

I Have A Poem For You
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Thoughts by Doug Holder

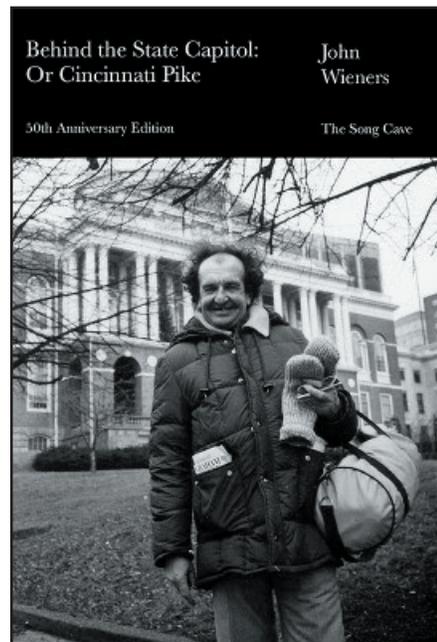
Recently I went on a tour of the Beacon Hill environs that the late poet John Wieners inhabited for many years. Jim Dunn, a confidante of Wieners in his last years hosted the tour, and was full of anecdotes about the poet and his life and times. The walk was partly in support of a reissued collection of Wiener's, "Behind the State Capitol: Or Cincinnati Pike." Jim generously agreed to this interview.

The original book was published in 1975 by the Good Gay Poets. Can you tell us about this collaborative and why was it decided to reissue this book in 2025?

The Good Gay Poets were an influential publishing group that was an offshoot of the gay liberation Fag Rag collective. John Wieners was involved primarily through his friendship with Charley Shively. Charley, Michael Bronski, John Mitzel and Larry Martin formed the radical gay anarchist collective in the early 70s and began publishing the Boston gay newspaper, Fag Rag, which ran until the early 1980's. Charley was a founding member the Good Gay Poets Collective publishing several seminal books of poetry by queer poets outside the mainstream poetry establishment. They published Freddie Greenfield's *Were You Always a Criminal?* ruth weiss' *Desert Journals*, and Aaron Shurin's broadside *Exorcism of the straight/man/demon*, Charley was the author of one book of poetry as well as the *Collected Works of Lyssander Spooner* (1971), *A History of the Conception of Death in America, 1650-1860*, his doctoral dissertation (1988), *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working Class Camerados* (1987) and *Drum Beats: Walt Whitman's Civil War Boy Lovers* (1989).

Charley also published *Behind the State Capitol* putting the book together with Wieners and John Mitzel. The three of them worked together on the collages and layout of the text. Originally, 1,500 soft covers and 100 hardcovers were printed. However, many of those copies were lost in a fire deliberately started by off-duty police and firemen in 1982, making the book very scarce. As John's reputation has grown, his work was discovered by a new generation of younger poets. The decision to reissue now was primarily Raymond Foye's idea working with the publisher, The Song Cave and it is long overdue. Copies of the original book are rare and go for hundreds of dollars. Until now, readers could only read it in PDF or excerpted in the *Black Sparrow Collected Poems* that Raymond edited.

This version will be an exact reproduction of the original text and collages, which was important to preserve as they were originally published, because it is such a unique book, visually and textually. (The re-issue will be available on November 4th) Also, coincidentally, a book of Charley's



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poems has just been published by Bootstrap and there is another Wieners book of John's essays and interviews to be published by Lithic Press this year.

They were years ahead of their time. The world has caught up. Charley, John and their work are so important in the air of these dark and tricky times. The only lingering regret I have is that I wish they were both here to see the fruits of their literary labors.

Wieners was a veritable 'walker in the city.' You formed a walking tour of his haunts. Tell us about this.

The Tour was suggested and sponsored by the Woodberry Poetry Room. I have Christina Davis and Mary Graham to thank for putting the whole thing together. It was a companion event to the reading the prior Tuesday at Harvard's Houghton Library with poets Eileen Myles and Cedar Sigo celebrating the re-issue of *Behind the State Capitol*. John's world the last years of his life was the Bohemian Northside of Beacon Hill, "Beatnik Hill" as you call it.

I was lucky enough to spend time with John the last 10 years of his life walking those streets with him. And it was always reassuring to be driving around Boston and have a random John Wieners sighting in Beacon Hill, in Government Center, by the Boston Public Library – I would see him walking the streets, even though we met regularly, and it was good to know that he was still part of the fabric of the city back then. Now, it seems his absence is part of the story of neighborhoods that has been lost with gentrification over the years, in Beacon Hill, the destruction of the West End and the ghosts of Scollay Square. I wrote an essay in *Jacket Magazine* about John and his walking world, *The Old Brick City by the Atlantic*.

Wieners used newspaper clippings, Hollywood fan magazines, even a disfigured image of gay porn. Did he ever talk to you about his art—collages, etc... that he used, in his books?

John would cut and paste various images and articles inside copies of his own books, especially in *Behind the State Capitol*. Images and collages were as important in that book as the text. The books in his library would become scrapbooks of decoupage, collages composed of everything around him. Although they would appear, at first glance, to be random assemblages of images cut from magazines, junk mail and articles, one would gradually see a pattern of transposing and pasting his dreams over the reality of his printed work.

John actively was engaged in his own work on a very visceral and physical level. Beyond stuffing his texts with the various ephemera of his everyday existence—and pasting pictures throughout, which frequently contained hidden personal meaning. John's active relationship with his books was ongoing and speaks to the fact that he was constantly reworking, collaging, covering and uncovering poems and pages in his books to a point where some copies are damaged beyond repair. But in John's world the books were not damaged, they were improved—with new edits, torn images of movie stars, poetry-reading flyers, and whatever else held secret importance to him at the time.

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The late Jack Powers told me that Beacon Hill—home to the poet—was called “Beatnik Hill” back in the day. I would think Wieners would have been comfortable here—although he didn’t consider himself a Beat poet, per say.

I think John was very comfortable in Beacon Hill living in the same apartment for almost thirty years from the early 70s until his death in 2002. I think his apartment specifically was very dear to him. Although it was sparse and a bit eccentric, it was home to him. I always felt privileged when I visited his apartment like I was entering another world—John’s world. I really treasure those memories of the two of us just sitting silently in the back room of his apartment together alone in our own thoughts.

John’s comfort in Beacon Hill and his well-being was provided by a small group of friends and relatives—Charley Shively, me, Raymond Foye, and his cousin Arlene Phinney and her son, Walter. Another person who truly was a lifeline to John in his later years was Jack Powers. Jack made sure John had cigarettes and would always whip up a warm meal for John, even when Jack was down on his luck. John’s comfort day to day in Beacon Hill was in large part, thanks to Jack. Jack set up many readings for John including two legendary readings at the Old West Church—one with an amazing cast of musicians and poets, and another with John Sinclair with Wayne Kramer playing crazy guitar accompaniment before a gig at TT the Bear’s. Jack always made sure John was paid even if it meant taking money out of his own pocket. Jack was essential. I got to know John well through his connection to Jack. They were more than neighbors—they were poet brothers.

Wieners was once asked directly what it was specifically that differentiated him from the other Beat writers. He took a long puff of his cigarette, and responded, “They got famous. I did not.” – a response so obvious, simple and direct, it elicited uneasy laughter from those present.

Why do you think Wieners is an important poet? When he was alive was he accepted by the academy—the Boston literati?

Wieners’ work is authentic in nature and pure in spirit. His unique voice had the sonorous quality of Old Towne Boston. Through the depths of drug abuse, bouts of mental illness, and emotional turmoil, he dedicated his life to the practice of poetry, and the artistic pursuit of heavenly visions amidst the ruins of daily life. There was a certain light from within him that was truly connected to a divine inspiration. He had a rare genius in his ability to perceive magic in the mundane and capture it in the immediate language of his work.

Although he published only a handful of books and three issues of his magazine, *Measure*, in his lifetime, his influence upon his contemporary poets and subsequent generations of writers is immeasurable. Poets who admire his work take him immediately to heart, and regard him with absolute devotion. His work has gained a cult status among generations of Boston poets like Joe Torra, Dan Bouchard, Sean Cole and Jim Berhle but especially amongst queer poets including Eileen Myles, Cedar Sigo, Kevin Killian, Jeremy Reed, Dennis Cooper, Michael Rumaker, Julian Brolaski, CA Conrad, Nat Raha, and many others. A poet’s poet, his various friendships and connections placed him in multiple influential poetic move-

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ments, but his poetry is singular and unique, especially in *Behind the State Capitol*.

Allen Ginsberg saw immediately the purity of Wieners' unique talent, "John Wieners glory is solitary as a poet – a man reduced to loneliness in poetry, without worldly distractions - and a man become one with his poetry." I think Robert Creeley in his introduction to *Cultural Affairs in Boston* said it best, "The poetry of John Wieners has an exceptional human beauty as if there is any other... (He) makes manifest the complex place from which all (his) work finally has come, and to which it, and he also, insistently returns: 'my city, Boston...' He said once to an interviewer, "I am a Boston poet," and there is no one for whom that city, or any other, has proven so determining and generative an experience.... Against the casual waste of our lives, his has proved a cost and commitment so remarkable. He has given everything to our common world."

I think there is such fervent appreciation for John's poetry lately because he was so criminally under-appreciated as a poet in his lifetime. He was virtually ignored by critics and Academic poets in his lifetime. I wanted to write my thesis at the Harvard Extension School on his work, and I was initially rejected because of the lack of criticism published at the time. It took several years but I finally was able to write my thesis on John. Since then, young scholars such as Robert Dewhurst and Seth Stewart have worked tirelessly to champion his work. Since his death, multiple editions of his letters, journals and other writings have been published, with more to be published in the near future. Consequently, his reputation and popularity among a wide array of poets and critics have increased considerably. Maybe, in another 50 years, he will be seen as one of the true lyric poets of the late 20th century whose work was years ahead of its time.

The reissued edition of *Behind the State Capitol* is available from The Song Cave now and can be found here-

<https://the-song-cave.com/products/behind-the-state-capitol-or-cincinnati-pike-by-john-wieners>

Charley Shively book of poems *I Have a Poem for You*, was recently published by Bootstrap Press available now-

<https://terrier-celery-swmk.squarespace.com/store/p/i-have-a-poem-for-you-by-charles-shively>