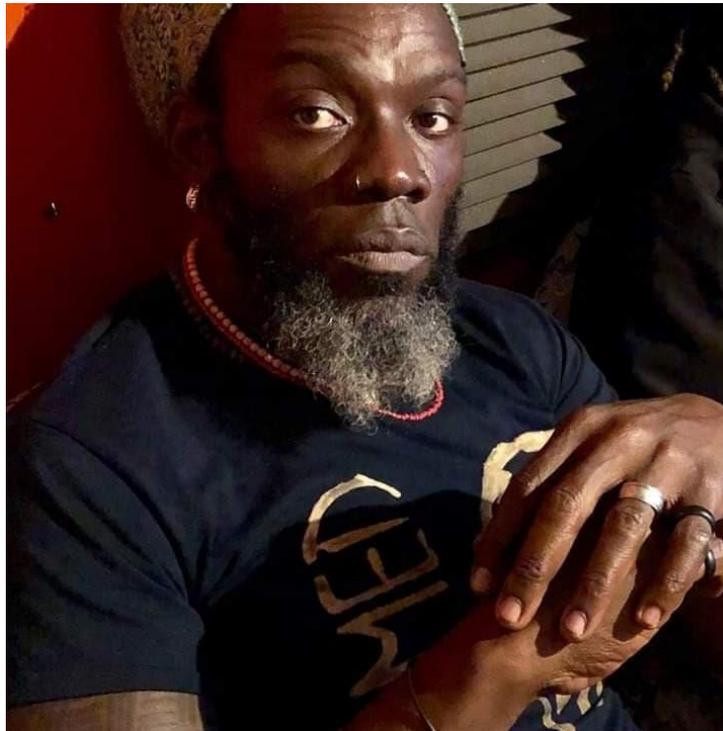




**Our Interview with Poet and Artist
Iyaba Ibo Mandingo**



**The past few years my work has become
a return to my childhood....
The poetry, and the plays, explore my native patois tongue.
The songs, and the movement, have become more conscious
of my African Caribbean soul.**

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Welcome to the **Poetry Page**, Iyaba! You were in our **2019 Art & Text** booklet as an artist with your incredible acrylic on masonite board, *Blue Trane (John Coltrane)*:



Iyaba Ibo Mandingo
Blue Trane (John Coltrane)
Acrylic on masonite board

I learned—from reading your impressive biography in our booklet—that you are a poet, painter, writer, actor, and playwright!

Please share with us your wonderful story of your earliest exposure to the arts through your mother and grandparents, and how they influenced you.

Iyaba: My grandparents were a tailor and a seamstress. I was my grandfather's apprentice from the time I was six years old to age eleven when my Mother, younger

sister Nicole, and I migrated to America. His tailor shop, and my Grandmother's seamstress shop, were filled with fabrics in every texture and color one could imagine.

Watching them create sparked my imagination. I got into lots of trouble for taking Mommy's foil paper, and creating imaginary worlds!

Mommy was a singer, and gave me my first opportunity to see someone perform. I was singing with the adult choir by the time I was seven, and getting the biggest rush from watching and feeling the audience's reaction.

Sally: You came to America from the West Indies in 1980 when you were eleven? You must have carried a lot of memories with you!

Iyaba: Ohhh, absolutely! They say eleven is the age of understanding. I remember everything about my time in that magical place where I grew up!

My grandfather remains my hero. Spending time with him every day was awesome! He was an artist, and a performer, who channeled his talents into the men's suits he executed like sculptures.

He filled my days with impressions of characters from Arab merchants and English gentlemen to Raykan, the local drunk.

And his sense of humor was addictive! He kept a regular group of friends at the tailor shop; all of them became characters in my first novel, "Sins of My Fathers."

Those times are alive in every aspect of my work.

Sally: What was the transition like—the move from the West Indies to America—and do the memories from it show up in your creative work?

Iyaba: The transition is another story! I didn't wanna leave! My granddad was the best friend a little boy could ever have. And the banana boat teasing I endured when I got here made me wanna go back to my grandfather. I begged Mommy to go back home everyday for the first year.

It eventually made me into this guy who remained a Caribbean immigrant, instead of becoming an African American.

Sally: Please share with us a little about your poetry. Do you always perform your poetry? Do you write formalist poems, or free verse? How might you define your voice and style?

Iyaba: I began writing poetry as a slam poet, so—in the beginning— yes, all of it was performance geared.

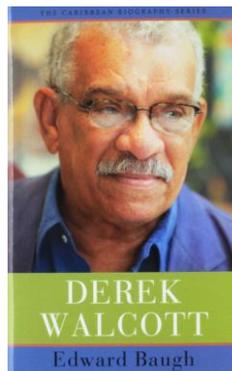
I love the ‘freedom’ of free verse. It allows for more room to explore the words without the restrictions of formal poetry.

In regards to poetic form, the Haiku is probably my favorite to explore. I love the discipline of packing an entire idea into the five-seven-five combination of words.

My voice and style are an evolving thing. The past few years my work has become a return to my childhood, and a listening to that old man all day. The poetry, and the plays, explore my native patois tongue. The songs, and the movement, have become more conscious of my African Caribbean soul.

Sally: Did you like poetry as a child both in the West Indies and in America? Who were your earliest influences in poetry?

Iyaba: Yes I did! Mr. Marcus Christopher, my grandfather’s best friend— and one of our nation’s most celebrated writers— used to read Derek Walcott aloud in the tailor shop all the time. I loved the melody of his words. Even then.



Playing the character Jackson Phillip in Derek Walcott’s play, *Pantomime*, while he sat front row/stage right remains one of the thrills of my professional career. Mr. Marcus Christopher was overjoyed when I relayed Mr. Walcott’s reaction to my performance: he said I was the best Jackson Phillip he had seen since writing the play!

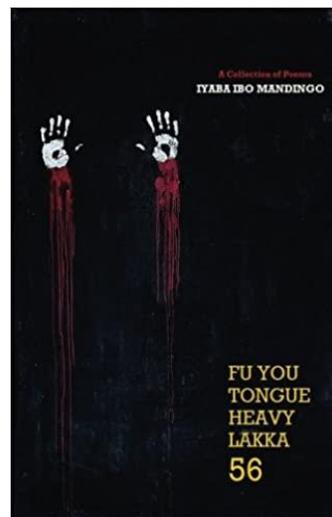
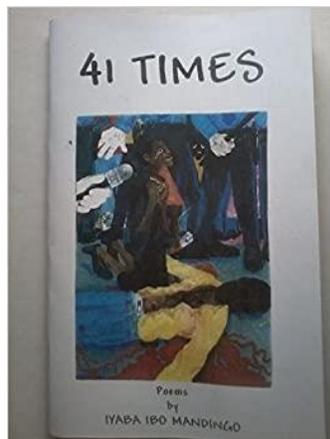
Sally: Who are your favorite poets, and what are your favorite poems?

Iyaba: I love Fredrico Garcia Lorca; my favorite poem of his is “Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías.”

Richard Wright’s, “Between the World and Me;” anything by Amiri Baraka (though I especially love his poems, “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note,” and “Ka’Ba”). Langston Hughes’s, “Harlem,” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Everything by Audre Lorde, and Sonia Sanchez. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s, “We Wear the Mask;” Mutabaruka’s, “Dis Poem.” I love everything by Bob Kaufman, but really love his book, *Cranial Guitar*. Everything by Ted Joans. I’ll stop there! Too many amazing elders!

As far as my contemporaries go, Roger Bonair-Agard is brilliant. His explorations of our Caribbean patois and cultures are honest, and electric. Chris Slaughter is challenging, and hilarious. Ursula Rucker is an amazing amalgamation of words, song, and fire. Yasiin Bey (Mos Def) is super clever. Willie Perdomo is a magical blend of languages, and culture.

Sally: You have published three chapbooks of poetry, and I think you also have a full-length collection that is available on Amazon, and on your website.



[IYABA'S WEBSITE](#)

Iyaba: Yes, the chapter books were really an ode to the Elders that came before me, for giving many Black and Brown poets the opportunity to publish their work, especially with an established Publisher.

The self-produced and published chapbook was a wonderful alternative, and the best way to get one's work out. I have several by Nikki Giovanni, Baraka, Sanchez, and Kaufman that I treasure along with my first edition signed books by novelists, poets and Black intellectuals.

Sally: Do you have formal training in poetry? I know you studied fine arts at Southern Connecticut State University. Did you study poetry, or creative writing, there?

Iyaba: Yes, SCSU offered amazing access to the practicing artists and writers on the staff, so I had the opportunity to study both poetry and creative writing with wonderful teachers who shoved me, quite aggressively, out of my comfort zone.

Sally: Please share with us which arts you studied, and how your education helped you evolve and develop as an artist.

Iyaba: I began my studies in Graphic Arts, but switched— at my father's chagrin— to painting, specifically, **the color**. That semester, we went from the physical lab (with t-squares and pencils) to computers. That, coupled with my double major in history, is the foundation of all my art, which I describe as a storytelling process in the tradition of the West African D'jeli/ Griot, who uses words, songs, performance, and visual art to tell the stories of us.

Sally: You have appeared regularly as a performance poet both in the United States and abroad. Please define for us what it means to be a performance poet.

Iyaba: The theatrical stage is the most freedom I have ever know as a Black Man in this hemisphere: there, one can be anything; everything. I enter performance poetry through the medium of slam, which is a competitive, sometimes aggressive, form of spoken word-poetry embraced by my generation. That, in turn, led to the chance occasion to act in a short one-man piece. That was the proverbial light bulb moment for me! I fell in love

with the freedom of the stage, and the ability to use all of my tools/skill-sets/talents to tell stories, and discover myself.



Sally: You also teach as a Master Teaching Artist. I love that title. Please explain what you teach, and what it means to be a Master Teaching Artist.

Iyaba: A few years back, Connecticut offered professional training to local artists through the organization, **Urban Arts Initiative**, sponsored by the **National Endowment**

for the Arts. The instructors were working professionals who offered wonderful knowledge on how to become a fulltime artist.

Two of the classes on which I focused most were: 1) Resident-teacher classes, which gave me the tools to visit classrooms for residencies that lasted anywhere from a day to several weeks; 2) Master-teaching-artist, which is more about approaching an entity— be it a school or community center— with a unique curriculum that not only touches on the rubrics for that specific demographic, but allows for the ability to engage students for a longer period of time.

I teach *Imagine*, or rather, *A Nurturing of the Imagination*, so any art form that makes that possible, I will employ. That is what I want my students to explore.

For me, the teaching component is my way of paying it forward. As an insecure, introverted, immigrant seventh grader at Cloonan Middle School in Stamford, CT, Mr. David Sepulveda, a Puerto Rican man—my art teacher— looked over my shoulder and said, *Wow, that's a beautiful brush stroke, you must be a painter.* He celebrated my work, and would share it with the other art teachers. I left his class that quarter sure I could become an artist. So I teach mostly for that: for that one kid waiting to be encouraged to explore his gifts by someone who looks like him.

Sally: That is truly beautiful, Iyaba.

Please tell us about your 1Man play, *unFRAMED*. I understand you performed it on your first African tour to South Africa and Nigeria?

Iyaba: We stayed in South Africa a little over six weeks. After the writers' festival in Kimberley, we toured the country north to the border with Namibia, back to Cape Town, and finally Joburg. We performed the play, *unFramed*, and also excerpts, along the journey. *unFRAMED* is an autobiographical story of my journey so far. I play eleven characters to tell “the story of me” in prose-poetry, song, and dance while painting a self-portrait that grows with the story.

In Nigeria, we performed in a terrific impromptu open air theater with theater students we had worked with for several weeks in Calabar.

Sally: You also performed your first novel, *Sins of My Fathers*, on the tour. Please tell us about that

Iyaba: We did several readings of my novel as I was an invited writer to the Northern Cape Writers' festival in Kimberley (infamous for the De Beers diamond mines), South Africa, in 2015. Being a performer, my readings are very animated.

Sally: You brought your poetry on the tour, too. Did you perform your poetry in South Africa and Nigeria?

Iyaba: Yes, it was—and remains— a high point of my career to have performed with the giants of South African poetry and art— Dr. Don Materra, and Professor Pitika Ntuli — who welcomed me home after a performance to a room of over five hundred people with the embraces and kisses of Grand Parents.

In Nigeria, where I lived for nearly six months, my poetry was lived. West Africa is where my ancestors were stolen from. The spiritual connections I experienced there replenished my sense of self— and sense of place— in this world. I *became* my Art in Nigeria.

Sally: That is amazing. Do you tour often?

Iyaba: We tour as often as we can. We were actually recently on tour with my band, D'Jeli, in the Caribbean. We were performing a new version of the play, now called *Self Portrait unframed*, when this pandemic hit. I came back home to Connecticut for a two week hiatus, and everything stopped. Much of the remaining tour is on pause as we wait to see what 2021 brings.

“AFRIKA360”...I came back with that mantra! I took the DNA in my body home. After nearly five hundred years, I was returning the bloodline of my Maternal and Paternal foundation to their origins. Within hours of arriving in Joburg, I removed my shoes and buried my feet in the soil.

My second night at the festival, I was asked to close out the welcome reading. The host convinced me to share a poem I had begun earlier that day about my return. My brain seemed to almost remember the haunting beauty of the languages. That brought me, and a room of over four hundred people, to tears. Two of South Africa's artistic giants— Don Materra and Pitika Ntuli— came to the stage, and embraced me with tears, hugs, and kisses. That was my welcome home.

I learned later that the community center was called Mayibuye, a term used during apartheid. It means “Bring Africa back.” It led to six weeks of magical beauty, touring the country. From the descendants of the Koisian people in Namakwa land, to Robben Island where Sobukwe and Mandela were imprisoned, and the sprawling ghettos of Alexandria. And so much more.

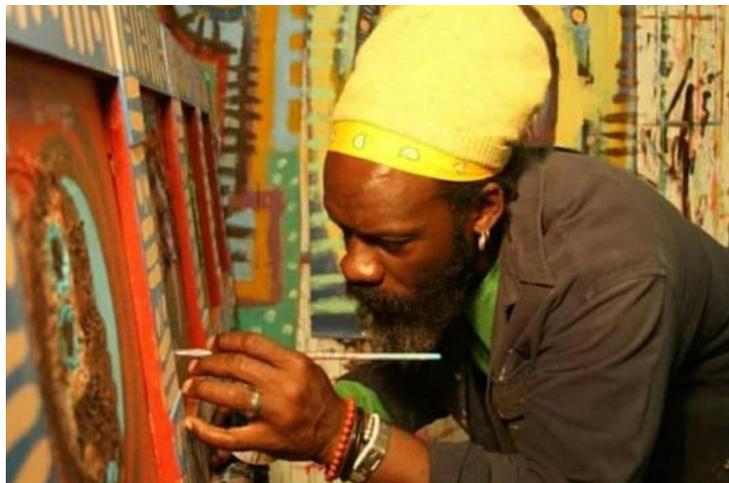
In Nigeria— the place where my blood began, the place that a Zulu Sangoma (spiritual diviner) told me would be where I would “find the rest of what I was looking for”— I remembered myself. Five and a half months of being in a place filled with people I looked like, everywhere! I have never ever felt more comfortable inside my own skin.

We performed at the Shrine—Fela Kuti’s legendary temple of freedom and music— and in venues across Lagos. We traveled to Calabar, and experienced the Africa from which our people were taken so many generations ago. Within weeks, I was speaking the Nigerian Pidgin English fluently, and understood more Yoruba words than logic could explain. I came back to America completely reconstructed—spiritually, artistically— completely.

Sally: That is so incredible, Iyaba.

Please tell us about your visual art. Your painting in our **Art & Text** booklet is so beautiful, and powerful. I think you show your work in galleries?

Iyaba: The visual Art is the first gift I recognized.



By age five, I was already getting in trouble with Mommy for taking her aluminum foil to create entire worlds with animals, and houses, and people.

Later, art was how I found my place as an eleven year old immigrant.

Today, it is probably the most fluid of the languages I speak. My art has been presented in exhibitions around the globe. We have collectors in the Caribbean, Japan, Europe, Canada, Africa, and North and South America.

Sally: I'd love to see your aluminum foil creations from when you were a boy. How marvelous! It's so good to remember our beginnings.

On top of all of this creativity, how do you find the energy to have a clothing line: **MandingoWear**©?! I understand the line has received several grants. Please share!

Iyaba: [MANDINGOWEAR](#) was a happy coincidence that has grown into a wearable art component of iYABARTS. I love ProKeds sneakers. I found a classic pair a few years back, and didn't realize until I got home that the reason they were so cheap was because of a huge smudge on the left heel! I painted them with an African mask motif, and added them to my collection of shoes. The first time I posted a picture of them on social media the response was insane! In a year's time, I had sold more than two hundred pairs of ProKeds, Chuck Taylor Converse, and Timberland Boots. I remembered my graffiti beginnings, designing Lee jackets, and my days as my Grandfather's apprentice in his tailor shop, and **MandingoWear** was born!

Sally: Well, I love that shoe on the [MANDINGOWEAR](#) website!

What do you enjoy in life outside of the arts! Gardening, family?

Iyaba: Family! I have five beautiful adult children: Malik is 31, Oni is 28, Femi is 27, Atiba is 26, and Kofi is 25.

I also love to cook, but I realize that my approach to that is very much painting inspired!

I also enjoy staying fit, and discovering new plant based foods to enjoy. Give me the Caribbean, and a bucket of mangoes, and I'm in heaven!

Sally: Please share with us anything else you'd like to talk about on the Poetry Page!
Thanks for joining us, Iyaba!

Iyaba: Our newest book of poetry, *Season Rice*, will be out in February of 2021, along with two children's books— *Navel Strings* and *Kwaku's Mask*.

We now have a gallery/loft here in Bridgeport CT, and look forward to the post-Covid days when we can invite everyone to come and share some art with us!



Iyaba Ibo Mandingo

2 Families 1 house

Now, three poems by Iyaba...

The statue of liberty

maybe I blinked but I don't think...
I remember seeing her from the plane
I was looking for an Ellis island vibration
when I entered this nation...
But this place wasn't mine to have...

one day I went looking for her...
to get some liberty from her...
I wondered if she'd have anything to say...
I think they closed her mouth the same day...
they closed Ellis island...

I walked inside her dress
And looked up past her breast...
to see her crown...
here from the ground...
the stairway to her brain moved slowly...
like a midday train...
as I climbed closer to her peak...
her stairwell grew much steeper...
and when I looked the way I came...
the bottom seemed much deeper...

the top was claustrophobic
and made plenty people sick...
the door to the heaven stretched arm was off limits...
no one could go there anymore...
since Ellis island closed her doors...

but I wanted to go up there to see...
what Kilpatrick & Goldstein & Carluchi & Smith...see...
But my name is Mandingo
and today it's off limits to me...

She represents america
in more ways than they know...
I climbed to the top to find doors
I could not enter...
Where many did before...but now not anymore...
I descended her stairwell of iron cold...
Realizing miss liberty had lost her soul...
and all her liberty had been sold...
2 those who could pay with their white skin...
Mr. Ellis would check them in...
European second home...
where Indians and buffalo used to roam...
and third world people get sent back home...
by xenophobic offspring
of European boat people
who now write laws...
that would have sent their great grandparents back...
back to Ireland...
back to Italy...
back to Western Europe...
back to feeling black like third world people...
waiting for Mr. Ellis to write his sequel...

from her beacon hand glows worldwide freedom...
cries she with silent lips...
give me your tired your poor...
your huddled masses
yearning to breathe free
I lift my lamp beside the golden door...
but for third world people
there doesn't seem to be a
knob anymore
So maybe
I blinked...

Tomorrow

old man on donkey
sideway ridn
coax-d along wid strategic
slap from cutlass turnd flat gainst hind parts
carryn a bag fulla yesterdays
in the crocus sack
bouncn gentle gainst the curve of his back
smiles a jagged hello...
to curious bright eye-d boy
face fulla inquisitive
lookn sideways at the sack
...ridn slowly into morrow

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FROWN

Black boy strolls down busy road...
longside curb...
gainst traffic
head down lookn n2 nufn
hands swing heavy shoulders
curled n2
a ball of fight
ere'thing aint all right
Frown too heavy for a boy
That age...

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