



AL ROBLES, 1930-2009

Al Robles, the fabled San Francisco zen poet, one-man social service agency, and founder of the Manilatown Senior Center, has passed on at age 79.

After a month with a debilitating nerve disorder, he was in recovery when he suddenly died on May 2.

Manong Al fought for the rights of the poor and the elderly throughout his life.

Along with delivering meals to shut-ins, he would record their oral histories of joy and hardship, then transform this into poetry. He mentored and inspired many community artists and activists during his tenure on Kearny Street.

Like many others, I assumed he would be around forever. Perpetually forty five years old, he roamed Chinatown, Manilatown, the Fillmore, Tule Lake, the Hopi Nation, and far-flung casinos. He led by example, serving the seniors, and fighting for the resurrection of the International Hotel.

With no pager, cellphone or email, Al could only be found in a chance meeting on a bus or on the street, unmediated by some modern contrivance. Organic and spontaneous direct human contact was part of his Way. He took care of the manong generation for over thirty years, even as he had become a manong himself. His schedule included meeting and adjusting to every crisis that came his way.

In 1970, as a young student of the then-new Asian American Studies, Al brought me out to read poetry with him at Civic Center, only to be heckled by winos. Far out! He was also my guide to the world of the manongs and SRO hotel life. He brought me to a hidden, locked, long-closed downstairs eatery below the I-Hotel. We sat on round fixed stools, plopping our bags on the dust-caked counter. He told stories, one after another. It was manongs and the VA, manongs and SSI, manongs at the doctor's, their wild adventures with fish, food, women, taxi dances... himself, a kid from the Fillmore, chasing perfumed dreams down Kearny Street.

He leaves behind a lunch program at the new International Hotel, and his book "Rappin' With Ten Thousand Carabaos In The Dark".

--- Curtis Choy