

Vincent priceless

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A year into his 10th decade on earth, Gloucester's poet laureate Vincent Ferrini is still a celestial talent - and his latest anthology proves it

Walking along East Main Street, past antique shops and the aroma of Smokin' Jim's Barbecue, toward the home of Gloucester's poet laureate, one can't help but wonder how the constant rumble of delivery trucks and the self-serve gas station next door with its neon Budweiser light could inspire such a prolific writer.

A rap at what seems to be a side door of the little house with tan siding (that practically sits on top of the Caledonia Place street sign) produces no answer. The poet's red Dodge Omni sits parked in the driveway. A call of "Mr. Ferrini?" yields nothing.

But after a few minutes, a diminutive man in a straw hat and dark sunglasses beckons from the back wooden gate to join him in the yard, where guests sit in plastic chairs with overgrown grass licking at their ankles as trucks rumble past and they likely enjoy one of the strangest, most inspiring conversations of a lifetime.

Vincint Ferrini, son of Italian immigrants, was born in Lynn 91 years ago from the day of this particular conversation. He then celebrated with quite a crowd at a birthday party in the home of a friend. Known as something of a lady's man, Ferrini was encircled by a group of women at his 90th birthday party held at the American Legion, legend has it, and took each one for a twirl on the dance floor.

This is just part of the man behind his new book, aptly named, "The Whole Song," an anthology gathered from poems from his first book about Lynn during the Great Depression to his most recent work.

It's an amazing commitment to the "art of poetry" for Ferrini to have worked patiently all these years and waited so long for major recognition, says Gloucester writer Peter Anastis.

Ferrini has published 30 books of poems, four collections of plays and an autobiography. The city councilors granted him this lifetime honor of poet laureate in 1998. But what exactly does a poet laureate do? The dictionary says it is a title given in Britain to a poet appointed to the Royal Household for life and having as his duty the celebrating of national or royal occasions in verse.

Alas, the laureateship is now largely titular, Webster's Dictionary notes. Ferrini will say his charge is simply to inspire, pass on sparks of creativity, give his life over to the page and sacrifice it for the enlightenment of others. He calls himself an "initiator of potentialities."

In relaying his life story, he begins by telling you he was a child of the Great Depression whose prolonged unemployment after high school led him to a wonderful discovery - his own mind. Right in the stacks of the Lynn Public Library.

"The public library becomes my step-home," he writes in his autobiography. "I meet the great dead, engaging them in long conversations. I read and write from dawn till midnight. My parents think I am going Kookoo, they yell at me, you are using your eyes too much and you will have trouble with them later on. But I am searching, I have to find out for myself."

The main question he dared to ask was how there could be such great poverty in America. To get to the bottom of it, he studied all the great "creative personalities," including Karl Marx, and discovered that America is not a problem-solving society, but one whose business is business.

"The disease of America is money," he says. "You need it, but it's a disease. When greed gets there, your life is taken over."

There he also fell in love with William Shakespeare. "I leap over stars, an acrobat fool delirious with his friendship," he wrote.

At the library, a young Ferrini learned far more than if his parents could have afforded to send him to college, he says, where he too would have been brainwashed, like the rest of this country, to learn how to make a fast buck.

"If I had gone to college," he says, "I would have been a professor and it would have killed me. I would have become part of the establishment and wouldn't think for myself."

Amidst the bookshelves, Ferrini's poetry ignited, despite his father's insistence that he was of the wrong social class to be a poet.

"I am also pregnant with the living Poem. It is in me. I am it," he wrote.

Better off Red

It was during this time that a workers' newspaper for labor piqued his interest in the Communist Party, where his political interests would rest for several years. He took his broadening mind and began working in one of Lynn's shoe factories, where he began to keenly capture the people and the atmosphere around him.

"I studied all these people in Lynn," he says, "and the condition they were in and I had kind of a photographic mind where I could describe them."

He knew then how the shoe factories should be run - by the people. But instead, they were packed up and moved South for cheaper labor, leaving a devastated Lynn behind. His first book "No Smoke" is about this time and his connection to the working man. The

hum of work equates a happiness that later becomes a graveyard of empty buildings - "Monumental tombstones accusing with broken eyes."

Later, while working for Lynn's General Electric he became "smitten" by the beauty of a fishing village to the north, and in 1948 he moved his wife and three children to Gloucester just after a snowstorm. He felt a connection, says Ferrini, partly due to the water found in his astrological chart. He is a Cancer with a Pisces moon. The sea is within him, say the poet.

"I know two things," says the man now, and that's "fishes and shoes."

When Ferrini speaks of the rotten establishment and of his own enlightenment, he gets excited, begins to speak in verse and sort of sings to you, lilting at the end of sentences and creating a driving momentum of words that almost sounds like the cadence of a black minister or even like he's softly rapping to you. There's no breath. No beginning and no end. Just a circle of ideas, that all seem to connect simply because of the way he speaks them, much like the rare recordings of an eager Jack Kerouac.

"I'm Cancer. I'm Pisces. I'm fish," says Ferrini, speaking in stark images.

Becoming a resident of Gloucester meant having to "sing" about it with his poetry, says Ferrini, who came to be known as the conscience of Gloucester. His constant writings and poems to local newspapers expressed anger over the dying fishing industry and an urgency about preserving the working class in the blue-collar community. Through the years, Ferrini has been there to remind people who they are and where they come from.

He has referred to the "police grip of wharfs," in reference to the fishermen's punishment by a government's rules and regulations. He is saddened to watch fishermen struggle to get by.

"It's a tough scene, see," he says, in his uncanny way of not moving his lips and sounding eerily like Dustin Hoffman.

He believes he is witnessing the beginning of another great depression, made worse by corporate greed. The future of his land, of Gloucester, rests in the hands of women, he says. He has written of "the hold of a widow's eye" guiding the men to harbor. The women have had to remain strong in the fishing village over the years, where tourists stroll the boardwalk to read the thousands of names of men who have died at sea. The town has pulled together before when times are tough, he says.

"It's a great town that way. You know what, the women are going to do it."

The enemy within

Though it has many coves, inlets and natural places to hide, Gloucester, at times, wasn't big enough for two major poets. The Harvard-educated Charles Olson, who called

Gloucester his home, was a great big man, who taunted the slight poet, Ferrini, who lived with his family next door to Olson in the Fairview Inn on Eastern Point Road.

"Physically a big man, Olson thought he should naturally tower over Ferrini in imaginative achievements as well," wrote Kenneth Warren and Fred Whitehead in the introduction to Ferrini's new book.

At that time, Ferrini ran a framing business from a small, unheated workshop. His independent craftsmanship afforded him the time to pause and release the words that burned within. The poet has lived on a small pension since he closed up shop in 1976.

The introduction's writers call the two poets' relationship "one of the most painful and perplexing friendships in American poetry," and say the two would struggle in life and death to inhabit the fishing village they both so loved. The two shared their creative ideas, which, though expressed differently, were often the same.

To the suggestion that there was competition between the two, Ferrini shakes his head salaciously and says, "Ooooh."

Ferrini's published work was about a poet's vision of the city as a poem, an idea Olson wrote about in his epic "Maixmus" poems, where he once took a shot at a magazine Ferrini was editing (see adjacent story).

"He butchers me," says Ferrini, looking back. "He cuts me to pieces. He had to kill me with words," which was their shared weapon of choice. "It was an attack. It wiped me out in words. I'm a feeling man."

Having to resort to his dictionary of mythology to decipher his rival's obscure references, Ferrini decided he was truly scorned.

"He crucified me and he resurrected me. He thinks he's that big to be able to do that, to kill and to resurrect. Even God has trouble doing that."

In response, Ferrini, who considered himself the heart to Olson's head, wrote a 30-page "love poem" to the fellow poet, who sometimes referred to himself as "Maximus" in his own writing. In the piece "In the Arriving," Ferrini speaks of a late-night walk and discussion between the two writers.

"How we argued in that night-rain/Thundering/Scratched/Lightning for our smokes/Heard the dead/Singing and rising/In the sap."

He speaks of Olson as "the full man" who is "round," "tall" and "many-dimensional" and calls him a "mantree" with "unforeseen tributaries."

It seems today that Ferrini clearly enjoyed the attention, even if it was rough-housing. Though he calls him a "strange duck" and jokingly calls him "minimus," Ferrini is the

first to admit he was terribly saddened by Olson's death in 1970. After that, Ferrini had trouble writing about Gloucester, he says.

And it took him nearly a decade after Olson's death to write "Know Fish," which has been called a record of the fishing industry and of all of Gloucester in the late 20th century.

"When his shadow has completely melted into the ocean of the ground and he was safely asleep and his eyes were no longer on my neck," he wrote of Olson, it was then Ferrini's turn.

He has since complained that finding publishers over the years has proven difficult. Since he felt Olson hurt his reputation as a serious poet, he is now touting "The Whole Song" as the book that will at last bring him the attention he deserves.

"This is what you missed out on because of Olson," he says. "Olson, Olson, Olson." He shakes his head at the thought of the man who stood 6-foot-8 and weighed 265 pounds. "He was big."

Ferrini, it seems, has never felt better.

"I'm a whole person," he says. "It takes guts, energy, intuition, belief in yourself. The center and the circumference are the same thing."

Moving with the earth

Living with his insides on the outside, his heart open to every new person and new experience, when the sunglasses come off, the curiosity shows in his small, squinty eyes. Ferrini says at a very young age, he realized one of his most basic needs was to have beauty in his life. The writing of poetry began as a second grader to a young girl.

"If you pay attention to the beauty inside, you attract it," he says.

To the question does he still write every day, he says he breathes, therefore he is writing and his breath is his poem. He is not aging, he says, because he is born again with every new morning.

In reference to his age, Ferrini says with passion, "People are used and abused and discarded. I'm not there. It takes guts to walk in your own shoes."

Speaking to him a couple of days following his birthday party, he says he enjoyed seeing all those well-wishers, but he doesn't want to be pigeon-holed by time and therefore wants no more parties celebrating another year of his life. Then, he gives a rhythmic reading of the turn of phrase he has worked on this very morning.

"I wrote you a letter this morning," he says frankly, honoring this day's guest as his muse of the day.

For a real glimpse at the man, he suggests reading his 1988 autobiography "Hermit in the Clouds," where his life is laid out in verse, including the day in 1941 when he saw a "brilliant" and "well built" woman on the street, took her home and soon married her. It was Margaret (Peg) Duffy, who taught high school English, French and drama. The two divorced 22 years later.

He is also the focus of an award-winning documentary called "Poem In Action," written and produced by his nephew, Henry, who also lives in Gloucester. To add to his collection of films about writers, which includes his critically acclaimed film about Jack Kerouac, Henry Ferrini is currently working on a documentary about Olson that features actor John Malkovich as its narrator.

"He got my sense of being," says Ferrini of his nephew. "He gets Kerouac. He gets me. When he does Olson, he'll get him."

The film begins with political activist Ferrini, at age 75, angrily speaking out at a City Council meeting, while the clerk is barking for him to state his name. Then the camera zooms in, for our introduction to this curious creature as he shares his musical nomenclature.

Ferrini is filmed leaving his powerful and love-filled words, stenciled in the sand and scrawled on Lynn's city walls. We hear his poetry and trace his exhaustive explorations on foot of the length and breadth of Gloucester's environs. Most everyone has spotted him, traipsing about - the town poet, the character in the funny hat.

Local writers, including Peter Anastis, then tell the camera of the writer's influence, as he wrote hundreds of letters to the Gloucester Daily Times and gave fiery testimony before local boards and commissions about those issues which impassioned him: preserving the working waterfront, the city's character and its open spaces.

"Through his example, Vincent has brought the best out of us as a community, urging the people of Gloucester always to hold the common good above individual gain and to think of ourselves as citizens and stewards, not exploiters and wasters," says Anastis today.

Vincent Ferrini has been his model of what an artist or writer should be since he first met him at the age of 15, says Anastis, who has been a newspaper columnist and writing teacher.

"He taught me that poetry was a living art not a dead pursuit and that poets had to live in society first and then in the study," says Anastis. "At the age of 91, Vincent is more alive, more attuned to the inner spirit and the outer world than most people half his age."

"There are few people whose entire lives are given over to the pursuit of human understanding and self-knowledge," he says. "Vincent Ferrini is one of them. He's also a wonderful guy, with a great sense of humor - a dancer in life and words."

Inside his small, simple cottage of a house, everything has a story. From found treasures to the artful images of beautiful women, solar systems, fish and classic scenes.

"I live in the unity of word and image," he says. "You gotta have both."

On the shelves among his own works are books on astrology, the poetry of Pablo Neruda, a copy of "Beowulf" and Nancy Milford's biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

He jumps around from book to book, picture to picture, showing off his room like a child hosting an after-school friend.

Go over to the Homer sculpture, he says, and he'll whisper wisdom into your ear. As if turning this age has somehow made the man drunk on life, elfin, yet powerful, he stands and demonstrates his zeal with arms outstretched.

"I move with the Earth. I move with the air. I'm in love with it all. I want all people to share it with."

He shares his natal chart of June 24, 1913 and is fascinated by the mysteries the chart reveals. Venus and Mars produced the "wealth" inside him, he says.

"I'm born today," he says. "I'm born each morning. The extension of time is a fiction."

OK. The time has come to discuss this laureate thing. We know to him it means letting his infectious love of life, passed down from his father, flow into those around him - "I'm spreading my fire," the beady-eyed poet says with all seriousness.

But it's such a lofty word for a man who thinks himself the angry voice of reason emerging from class tensions and labor struggles. What did he feel when given the honor of poet laureate?

He stops his dancing around.

"Nothing," he says plainly. "Well, OK, they recognized me. But I recognized myself before they recognized me." Obviously pleased with himself and his answer, he points his finger to make a point. "Get it."