



The Only Thing That Lasts:

An Oral History of Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop interview with Michael Kelly Williams

Michael Kelly Williams, raised in Detroit, Michigan, grew up surrounded by art and music. After studying art at the University of Michigan, he moved to New York City and in the summer of 1979- joined The Printmaking Workshop. There he connected with a global community of artists and met key figures such as Otto Neals, robin holder, Krishna Reddy, and Betty Blayton, who involved him in her Children's Art Carnival. His experiences, including his time printing in a studio Blackburn helped to establish in Asilah, Morocco, continue to shape his art today. In 2018, he became the first recipient of the Blackburn Legacy Fellowship. Williams has been commissioned for various permanent installations, including two mosaic murals at the Intervale Subway Station (2/5) in the Bronx and several glass murals in Queens, New York.

In this excerpt, he reflects on his close bond with Blackburn, their shared passion for jazz, Geri Allen's album *The Printmakers*, and the first woodcut he printed at the workshop.

**Interview conducted by Camille Crain Drummond
November 2, 2023**

Michael Kelly Williams:

Bob and I shared our love for music, particularly Black improvisational music, although, you know, music from, international music too, diasporic music, yeah. So, Bob always had the radio tuned to the local jazz station, and he would tape actually music at home, and he would share, he would say, "Michael, you got to hear this!" And let me, you know, listen to a cassette. It's funny because cassettes of Bob's are here at the shop, you know, and they're archived. But anyway. We would go to clubs together, and Bob seemed to know everybody. Like, he would go to everyone's show, practically. I'm serious! But he knew many musicians. So I remember going with him to Louis Armstrong's house, where Max Roach was giving a demo. That was just so sublime. And he and Bob went way back.

Well, I want to share. The musician Geri Allen, who came from Detroit too, was a dear friend of mine. Her first album is titled *The Printmakers*. You know, I mean, who gives the printmakers any credit? But Geri came here and to the printmaking workshop. I mean, I knew her from Detroit, but she had a dear friend, Kabuya, who she went to Howard with, and Calvin Reid who also went to Howard. So

they were printmakers that were regularly here at the shop. So Geri's first album, *The Printmakers*, if you listen to that, you know, you hear sounds and some of the music—these presses make sounds and the artists, they could be carving, they could be using techniques that make certain noises. But anyway, I remember going to the Vanguard with Bob to hear Geri play, and Geri says during intermission: “And we have someone in the audience I'd like everyone to know—Robert Blackburn!” You know, beautiful. Yeah.

/

Camille Crain Drummond:

Do you want to talk quickly about this being the first print you made in the shop?

MKW:

Yes. This is the first. Well, eventually I would work litho colors behind this, and it would become the first, you know, full-color print I did at the workshop. And so it depicts a kind of fusion of the art ensemble of Chicago and Sun Ra's band, that I was listening to. Sun Ra was in residence at a place called Squat in Chelsea, right around the corner from the printmaking workshop. So we have a piano player, a bass player coming in, a couple of bass players. I mean, you can see there, the bass and two horns.