



GROUND S F O R S C U L P T U R E

*Wordsmith: A Def Poetry Reunion Honoring Sonia Sanchez –
The Poetry Of Peace & Resistance*

BIOGRAPHIES



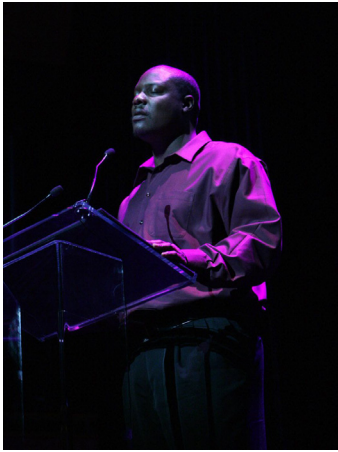
IG: @toniblackman

Toni Blackman

The first official U.S. Hip Hop ambassador, Toni Blackman, has not only traveled to 50 countries around the world but rocked Summerstage events, performed at the UN, Town Hall NYC, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), Carnegie Hall, Kennedy Center, Apollo Theater, 9:30 Club in DC, the Roxy in L.A., the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, BRIC, DODGE Poetry Festival, and Lincoln Center. Last year Toni hosted and performed at the UN, on Broadway and the Def Poetry Jam Reunion. Multi-talented, this pioneer in Hip Hop theater and Hip Hop education, has worked both behind and in front of the camera. She's an artist and a visionary. Creator of **Rhyme like a Girl** and **The Freestyle Union**, Toni, owner of **Speak with Ease**, a public speaking coaching service, recently worked as the Spoken Word/Rap Coach for Kwame Alexander's Emmy Award winning Disney series, **The Crossover**. Creator and co-host of **Lyrical Meditation Cypher Podcast**. Author of **Innecourse** (Villard/Random House), her new book, **Wisdom of the Cypher**, (Red Sky Presents, released March 2024). Toni's writing can be found in **This is the Honey**, **Live Through This** and other anthologies. An Echoing Green and a Soros Fellow Alum, Toni is currently touring with Restore Local, a climate change initiative, and releasing music from her Hip Hop Meditation Music series, a project supported by the New York State Council on the Arts. This Howard University graduate was recently selected for a SheStories Grant with Big We Foundation for her documentary, **A Woman's Place is in the Cypher**. Toni is a bi-continental woman living between Brooklyn, NY and Dakar, Senegal.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @iamkayothegreat

Kraal “Kayo” Charles

Kraal “Kayo” Charles, a Brooklyn native, is a performer, playwright, and producer. He has traveled extensively around the globe to be featured on stage, television, radio, and film. Kayo began his career on New York City’s poetry slam scene, becoming the youngest Grand Slam Champion at the legendary Nuyorican Poets Café in 1998. He was the first poet ever to present to audiences of thousands at the Harlem Book Fair and millions at the New Year’s Eve Ball Drop in Times Square.

Kayo was highlighted during the inaugural season of HBO’s Def Poetry Jam and in the documentaries, *Bone Bristle* and *Hughes Dreams Harlem*. He has shared the stage with literary legends Maya Angelou, Terry McMillan, and Chinua Achebe and has performed for luminaries Senator Charles Schumer, Congressman Gregory Meeks, and Comptroller William Thompson.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @dcrosstheartist

Derick Cross

D.Cross (Derick Cross) is a Queens NY native and Brooklyn based multi dimensional, visual, vocal poetic performance artist and arts educator. He creates imagery and vocal art that transcends and crosses boundaries of genres and labels. This "Vocal Beat Expressionist" uses "vocal acrobatics" to create sonic collages of his poetry combining words, raps and beatboxing. He has performed nationally & internationally in venues including Madison Square Garden, SOB's, The New Vic Theatre (off Broadway), NJPAC and Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. Mr Cross was selected as a cultural HipHop Ambassador for The US State Department's Next Level program (2017, 2023). He served as a HipHop Cultural Diplomat in Azerbaijan and The Philippines.

D.Cross has been featured on MTV, The Electric Company Nickelodeon, TV Land & BET's 106's and Park. His vocal talents have been featured on the award winning Aflac "Pigeon Rap" ad & 7-Up's "10" campaign. In 2003 he taped for HBO's Def Poetry Jam Season (Mr Cross has been featured as part of the Def Poetry Reunion shows). In addition D.Cross was the Hottest Poets \$10,000 Spoken Word Grand Champion of 2002/03 as well as a member of their international slam team of 2003.

D.Cross' visual arts has been exhibited nationally & internationally (Sweden & Brazil). Cross' work can be found as part of the collections of Erykah Badu (Singer), Kool Herc (Hiphop founding father), Big Daddy Kane (Hiphop Icon), Rakim (HipHop Icon), Danny Simmons (Artist/Co founder of RUSH Arts & Def Poetry) and Bashiri Johnson (world renowned percussionist). He is the Arts Director for African Voices Communications. Mr. Cross is also a SVA (School of Visual Arts) graduate (Bachelors of Fine Arts) who has worked as an Arts Educator teaching youth visual arts, Hiphop studies, vocal arts (Beatboxing) and poetry for the past 25 years.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @mzlezie

Lezlie Harrison

Hyper-active on the New York and global jazz scenes, Lezlie is also, along with the late Dale Fitzgerald and trumpeter Roy Hargrove, is one of the triumvirate responsible for launching New York's world-renowned Jazz Gallery. As a vocalist both bold and subtle, her vulnerability attends to the fragile matters of our collective human affairs, while her optimistic momentum inspires us to rise above any tribulation, and to rejoice. Be it Jazz, Blues, Gospel, Soul, The American Song Form, original compositions, or any song in ANY form, Lezlie will imbue it with her distinctive stamp and make a very personal delivery.

She carries that over to her regular spot on WBGO, the global leader in Jazz radio, where she is host *Come Sunday* and co- hosts with Janis Siegal, *Singers Unlimited* revealing the love and pride with which she regards America's music.

Her latest release is *Let Them Talk*, on Cellar Live Records.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @vanessahidary

Vanessa Hidary

Vanessa Hidary is a trailblazing spoken word artist, educator, and advocate. Over two decades ago, she began performing her powerful poetry in New York City venues, becoming a pioneering voice for Jewish identity in the slam poetry scene. A native New Yorker, she has written numerous solo shows and is currently traveling the country to facilitate identity-based writing workshops for teens and adults in the wake of rising global Anti-Semitism.

Vanessa's creative work often centers on bridging divides and fostering unity among diverse communities. Inspired by her own Syrian-Jewish heritage, she founded the *Kaleidoscope Project*, a narrative-arts initiative that amplifies the stories of Jews of Color, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, and those with interfaith experiences. Through personal storytelling, Vanessa provides platforms for underrepresented voices and encourages conversations about identity, discrimination, and belonging.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @itsjustahmad

DJ ItsJustAhmad

Over the years, DJ ItsJustAhmad has been a member of various bands, including Old Sol and Agudos Clef. He has also DJed for numerous acts, such as MC Hustle MC, Black Collar Biz, Homeboy Sandman, Cormega, and Trap Rabbit. DJ ItsJustAhmad has consistently demonstrated his artistry in both live performances in clubs and art gallery installations, showcasing his ability to provide music on demand.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



Tammi Lawson

Tammi Lawson is a Bertha Franklin Feder award winning librarian and Curator of the Art & Artifacts Division at The New York Public Library's renowned Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Lawson advises and supports scholars and curators who visit the collection to research and prepare articles, books, catalogs, films and exhibitions focused upon black art and artists. She curated *Constance E. Clayton: A Labor of Love* and collaborated on the Schomburg exhibition *Curators' Choice: Black Life Matters*.

Tammi will host the Pre-event Talk: Sonia Sanchez & Abiodun Oyewole.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @robertolugowithoutwax

Roberto Lugo

Roberto Lugo is a Philadelphia-based artist, ceramicist, social activist, poet, and educator. Lugo utilizes classical pottery forms in conjunction with portraiture and surface design reminiscent of his North Philadelphia upbringing and Hip Hop culture to highlight themes of poverty, inequality, and racial injustice. Lugo's works utilize traditional European and Asian ceramic techniques reimagined with a 21st-century street sensibility. Their hand-painted surfaces feature classic decorative patterns and motifs combined with elements of modern urban graffiti and portraits of individuals whose faces are historically absent on this type of luxury item - people like Sojourner Truth, Dr. Cornel West, and The Notorious BIG, as well as Lugo's family members and, very often, himself. Lugo holds a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA from Penn State. His work has been featured in exhibitions at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, among others. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including a 2023 Philadelphia's Cultural Treasures award, a 2019 Pew Fellowship, a Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon Polsky Rome Prize, and a US Artist Award. His work is found in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The High Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Brooklyn Museum, the Walters Art Museum, and more. He is currently an Assistant Professor at Tyler School of Art and Architecture in Philadelphia, PA.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @jessicacaremoor

Jessica Care Moore

Jessica Care Moore is one of the leading voices of her generation. An award winning poet, recording artist, book publisher, activist, cultural arts curator, and filmmaker. She is the Executive Producer and Founder of the 20-year old rock & roll concert and empowerment weekend, Daughters of Betty - Powered by Black WOMEN Rock! and the founder of The Moore Art House 501C3 dedicated to elevating literacy through the arts in neighborhoods and schools. The founder of Moore Black Press, she published poets Saul Williams, Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, asha bandele, Danny Simmons and more. Her publishing house secured an imprint deal with HarperCollins in 2024 and released NYC poet Brad Walrond's extraordinary collection "Every Where Alien. She has mentored youth all over the country, and has lent her voice and time inside juvenile detention centers, prisons, universities and art institutions around the country her entire career.

Your favorite's emcee's favorite poet, she has recorded her poetry with Hip Hop legends -- Common, Nas, Jeezy, Talib Kweli, Karriem Riggins, Techno Pioneer Jeff Mills, The Last Poets, Jose James, Roy Ayers and others. Writer Greg Tate called her poetry "A black scream. moore is the author of *The Words Don't Fit in My Mouth*, *The Alphabet Verses The Ghetto*, *God is Not an American*, and *Sunlight Through Bullet Holes*. Her fifth book, "*We Want Our Bodies Back*" published by Harper Collins in 2020 won the American Library Association Black Caucus Poetry Honor. Her first children's book, *Her Crown Shines* is slated to be published in 2024 and illustrated by Dare Coulter (Harper Collins). The celebratory poem caught the attention of Oprah Winfrey and she shared it widely on her social media pages.

Her full scale theatrical work, *Salt City*, A Futurist Techno Choreopoem premiered at The Apollo Theater. She's received several Spirit of Detroit Award, a "Cultural Hero" Award from The Torch of Wisdom Foundation and The "Trailblazing Poet" award from Words Beats and Life in Washington D.C., in addition to Testimonial Resolution from the Detroit City Council. She was appointed by Governor Whitmer to The Michigan Council of Arts and Culture. The Director of the Ford Foundation referred to her as a National Treasure.



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Jessica Care Moore (cont.)

She is a 2019 and 2017 Knight Arts Recipient, a 2018 Joyce Award Winner, 2016 Kresge Art Fellow, The 2013 Alain Locke Awardee and the 2015 NAACP Great Expectation Award.

Her anticipated rock and roll project is a collaboration with powerhouse rock singer Steffanie Christ'ian. The duo's album (and group name) , We Are Scorpio is currently out through Talib Kweli's Javotti Label and moore's Black WOMEN Rock! Brand.

In 2023 moore was invited by the family of Malcolm X to read her work at The Shabazz Center, alongside Angela Davis and Civil Rights Attorney Benjamin Crump. She has read her poems and leant her powerful voice to many causes all over the world, including, United Nations World Aids Day, Shanghai's Iron Mic Music Festival, Berlin International Poetry Festival, Flupp International Literary Festival in Brazil, and was honored to perform at the first Afrochella Festival in Ghana during the year of the return. Her work has graced the stages of The Apollo Theater, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center and the London Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Moore's first feature film, *He Looked Like A Postcard* was nominated for "Best Feature Narrative" at The Pan African Film Festival, The Miami Black Film Festival, and The Martha's Vineyard African American Film Festival. She wrote, produced and co-stars in the film with Tobias Truvillion.

Moore captivated a national television audience in the 90's when she won the legendary "It's Showtime at the Apollo" competition a record breaking five times in a row -- with a poem. moore's poetry and voice is prominently featured on the 4th floor of the Smithsonian's New National Museum of African American History.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



@abiodun.oyewole.39

Abiodun Oyewole

As one of the founding members of the legendary Harlem group The Last Poets, Abiodun Oyewole has dedicated almost 60 years to using his poetry to articulate, glorify and protest the impurities of the black experience world-wide, and in America particularly. He has become a fixture in the landscape of black consciousness, using uncompromising verse to scold a nation whose inclination to maintain the colonial yoke around the neck of the disenfranchised has always been at issue. For that, he has been honored and appreciated by millions.

Since Abiodun's first recording with the Last Poets, his work has had a profound influence across the hip-hop landscape, having been sampled by the likes of the Notorious B.I.G., N.W.A., A Tribe Called Quest and countless others. Phrases he coined like "Party and Bullshit" have become a mainstay in the Hip Hop lexicon. Today he continues to spread his message, as a performer touring the world with the Last Poets, as an educator teaching kids arts education in NYC public schools, and as an artist collaborating with notable rappers such as Nas, Common, and Dead Prez on award-winning album projects.

Abiodun has also made an unwavering commitment to the next generation of conscious young minds. A labor of love for over 40 years, 'Brother Dune' has opened his home every Sunday to poets, rappers, singers, philosophers, teachers, students, fans and everyday people who have an appreciation for the arts and yearn to be around love and black consciousness. The initial purpose of 'Open House Sundays at 110' was to give aspiring poets a platform to share their work and receive feedback from a giant in the arts. Over the years, Open House Sundays at 110 has grown into so much more, becoming a cultural institution in the Harlem community, with food, political conversation, music, and a fellowship that has touched thousands of people over the years. Prominent artists who have walked through those famed doors at 110 Morningside Drive span from Melle Mel to Doug E. Fresh to Erykah Badu. Moreover, notable institutions such as Def Poetry Jam and celebrated poets such as Jessica Care Moore were born out of Open House Sundays at 110. Undeterred by the pandemic, Open House Sundays has now moved to a virtual space, as Abiodun continues to mentor the next generation of brilliant young artists.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @bonafiderojas

Bonafide Rojas

Bonafide Rojas is a poet, musician & the author of five collections of poetry: *Excelsior*, *Notes On The Return To The Island*, *Renovatio*, *When The City Sleeps* & *Pelo Bueno*. He's appeared on Def Poetry Jam & was awarded the 2023 Letras Boricuas Fellowship from The Mellon Foundation. He's the bandleader/songwriter for The Mona Passage, who have released two albums: *The New Myths* & *When The City Sleeps*. He's performed at Lincoln Center, The Brooklyn Museum, El Museo Del Barrio, Bowery Ballroom, Philadelphia Museum Of Art, Rotterdam Arts Center, Konvent Zero Barcelona, Spoken Word Paris, Latinale Berlin, Hafen Lesung Hamburg, & Festival De La Palabra Puerto Rico. He's an avid collector of pop culture & only wears red socks.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @urucker

Ursula Rucker

Poet, recording artist, activist, teacher and revolutionary, Ursula Rucker is a certified veteran of the global music and poetry scene. A skilled writer and dynamic performer, Rucker's rich and textured voice is one of the world's great, living instruments. For nearly 3 decades, Rucker has used her fiery prose and invigorating imagery to excite and inspire listeners around world-wide. Her solo albums are brimming with power and wide-ranging musical diversity and she has built an equally impressive catalog as a collaborator. Rucker can be heard on dance floors across the world, as the voice of many House and Dance music classics. She has toured with her live performance memoir, *My Father's Daughter*, which she describes as "90 minutes of self-truth and discovery." She was a 2018 recipient of the prestigious fellowship from the Pew Center for Arts & Change. In 2020, she released *big/small poems for pockets*, a chapbook of haikus. In 2021, Ursula collaborated with artist Vince Fraser on his exhibit *Ase Afro Frequencies* which debuted at Artehouse Miami and was recognized as Best Art Exhibit 2021 by TimeOut Miami. At the close of 2022, Ursula had the distinct honor of being selected for the Philadelphia Cultural Treasures Fellowship, recognizing her continued commitment to the advancement of art, and artist advocacy, and an endorsement from her community that her legacy is essential to the cultural fabric of Philadelphia.

Whether she's on the stage, in print, or on record, Ursula Rucker is an artistic force of nature.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



FB: @poetsoniasanchez

Sonia Sanchez

Poet. Mother. Professor. National and International lecturer on Black Culture and Literature, Women's Liberation, Peace and Racial Justice. Sponsor of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Board Member of MADRE. Sonia Sanchez is the author of over 16 books including *Homecoming*, *We a BaddDDD People*, *Love Poems*, *I've Been a Woman*, *A Sound Investment and Other Stories*, *Homegirls and Handgrenades*, *Under a Soprano Sky*, *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (Beacon Press, 1995), *Does Your House Have Lions?* (Beacon Press, 1997), *Like the Singing Coming off the Drums* (Beacon Press, 1998), *Shake Loose My Skin* (Beacon Press, 1999), and most recently, *Morning Haiku* (Beacon Press, 2010). In addition to being a contributing editor to *Black Scholar* and *The Journal of African Studies*, she has edited an anthology, *We Be Word Sorcerers: 25 Stories by Black Americans*. *BMA: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review* is the first African American Journal that discusses the work of Sonia Sanchez and the Black Arts Movement. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts, the Lucretia Mott Award for 1984, the Outstanding Arts Award from the Pennsylvania Coalition of 100 Black Women, the Community Service Award from the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, she is a winner of the 1985 American Book Award for *Homegirls and Handgrenades*, the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Humanities for 1988, the Peace and Freedom Award from Women International League for Peace and Freedom (W.I.L.P.F.) for 1989, a PEW Fellowship in the Arts for 1992-1993 and the recipient of Langston Hughes Poetry Award for 1999. *Does Your House Have Lions?* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is the Poetry Society of America's 2001 Robert Frost Medalist and a Ford Freedom Scholar from the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. Her poetry also appeared in the movie *Love Jones*. Sonia Sanchez has lectured at over 500 universities and colleges in the United States and has traveled extensively, reading her poetry in Africa, Cuba, England, the Caribbean, Australia, Europe, Nicaragua, the People's Republic of China,



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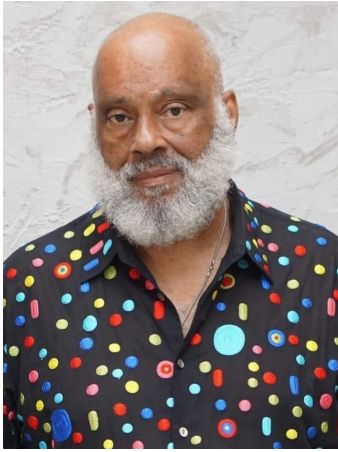


Sonia Sanchez (cont.)

Norway, and Canada. She was the first Presidential Fellow at Temple University and she held the Laura Carnell Chair in English at Temple University. She is the recipient of the Harper Lee Award, 2004, Alabama Distinguished Writer, and the National Visionary Leadership Award for 2006. She is the recipient of the 2005 Leeway Foundation Transformational Award. Currently, Sonia Sanchez is one of 20 African American women featured in “Freedom Sisters,” an interactive exhibition created by the Cincinnati Museum Center and Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibition and she was the recipient of the Robert Creeley award in March of 2009.



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E



IG: @dannysimmonsjr

Danny Simmons

Danny Simmons is a published author, poet, painter and philanthropist. He is a leader in the art world with his philanthropic ventures, artistic talents and creative mind and drive.

Danny Simmons played an instrumental role in the conceiving of and co-producing the hit HBO show Def Poetry Jam, and won a Tony Award for the Broadway version of the show.

Simmons is co-founder, along with his siblings, Russell, and Joseph “Rev Run” Simmons, of the Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, and founder of Rush Arts Philadelphia and RAP Gallery II, a new solo exhibition/arts education gallery that opened in 2019. He is a former board member of the Brooklyn Museum, the Brooklyn Public Library, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Conference of Artists and former Chairman for the NYS Council on the Arts.

Today, his works appear in Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn Museum, Chase Manhattan Bank, Deutsche Bank, Schomburg Center for Black Culture, The Smithsonian, United Nations, United States State Department Collection, David Driskell Collection, Petrucci Family Foundation, PAFA Collection, and, on an international scope has shown work in France, Amsterdam and Ghana. In 2019, he was appointed to Philadelphia Museum of Art’s African American Collections Committee.

Danny Simmons holds a Bachelor’s degree in social work from New York University, a Masters in public finance from Long Island University, and is the recipient of an honorary PhD from Long Island University. He continues to thrive at his ‘home gallery’ in Philadelphia, PA.



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fireystringscompany.com

Nioka Workman & The Firey Strings Company

Nioka Workman is an artist, composer, curator with numerous credits in the areas of music, dance, theater and film. Her recent highlights include, appearances at Carnegie Hall/City Winery in a Tribute to Paul McCartney, Steve Jordan music director, a feature with Black Rock Coalition Orchestra and with Def Poetry Jam CEO Danny Simmons, Wordsmith & Kayo. Nioka's musical stylings can be heard worldwide on the recordings of luminary artists like Steve Coleman, Greg Osby, India Arie, DJ Rogers and Joe. Her festival credits in and outside of the USA include; Greater Hartford Jazz Festival, Springfield Jazz & Roots Festival, Summer Stage at Billie Holiday Theater, the International African Arts Festival, Montreal Jazz Festival, and Sons'd Hiver Festival in Paris. She actively curates and arranges music for events through (FSCO) Firey Strings Company. FSCO has features on Grammy nominated Betty LaVette's 'Blackbirds' and in JFA's virtual showcase "Bird Calls, celebration of Charlie Parker". Nioka is currently part of the Once Upon A One More Time show on Broadway. Occasionally, she tours with Leslie Parker Dance and her own band Firey String Sistas.

Established in 2011 by Nioka Workman, the **Firey Strings Company** (FSCO) was designed to 'push the art of string playing to the next level'. Our company creates residencies, sessions and events for string players to work on technical skills, perform and network. We empower female artists, composers and international artists that are seeking opportunity to perform in festival settings, main stages or work in educational settings.