

A Poet Looks Past Bitterness

By Walter Blum

■ Al Young stands tall, and vital, and friendly eyes look at you when he talks. But it is the voice that gets you. A gentle voice — the voice of a poet and writer who has heard the cadences of life, and knows the special joys and heartbreaks that become part of a man when he is black.

He was born in Mississippi, 30 years ago, but there is no trace of South in the voice. He grew up in Detroit, though, where he listened anew to the sounds of Afro language and absorbed them into his skin. Music ran in the family, and at one time Al sang professionally and played trumpet. Young's father played jazz tuba. "For me, though, there was something important about the word," he says. "I finally had to decide: was I going to play music, or write, or just be mediocre at both?" He settled on the word.

Lately, success of a sort has greeted Al Young's efforts. Holt, Rinehart and Winston just brought out his first novel, *Snakes*. Critics have hailed him as one of the most promising of the young black writers. There have been prizes: the \$1500 Joseph Henry Jackson Award for his book of poems, *Dancing*; a \$500 National Endowment for the Arts prize for a poem in an anthology. At Stanford, where he teaches, students line up for his courses, and a second novel *Where Is Angelina?* is slowly taking shape in his typewriter.

What makes Al Young significant, however, is that he represents a new trend, a new attitude and a new direction in American Negro writing.

"Until recently," he explains, "black writers were almost required to write something that was overtly angry, something that said, 'Charley, Whitey, I'm gonna cut your throat.' It gave the white reader a titillation, it sold, and publishers were pushing it because it did sell. It's reached the point now, though, where the public is no longer excited by clenched fists, by pseudo-black anger — I say 'pseudo' because of the way Madison Avenue has been exploiting it."

The new look may not be as startling, but it will be better literature, he is convinced.

"In the Seventies," predicts Young, "there's going to be a rich flowering of black genius, unlike anything that has been seen before. There are young writers coming up now who are not so much interested in frightening the Man, meaning Mr. Charley, but in expressing themselves deeply as human beings — writers like Ishmael Reed and Cecil Brown and Paul Lofty and William Anderson — writers interested in bringing out the enormous variety of feeling and thought in the black community, which you weren't allowed to see in the Sixties when Black Anger was the only thing fashionable."

Not everyone agrees. A hip friend, Young writes in one of his poems, once advised him to strike a more militant pose. "Don't nobody want no nice nigger no more," the friend warned.

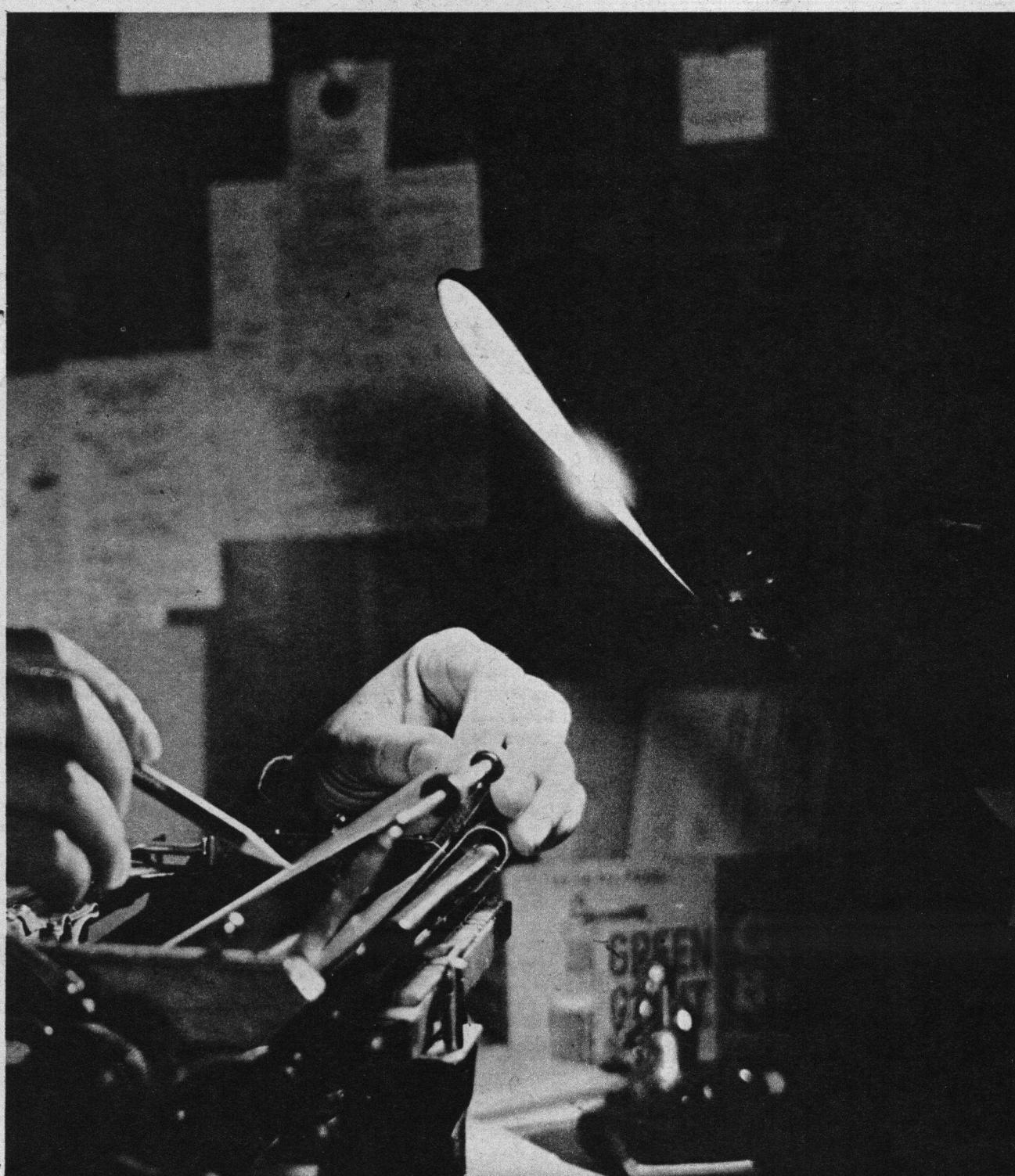
But Al Young's voice has remained gentle. Although he admits militancy may be neces-

sary, he also believes it can become a cliché. "We've always been stereotyped" he complains. "First, there was the Stepin Fetchit, yassuh-boss-I'm-goin'-to-the-big-riverboat stereotype. Then came the angry black man shaking his fist — and shaking it and shaking it. But never once in all this was there a hint that black people might also be human beings. This is what you're going to discover in the new literature."

Young himself has never fit any mold. He attended the University of Michigan, where he majored in Spanish, but quit in his senior year "because I wanted to see the sad world." There followed a period of wandering and odd jobs — construction worker, disc jockey, professional musician — then marriage, a Stegner writing fellowship at Stanford and a degree from UC Berkeley. Nowhere, at no time, did Al Young join a literary movement, or become part of any avant-garde. He has always been his own man.

His poems speak of love and pain and ordi-





Photography: Fran Ortiz

nary people; a few are odes to favorite musicians like John Coltrane and Ma Rainey. He writes them on scraps of paper, which he then stuffs in a desk drawer and may not see for months. "I'm always surprised by what I find," he says.

For prose he uses a typewriter. When a novel is in progress, as it is now, he will try to set aside three hours each day — morning or evening — squeeze himself into a five-by-five studio at his small tree-shaded home in Palo Alto, leave word with his wife Arlin not to be disturbed, and type. He makes no outline of what he's going to write. "I type very quickly," he explains. "I find I'm able to take dictation, so to speak, from my mind."

His first novel was seven years in the making, and went the rounds of publishers. "I have a whole sack of rejection slips at home," he says. "I read in *Writers Yearbook* once that a guy papered his room with rejection slips, and I thought that was a pretty cool thing to do."

Fortunately, there weren't enough slips to

complete the project. Young was in Mexico, resting, when word came that *Snakes* had been accepted. "My agent wrote me that the editor had arrived from London one morning, found the manuscript on his desk, read it, called her up at noon and said, 'We'll take it!'" In publishing, that happens about as often as a movie star being discovered sitting on a drug-store stool.

Snakes is about a young black musician growing up in Detroit, and obviously there are autobiographical elements in it. But most important, the book makes a stab at reproducing what Young calls the "Afro-American language."

Young is fascinated with the fact that most black people, especially educated blacks, are bilingual. "It's not just the vocabulary," he says, "it's the intonation." In standard English, for example, a man might say, "I'll see you in an hour or so." The same sentence in one of the black idioms might come out something like, "Amo check you out in about an hour."

Birthday Poem

*First light of day in Mississippi
son of laborer & of house wife
it says so on the official photostat
not son of fisherman & child fugitive
from cottonfields & potato patches
from sugarcane chickens & well-water
from kerosene lamps & watermelons
mules named jack or jenny & wagonwheels,*

*years of meaningless farm work
work Work WORK WORK WORK —
"Papa pull you outta school bout March
to stay on the place & work the crop"
— her own earliest knowledge
of human hopelessness & waste*

*She carried me around nine months
inside her fifteen year old self
before here I sit numbering it all*

*How I got from then to now
is the mystery that could fill a whole library
much less an arbitrary stanza*

*But of course you already know about that
from your own random suffering
& sudden inexplicable bliss.*

— Al Young

"Now, if you examine that sentence," says Young, "you'll see that the 'amo' business — the squeezing together of 'I will' or 'I am going to' — is basically a structural thing. It's part of a different language, different, that is, from standard English. When I was growing up, we all spoke two languages like this: one at school, another at home."

The language, and all the variety of personality and experience in the Negro's world — this will come out, Young believes, in the coming Black Renaissance.

"In fact," he says, "Ralph Ellison in one of his essays claims that there's a wider range of personality difference in the black community than in the general American mainstream. I think I know what he means. People living on a more precarious basis, not knowing from week to week what they'll be doing, tend to develop life styles that are more peculiar, more individualized. But America has just begun to learn what black people are like as people."

"Think about it. When a white man appears on television, the question never arises: Is he an Uncle Tom, is he a militant? But with a black person up there, just his very presence says a whole world about black people in general, about America. Viewers ask questions. They wonder what the man's posture is. I think it will be a long time before black people are accepted just for what they are. You know, there are all kinds of blacks — some are bastards, some aren't. The problem is seeing the truth is racism itself. This is what keeps Americans from knowing what blacks are really like."

Young's object in his prose, and in his
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poems, is to try and strip the stereotypes from the person, the myths from the man. None of this is exactly new, of course. As long ago as 1946, Ralph Ellison was objecting that in literature, Negroes were seldom drawn "as that sensitively focused process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct, of passion and spirituality, which great literary art has projected as the image of man."

Ellison could have been writing about Young himself. For there are fascinating opposites in Young, too, his clothes — yellow Finnish tie, striped brown shirt, mod brown shoes, for example—in contrast with the ever-present voice, gentle, subdued, even middle-class. The contrast of writer, digging deep into his guts; and the unspectacular life of the man, the college instructor in suburbia, spending his spare time sketching or hiking with his wife in places like Mendocino, Marin County and the wilds of Big Sur.

Life is fairly settled now for Young, but it hasn't always been so. "We struggled hard during our marriage to keep things together," he says. Recognition came slowly, too. Until now, the majority of his stories and poems were bought by little magazines and quarterlies, and royalties were meager. In the literary world, one simply does not get rich off *Evergreen Review*.

Getting people to dig poetry has also been something of a problem. A couple of years ago, when he was still in college, Young taught ghetto youngsters at the Neighborhood Youth Corps in Berkeley. One day he asked a boy, "Why don't you like poetry?" The boy shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if poetry is so groovy, and it has all these groovy things in it like you say," said the youth, "why do you poets keep beating around the bush all the time?"

The youngster's reply stuck in his mind. "What this kid was asking us to do was tell it like it is," he says. "And this is what I believe a poet must practice — but with his own voice and his own heart, like Walt Whitman, even if it means breaking all the rules and all the little codifications."

More than anything else, though, Young is disturbed by the cynicism of the times. "The whole business of art as hustle, which seems to be where we've come to in this part of the interminable Twentieth Century, has to be challenged." He mentions books like *Airport*, *In Cold Blood* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. "Research jobs," he calls them. "You can admire the work, but where is the writer with heart, with feeling?"

This catering to the market place has caught up with black writers, too, and many of

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them, he claims, have been sold down the river.

"The rumor now is that black anger is out, that what's wanted now is *white* anger, protest, Abbie Hoffman." Young sees this as part of an ugly syndrome. "The publishing industry milks a theme until it's dry, and then they drop it, and some poor guy who thought he'd really opened up a field finds out he's been a dupe, he's been used, to fulfill a particular fad." Anything to make a buck, he says. "Like everything else in American life you package it up, whether it be egg or sausage, and you sell it."

There is a touch of gray in Al Young's hair now, premature perhaps, but no indication that he has yet become world-weary or disillusioned. The fight goes on, unabated. On the once all-white Stanford campus, Al Young cuts

a bright, interesting figure. Students stop to talk to him. A pretty coed brings over a form to sign for summer study in Italy, reminding Young of 1963 when he spent seven months bumming around Europe, soaking up atmosphere.

He walks slowly now, with easy strides. In the hot Palo Alto sun, the voice is like a cool refreshing bath. He glances at the students around, many only a few years younger than he. He thinks that what they are searching for is spirituality, some equivalent for religion.

"There's a hunger for a cosmological tying together of things," says Young, "a justification on some higher plane. I've found that even very political students of mine crave this assurance, that there is some part of man that transcends what is discernible to the senses. I think this accounts for the popularity of writ-

ers like Herman Hesse — and the popularity of drugs."

The old avant-garde posture, he says, is fading. "Every mediocrity knows how to deck his work out in some fantastic idiom, in a dress that looks offbeat. But the pendulum's swinging the other way now. The bizarre, the grotesque, the way-out — everything that gets lumped together under the term avant-garde — is on the way out.

"Nobody can really be shocked by anything in literature any more. People are finding there's a limit to how much they can be turned on by drugs and sex. If there's an avant-garde today, it's among those writers and artists who are trying to restore a kind of basicness to art — whether it be of a spiritual or an intellectual nature."

Out of this, Al Young believes, will come the Black Renaissance.

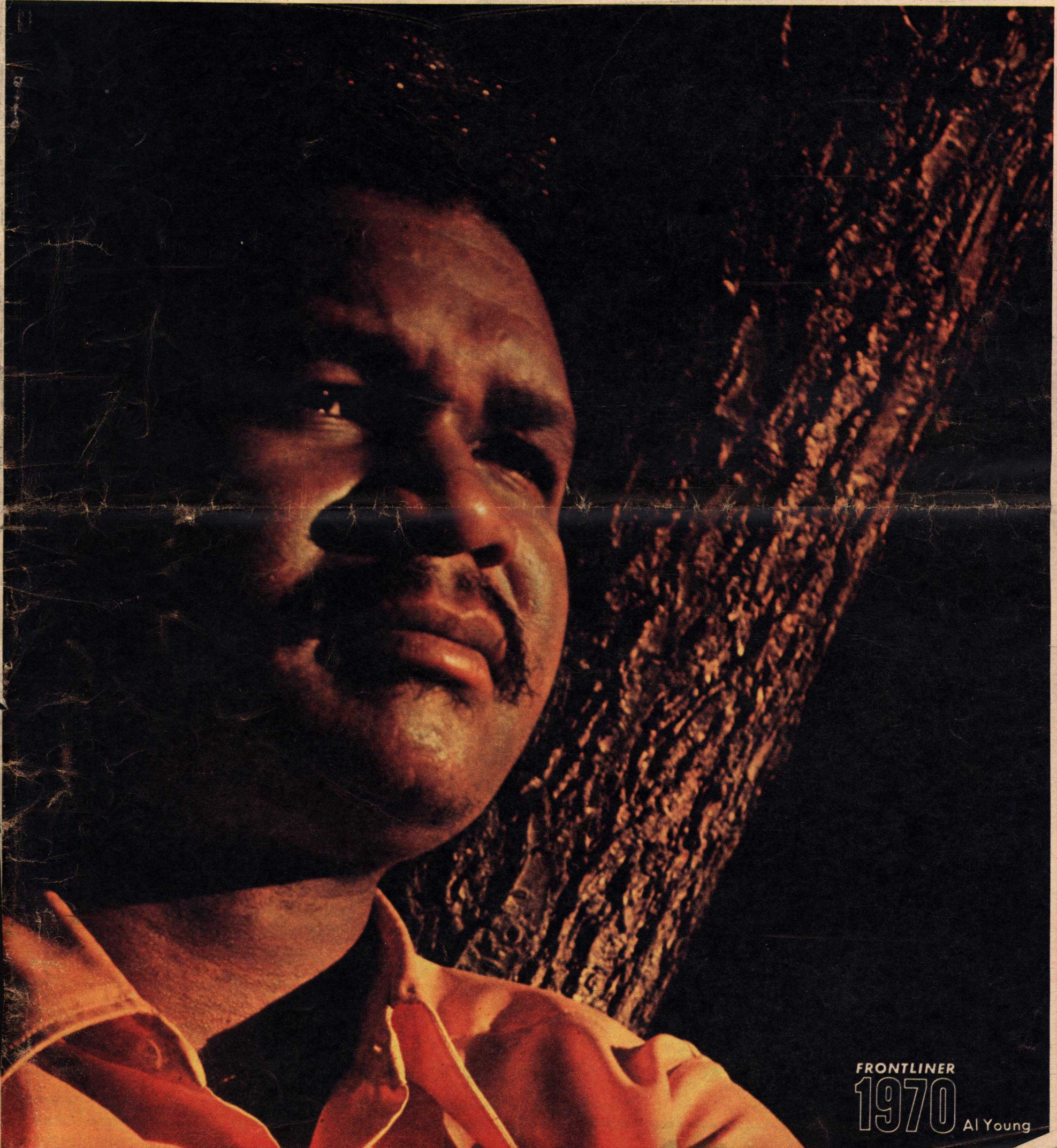
"Last week, I sat in on an Afro-American literature class in which a work of mine was being discussed," he recalls. "I was under the heaviest attack from white students who were saying, 'You're not militant enough.' Then a black student got up and remarked, 'You know, LeRoi Jones isn't the only black writer around, there are all kinds of things happening in the black community.'"

With his gentle, yet distinctive voice, Al Young is one of those things happening. □

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1970 Al Young