

Jayne Cortez
1934-2012

Jayne Cortez was born Sallie Jayne Richardson on the Army base at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, on May 10, 1934. At the age of seven, she moved to Los Angeles, where she grew up in the Watts district. "Young Jayne Richardson reveled in the jazz and Latin recordings that her parents collected" ("Jane Cortez"). "Early exposure to the recordings of Bessie Smith instilled in Cortez a deeply etched sense of female identity, which, combined with a strong will, shaped her into an uncommonly outspoken individual. In 1954, Cortez married jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman when she was 18 years old ("Jane Cortez").

Cortez was "transformed by the sounds of Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and no-nonsense vocalist Dinah Washington, whose visceral approach to self-expression clearly encouraged the poet not to pull any punches" ("Jayne Cortez"). "'Jazz isn't just one type of music, it's an umbrella that covers the history of black people from African drumming to field hollers and the blues,' she told *The Weekly Journal*, a black newspaper in Britain, in 1997....In the sense that I also try to reflect the fullness of the black experience, I'm very much a jazz poet" (Fox).

"Cortez, who respected the memory of independent performing artist Josephine Baker, preferred to name inspirations rather than influences, especially when discussing writers. Those with whom she identified included Langston Hughes, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, Christopher Okigbo, Henry Dumas, Amiri Baraka, and Richard Wright" ("Jayne Cortez").

Active in the struggle for Civil Rights, she strongly advocated using art as a vehicle to push political causes ("Jayne Cortez). "It was as if her verse, which often took on large, painful subjects like racism and misogyny, had become an instrument itself — an instrument, Ms. Cortez felt strongly, to be wielded in the service of social change" (Fox).

In 1969 her first collection, *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares*, was published, and Cortez went on to become the author of 11 other books of poems, and performed her poetry with music on nine recordings. "Cortez wrote and performed with an uncompromising intensity all her own. Acerbic, hard-hitting, unsentimental and scathingly honest, her take on reality is so potent — and even pungent — that many poets may seem benign, or even superficial, by comparison" (Jayne Cortez).

During the 1960s, Cortez began performing her work to musical accompaniment, touring and recording with her band, *The Firespitters*. "Cortez's poems were not so much set to music as they were a part of the music. They were chanted more than recited, employing carefully calibrated repetitions, shifts in tempo and modulations of vocal tone" (Fox). "Ms. Cortez's work was beyond category by virtue of embodying so many categories simultaneously: written verse, African and African-American oral tradition, the discourse of political protest, and jazz and blues" (Fox).

"Jayne Cortez." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 03 Jan. 2017.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jayne_Cortez.

Fox, Margalit. "Jayne Cortez, Jazz Poet, Dies at 78." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 03 Jan. 2013. Web. 03 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/arts/jayne-cortez-poet-and-performance-artist-dies-at-78.html>>.

Poems:

"If the drum is a Woman"

<http://www.aaregistry.org/poetry/view/if-drum-woman-jayne-cortez>

"There it Is"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/90805>