know what makes us go
The search for inner peace
Anesthetize
Desensitize
And warring feelings cease

[The soul of a true classic bass part]

The soul of a true classic bass part
As written by Bach or by Mozart
Is first that each note is the best
And then comes this ponderous rest ...

[The will to live in harmony]

The will to live in harmony
Is instinct number one
And though it's dumb
To just get numb
That's why it's so much fun

The irony is that our souls
Are really what we freeze
The juice that binds
Our glands and minds
Gets forced out in the squeeze

The man just winks. He'll favor me
It's doublesided knavery
A constant con
Who puts who on?
A modern form of slavery

Prayer

As a living being I submit myself
Totally and gratefully to the laws
Of nature in the deep yearning hope
I can learn to know and obey them
As fully as possible. Amen.

[How do you deal]

How do you deal
With what you feel?
How's your sense of phrasing
What is real?
You may be wrong
(But) you'll get along
(You) Won't go crazy if you
Write a song.

I pick my nose
(And) I pick my skin
Red rump like a monkey kinda
Red and thin
I scratch my head & pull on my beard
Ideas come, but some are kinda weird

Sound & Soul

It isn't really rigid metronomic time
that counts
It's sound and soul, communication,
love, support and bounce.

Profundity's My Racket

Every species has its racket
Porcupines have got their quills
Every penguin has its jacket
Even skunks have got their skills

Cats are kind of independent
Eating mice but feeding lice
Rats are somewhat more dependent
When they're tame they're really nice

Dogs chose us in ancient days
Giving love for room and board
Helping out in many ways
Shepherding the human horde

And chameleons change colors
Just as leaves and people do
We've got brains and pains and crullers
And some music, me and you

As a writer and a bassist
I can pick my work and hack it
And my puns may be the basest
But profundity's my racket

Fill King

He's as wise as any wizard
He can slither like a lizard
And his fills describe some really pretty holes

He knows every song that's written
When you hear him you'll be smitten
By a love that comes from only Jimmy Rowles

[What makes you think that we're]

What makes you think that we're
Playing your game
Try'n' to compete with each other?
What would you do if we
All played the same
Go out and beat up your brother?

[They don't have to choose between]

They don't have to choose between
basses and celli
With talented people like
John Giannelli
Who plays all the feelings from
righteous to smelly
And also is one of my
favorite felli

To George Duvivier

Good to hear you, George I dig your
Sound and you're my brother figure
All that news 'n' rosin too 'n'
We sure love what this group's doin'

[Managua Nicaragua following Cuba]

Managua Nicaragua following Cuba
Has really kicked the mafia out
It's costing millions
But they're into billions
And that's what the war is about

They won't have to deport me
I live in Sweden
I moved about as far as Capone
And take my word
I will hardly be heard
As long as they leave me alone

Mulligan

That's Jeru,
Not Guru
That's a true
Walking stew

[I just cannot give her up]

I just cannot give her up
Although I know that she is gone
She's a part of me as long
As I'm alive her soul lives on

She personified perfection
In a very human way
Just to know that she was possible
Inspires me every day

I'm so lucky her life touched me
It's impossible to say
I'm just one of many people
That she reached and made OK

A Sad Moment of Truth

There's only
Turning back
A classic
Cul de sac

[The greatest jazz-player--who is he?]

The greatest jazz-player--who is he?
You might want to nominate Dizzy
He knows more notes than Greece has boats
But somehow he never plays busy

To a Jealous Person

All my life I've been lucky in friends
It's a blessing to me, not a hex
I could never forsake half of them
Just because they're the opposite sex

[So Nixon is a millionaire]

So Nixon is a millionaire
And Doctor King is dead
It's not so hard to understand
The split in every head

It really seems as though the good guys
Do appear to lose
What is it that we really want?
Whose methods do we use?

"The end is preexistent in
The means" as Martin said
So first let's conjure up a goal
Before we go ahead

Let's choose a way to get there
That we'll never have to quit
A way that's so coherent that
Our goal and it will fit.

If what we want's survival, then
Let's choose a route to peace
Where love of life will rule the roost
Not armies and police.

[I just went in to stand]

I just went in to stand
Not to sit
But then I had to turn
Sit and shit
As often seems to happen
To the lowly
The whole thing worked out well
But rather slowly
I wonder what the busy people do
I wonder how they find the time to screw
Now wouldn't it be funny if our business
And our unctions
Were only running interference
For our functions?

[I'm betting my soul]

I'm betting my soul
And I'm betting my body
That I will get by
Without learning karate

Blossom Dearie

Her whisper reveals
Much more than conceals
An overheard secret is Blossom
With absolute taste
Not one breath of waste
Tornado of truth playing 'possum.

Telephone Message

I left my country, I left my work
I left a very warm climate
But hardest of all, I left my friends
To change my whole life and to time it
So all that I do is arranged around
Who I am, and not the reverse
At night I create so of course I sleep late
(For me anything else is perverse)
So please call again, but don't forget when
You do the phone might be unplugged
The whole world and I will continue to try
To relate so that no one gets bugged

[To rhyme with good time]

To rhyme with good time
Is an instinct that I'm
Pretty sure every animal has
Cause dogs say bowwow
When cats say meow
And you know about sheep and their baas

The first things we say
Can be Mama or Papa
Or peepee or caca or such
And birds that say coo coo
Or cows that say moomoo
Aren't really so different as such

A rhyme's worth a dime
But a thought can't be bought
So to me there is nothing that's worse
Than no rhyming, no timing
No swinging, no singing
Meaningless thoughts free verse

Morningtime

There is something nice with the morningtime
For music and also for verse
The first soft feelings of flowing forward
The mind coming out of reverse.

[Don't be surprised if some]

Don't be surprised if some
Little old ladies
Act kind of aggressive and bold
Look in their eyes if they're
Up in their eighties
That could be how they got that old.

[I miss Doctor King every day]

I miss Doctor King every day
I listen for what he might say
I try to do things in his way
His love and his methods will stay

[The least I can do]

The least I can do is
My absolute best
I just hope that someone
Else does all the rest.

To You, CIA--You Screw Me My Way

Just to make your work less of a bore
So you might feel like less of a whore,
Now and then I'll write you guys a poem
You can read 'em out loud, get to know 'em

I know I'm not alone on the phone
But I'll be with you when you're alone
I'll be smuggling truth and I'll rig it
Through a hole in your soul, so you dig it.

Why?

Where do the tears come from and why?
Why is the soul soothed when we cry?
If the eyes are the windows of the soul
Is that why it's they who play the role?
Why are the tears so filled with salt?
How does that help relieve some fault?
If the salt's reduced in some psychic wound
Maybe that leads to feelings better tuned
How can the juices we produce
Each have a different special use?
If it's water that chemicals convert
How do they know where and when to squirt?
Answers that say the unfit die
Don't satisfy the question why?
Mother Nature can really drop my jaw
She can leave me in gulping gaping awe.
When I focus on really why why why
She's so beautiful she makes me cry.

[Computers and the Bible]

Computers and the Bible
May have the answers
But when the chips are down let us pray
Some faulty chip doesn't
Trigger a slip and just
Let the chips fall where they may

Bureaucratic balderdash
At every border
Is violating reason and rhyme
They'll find a way if you're
Willing to pay time is
Money and money is time.

Marriage

An almost irresistible force
The only one that leads to divorce.

[As you live and as you learn and]

As you live and as you learn and
As you notice more and more
You'll observe that many answers
Are "both/and," not "either/or".

Business

The word "business" can
Sometimes be almost clean
Whereas mostly it
Ranks with the most obscene.

[Life is full of faults]

Life is full of faults
And possibilities
Only death is perfect.

S.D.I. (Cosmic Economy)

This means permanent expansion
At a geometric rate
But the whole world's wealth will never,
Altogether, be that great . . .

It Takes Mistakes

A dear beloved genius, you have
always been, dear Thad
But now you've got yourself a job called
dear beloved Dad
A whopper, if I may say so
with which you're now entrusted
To help your son invent himself
so no one's chops get busted

There'll be mistakes
Thad's what it takes

Unity

The
One big No
is
One hell of a lot easier
than
One thousand Maybes.

[Sometimes the Years Protect Us]

Sometimes the years protect us
From some of the other years
Sometimes that nice protection
Just suddenly disappears.

Nobody's Perfect

Every fruit comes with a stem and
Has at least one pit
Pears might even have some freckles
And some partridge shit.

For Mingus

Thank you for listening to my older stronger brother
Who fought so many battles some for me
What he really fought for was for all of us
To understand
To communicate
To be free

Hatred:

A festering wound which,
unlicked,
can afflict
The hater far more than the hated
When you get through healing
this hole
in your soul
You'll only regret that you waited.

P.S.

Whether we're big
Or whether we're small
There's a little asshole
In us all.

Leaders

Now leaders are people
Who just cannot stand
The condition of things
As they find them
Who work and cajole
Just to move things around
Leaving different messes
Behind them

New York Through the Ears

The sound is of bustle
It's ruder than rustle
The mumbling of muscle
The humming of hustle.

[My only home is my suitcase]

My only home is my suitcase
All the hotels are the same
My oldest love is my old bass
Everything else is a game.

Poles Apart

There are many kinds of poles and
There are many Poles apart
There's survival Poles Together
Solidarity and heart.

Ism Ism

Every ism makes a schism
I'm for antiismism
(sometimes)

Spies

Thank God for spies
And counterspies
And moles and agents
In disguise
Some day we may not
Need those guys
When governments
Stop telling lies.

[I'm roiling around]

I'm roiling around
In the soil of my soul
I'm mulling over the mulch
You might even say
That I'm fucking with the muck
There's so much soil
And so much mulch and so much fucking muck
I've got to ask you please to say goodbye
And wish me luck

[There's a needed word]

There's a needed word
That I've never heard
It means "he or she,
As the case may be."

You Are

You are your greatest composition
The one folks hear
When they hear your name

You are your spirit's own physician
The one who heals yourself
As a daily game

You can't create yourself
That job's been done
You can compose yourself
It's kind of fun ...

You are the people you have turned to
And you are the one who does what you do
Your major work of art is you

Aunt Mary's Gifts

The smell of the oils
The focus on life
The laughter, the fun
The nature, the sun
Vacations with you
And your point of view
All these things, you see,
Will never leave me.

Love,

Keith

Olfactory Satisfaction Too

The fragrance of all our
confluent secretions
Lingers and lulls us to sleep
The essence of essences
Nature's completions
Perfume whose secret runs deep

Funny That Way

I do need a person I do need a stroke
I do need a poem I do need a joke
My words are absurd I'm a serious nerd
I'm funny that way

My nose isn't perfect my face is askew
My body says "Thank you and how do you do?"
And my good intentions may sound too intense
I'm funny that way

Mostly folks depend on jokes for light comedy
Don't complain about your pain take one look at me

I can't be a comic I can't be a fool
I'm born to a manner you can't learn in school
My gift is so real it's a basic appeal
I'm funny that way

[Who you are]

Who you are
Is what you do
When no one else
Is watching you.

Last Poem-October 1992

There's no left left
And the right is wrong
The center's for dissenters
And the shortages are long

The biggest cities' bigness
Is their biggest single problem
Like some laboratory rats
Jammed in a cage

And some churches hate
The condom someone's
Conned'em and their kingdom
It's a bleeped-up world
With rising seas of rage.

Music

OK, Every nation has its own
Traditions and its language,
And to take good care of them is really laudable;
And the language and traditions find
Their way into the music
With results that now and then are really audible

But the function of the music is
To get beneath our differences
Communicate directly, soul to soul.
It's the nearest thing to
Universal language we've developed
And its purpose is to make the whole world whole.

As You Are

You're part of nature
As you are
'Cause Nature made sure
Every star,
Every moon that sets in motion
Every ocean
Every stone
Would have a nature
All it's own;
And when you say you're
All alone
You're the blue note in a love song -
What a love song!
Am I wrong?
Aren't our lives just a part of our music -
The things we feel as real as a theme
Birds that screech
At the beach
And even each pain-filled heart
Play a part
In nature's perfect scheme.
As nature grows things,
So do we;
But nature knows things,
We can't see -
When the time comes for a change of heart,
There's a reason -
A change of season -
As nature sees you
Prune away the old,
Start something new and bold
You know she loves you
As you are