



GROUND S FOR SCULPTURE

Wordsmith: A Def Poetry Reunion Honoring Ursula Rucker

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 **Innercourse** (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.



GROUND S FOR SCULPTURE



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



IG: @khemist_lv

Khemist

Hailing from Logan in North Philadelphia, Khemist Mayfield is a multi-instrumentalist, poet, and rapper whose artistry is defined by the "shadows and steel" of his upbringing. His work serves as a soulful bridge between the harsh realities of systemic neglect and the elegance of resilience, transforming the pulse of his surroundings into a powerful testimony for the unheard. Deeply influenced by icons like Nas, Sonia Sanchez, and Octavia Butler, Khemist delivers his lyricism with a steady, unshaken conviction that blends the precision of poetry with the grit of street-level observation.

His trajectory from early projects like D2WR, hosted by Black Thought, culminated in his 2023 debut album, *A List of Demands*, executive produced by the legendary DJ Jazzy Jeff. A frequent collaborator with industry greats, Khemist recently contributed his songwriting talents to Bilal's 2026 Grammy-nominated project, *Adjust Brightness*. Now, in collaboration with producer Anwar Marshall, he has evolved his live performance into a seamless fusion of instrumentation and MCing—often rapping while playing guitar. This commanding blend of poetry, blues, jazz, and hip-hop cements his status as a singular voice who doesn't just perform rap, but lives it through every chord and rhyme.



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.



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



IG: @thelegendaryblackice

Lamar “Black Ice” Manson

Black Ice is a Tony, Peabody & Emmy Award-winning poet and 6-time HBO Def Poet, widely recognized as a pioneering force in bringing poetry into the mainstream. His work spans high school curricula to Ivy League universities, and he has shared stages and collaborated with artists including The Roots, Mary J. Blige, Nas, Kendrick Lamar, and Def Poetry on Broadway. A sought-after voice and performer, he has appeared on The Arsenio Hall Show, BET’s Rap City, and TV-One’s Verses and Flow, and has lent his voice to national campaigns for Mercedes-Benz, Honda, and Heineken, as well as audiobooks for Russell Simmons. From performing for over a million people at the LIVE 8 World Concert to teaching Master Writing Courses across the globe, Black Ice continues to push the boundaries of poetry on an international stage.



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

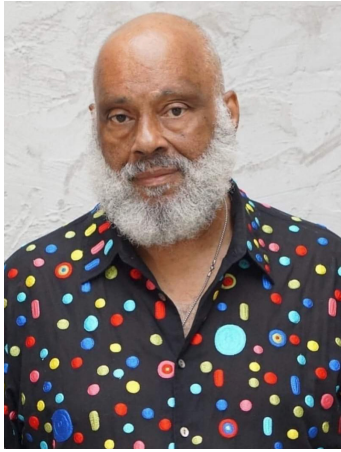
Ursula Rucker

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 Artechouse 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



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.



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



IG: @ReddCarpetRoom

Jamaaladeen Tacuma

Jamaaladeen Tacuma (born 1956, Hempstead NY), is celebrated internationally for his creatively free and funky approach to the electric bass. At the age of 19 his innovative style caught Ornette Coleman's ear, and he became the first bassist in Coleman's electric band, Prime Time, touring and recording with the group throughout the 1970's and 80's. Viewed as one of the most distinctive bassists of his generation, he is credited for redefining the potential of the instrument.

Tacuma debuted as a bandleader, composer, and arranger in 1983 with the album *Showstopper*, going on to develop compositions that blend Prime Time's elaborate harmonies with engaging melodies. His 1988 album *Jukebox* was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1989; in 2011 his ongoing achievements were recognized by the Marcus Garvey Foundation 50th Anniversary Award and award of a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, in 2018 he received the City of Philadelphia's Benny Golson Award, The Benny Golson Award includes a City proclamation and the Liberty Bell award - one of the highest honors from the City of Philadelphia.

Valuing adaptability, adventure, and dynamism, Tacuma's ever-shifting aesthetic is evident in his wide range of projects and collaborators over the years, from fronting the funk trio *Cosmetic* to co-leading ensembles with US and European colleagues such as Vernon Reid and Derek Bailey, as well as recording with James Blood Ulmer, Nona Hendryx, Mark Ribot, Gary Bartz. He has worked with Poets Jayne Cortez, Quincy Troupe, Amiri Baraka, The Last Poets and co-wrote and co-produced a song entitled "WOMEN FIRST" for *KINDRED*.

Since 2015, Tacuma has been producing the annual *Outsiders Improvised & Creative Music Festival* in his hometown of Philadelphia, providing a platform for renowned artists such as Saxophonist Odean Pope, pianist Farid Barron, violinist/bassist Henry Grimes, saxophonist/noisemaker John Zorn, and Guitarist's Mark Ribot and Nels Cline as well as emerging local artists.