

# An interview with Stanley E. Banks

author of *Blue Beat Syncopation*

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Interviewed by Kevin Rabas

*Q. What do you see as uniting this 20-plus year collection of your work?*

A. A lot of the work has elements of the blues in it. For me, the blues aren't totally down. You know the saying, "It's always darkest before the dawn." I look at life like that. Or, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." When I think about it, there are various shades of blue. Some blue is a cool kind of blue, a hazy, mellow kind of blue. Then there's a depressing blue. There's a hard-core blue, a rough kind of blue... I think of blue like that. On beat, I've had people talk about how I read the poems, talking about my sense of rhythm...and voice. The voice deals with attitudes and difficult moments, trying to find revelation. Like most poets, I'm trying to make some sense of chaos. The voice is always trying to make some sense of death, issues, attitudes...And syncopation, that's the one thing we all try to do, get the music that's distinctive to us onto the page. Syncopation, it's also one of those musical terms those jazz guys use.

You're playing between the beat, you're playing a little off beat, and you get back on beat. With syncopation, I think of the offbeat or wayward voice trying to find some meaning. Without being preachy or overly sentimental...I'm trying to present some cold facts.

When Jim McKinley said to me, "Stan, you should have a collected poems. You know, you've been at this 25 years now," I said, "What! Man, have I been writing that long?" (laughs) I feel old all of the sudden. I had to look at the work in a totally different way.

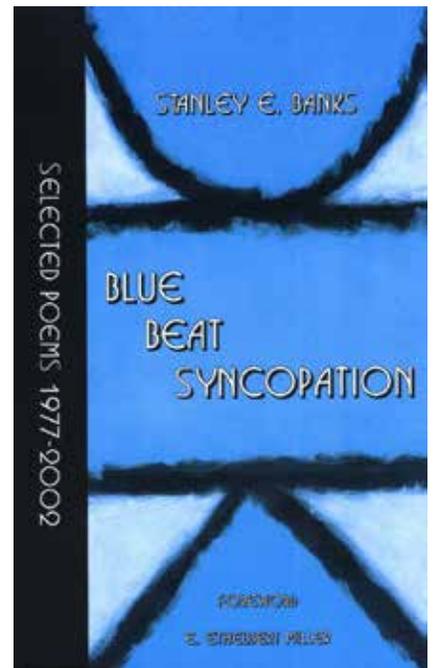
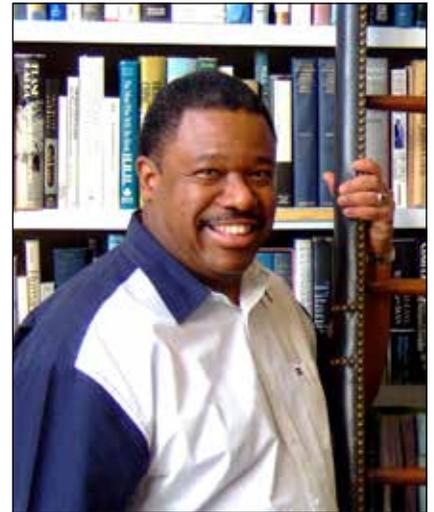
*Q. Tell me about your annihilation poems.*

A. Some day I want a whole book of annihilation poems. I almost have enough. You know those moments when you can either be critically wounded for good or be critically wounded and survive? Those small moments that kill us that nobody ever sees, those are the basis for the annihilation poems. There's a whole other place I go with those poems. She's left, she's stomped on my heart, I want a bullet to the brain. That's the sense of it. "Though I still loved her,/ I would have preferred castration/ to her kind of annihilation." That's what came first. That's how they started, the annihilation poems.

"Annihilation #8" came from when I was eight years old watching Bonanza on television. I was watching my heroes, Little Joe (Cartright) and Hoss. Also, I remember a poster of Superman with a little black boy looking in the mirror beside it, with the caption: "What's the matter with this picture?" Of course, he wasn't going to be Superman, and he couldn't really relate to what he saw. I was that way with Little Joe. I thought, I need to find an identity here.

Also, there's "Annihilation #711," where life is a crap shoot, and my grandmother is dealing for my life.

*Q. A lot of the poems in the collection are poems about family, history, place. Tell me how these factors into your overall collection--and day to day.*



A. I'm always trying to figure out why I've been so blessed. Coming from where I come from, I'm always thankful...I was born in the shit-house. You can take that and become bitter and mad and angry at the world. Or, you can take it and say, so I wasn't promised anything, I wasn't given anything, but I'm going to make something better of my life somehow and influence people in a positive way. That's how my family affects me.

It never escapes me that people want to interview me, or publish something of mine, and I can get off this phone, and think of my nephews who are just about all in jail. That's an American tragedy. One's in jail for murder and dope, and the other dope, armed robbery...One's a dopehead, one's an alcoholic. In my family, no one got the big break. And I look at myself and wonder, how in the hell did I become a poet?

*Q. Since this is your constant question, how does the poet survive?*

A. What I always come back to is the earthly angel called my grandmother. Coming from an abusive household, living around some mean stuff, even though Vine Street on Friday and Saturday night could be exciting, there was also some ugly stuff going on, too. In my grandmother's house, I was free to be the little nerd and goofy kid I was. She just believed with the belief of a bible-beating, pistol-toting grandma that this grandbaby of hers was going to do something.



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