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THE BLACK SCHOLAR

"TRIBUTE TO ROBERT CHRISMAN"

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TRIBUTE TO ROBERT CHRISMAN, by Robert Allen 11/19/09

Forty years ago in November 1969, Robert Chrisman co-founded The Black Scholar with Nathan Hare and Allan Ross. The launching of the Scholar followed in the wake of the historic strike at San Francisco State. The strike involved thousands of students and faculty, including Chrisman, in a prolonged and sometimes violently repressive struggle with the administration and the state. Among the student demands were the creation of a Black Studies Department and a Third World College. These demands were won but Chrisman was forced to pay a high price for the victory. He and Nathan Hare were fired from their teaching positions at SF State in retribution for their activism in the strike. Chrisman was reinstated but not in a tenure-track position. Refusing to be silenced or driven from Black Studies, they instead decided to found a journal devoted to black studies and research, a journal that would be interdisciplinary in approach and that would seek to unite street activists and academic intellectuals in common advocacy for the needs of the black community. Forty years and more than 200 issues later that journal, The Black Scholar, is still publishing and has become the leading independent journal of African American scholarship and intellectual inquiry in the US.

I have worked with Robert Chrisman for 37 of the last 40 years – I believe that may be longer than all of our marriages put together. We are friends and colleagues who have grown from youthful scholar/activists into senior citizen scholar/activists. Over that time, I have seen his unshakeable dedication to TBS and his fierce determination to keep it going despite very difficult times. I have seen him do every task involved in magazine production, including planning issues and soliciting articles, editing and working with authors, working with typographers and printers,



and bookstores and distributors, and, most difficult of all, Dealing with the US Post Office.

Robert Chrisman was <sup>raised</sup> ~~born~~ in Nogales, Arizona. His family moved to the Bay Area in the 1950s where he became involved in the lively and diverse cultural scene in San Francisco. He entered UC Berkeley's English department to study literature. On his own he discovered the works of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Robert Hayden, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx, Che Guevara, Pablo Neruda, Mao Tse-tung, and the Beat Generation writers.

Robert turned to poetry as medium of expression for his vision.. His work gained recognition from critics and other poets, including Alice Walker. Alice Walker wrote of Chrisman's poetry: "Revealed in this beautifully lyrical poetry is a mind's intense desire to comprehend the limits of, and to break through the snares of essentially Euro-Tectonic orientation into the larger world of struggling humanity: they offer songs of fishermen, cotton pickers, cane cutters and coffee pickers . . . ." Robert Chrisman has published two volumes of his poetry, *Children of Empire* (1981) *Minor Casualties: New and Selected Poems* (1993) It has been said that his poetry is concerned with the issues of empire, both intensely personal and global. In these explorations, poems range from intense lyricism, to celebrations and measured elegy, to biting satire.

Dr. Chrisman's other books include three major anthologies of writings from The Black Scholar. These are: *Contemporary Black Thought* (1972), *Pan-Africanism* (1973), and *Court of Appeal: The Black Community Speaks out on the Racial and Sexual Politics of Clarence Thomas v. Anita Hill* (1993). In 2001 Chrisman co-edited with Laurence Goldstein the anthology, *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry*. Robert Chrisman has written scores of essays and



editorials that have appeared in TBS. He is presently compiling and editing a collection of his essays that will be published in the near future.

Aside from his writing and editing, Robert Chrisman has long been engaged with the academy. He holds an MA degree in Language Arts from San Francisco State, and a Ph.D, in English from the University of Michigan. In addition to teaching at SF State he has taught at the University of Michigan, Williams College, UC Berkeley, the University of Vermont, and Wayne State university. In 2005 he retired as Professor and Chair of the Black Studies Department at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

I know of no one who has worked harder than Robert Chrisman to actualize an intellectual vision. In building TBS he has demonstrated the power of the principles of self-determination and self-reliance. He built the Scholar not by relying on grants and funding from foundations and government agencies, but by relying on the people we serve – teachers, students, community activists, labor activists, writers and artists, librarians, academicians, and just plain working people – our subscribers. These folks have shown that they have the power to sustain an intellectual enterprise and keep it independent. Robert Chrisman believed that by relying on community support TBS could be self determining. And this we have done. When we plan issues and editorials we never have to look over our shoulders. There have been no angels, no puppeteers pulling strings, no stipends or subsidies, no cash under the table, no hidden bank accounts, no quid pro quo. What you see is what you get. For forty years Robert Chrisman's strategic vision has enabled the The Black Scholar to make a path where there was none before.

For me personally, Robert Chrisman has been a friend, colleague, mentor, and the older brother I would otherwise never have had.