

SMALL PRESS LEGENDS: JOHN MARTIN

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John Martin (1930), founder of Black Sparrow Press, was both publisher and editor for 36 years, retiring in 2002. He is most noted for helping to launch the literary career of Charles Bukowski and re-publishing the works of John Fante. He published over a dozen titles annually, with more than \$1 million in sales, including works by Wyndham Lewis, Paul Bowles, Robert Duncan, Theodore Dreiser, Joyce Carol Oates, D.H. Lawrence, Diane Wakoski and many other influential writers. Martin sold Black Sparrow's backlist to David R. Godine in 2002, and publication rights to Bukowski, Paul Bowles, and John Fante, were sold to Ecco Press, where they still appear, with the now-famous covers designed by his wife Barbara Martin.

A.D.: Could you please elaborate on your background before you started Black Sparrow Press in 1966?

J.M.: My father was killed in an automobile accident in 1939 when I was eight, and that eliminated financial security for our family. There was enough insurance for my mother to continue raising her three children. I couldn't attend college, and had to go to work right out of high school. I enjoyed my own *factotum*, I had many crummy jobs, but I always did very well in them. I can remember two times when I was hired as extra labor, and ended up becoming the general manager. In 1959, the year I got married, I landed a job with an office supply, printing, and furniture company. I was there for ten years. I helped build that company up from just three people working out of a garage, myself and the two owners, into an impressive enterprise with forty employees, doing millions of dollars a year. That's where I got my expertise as far as building a company up from nothing.

After about eight years I realized I had accumulated a collection of rare books that I could easily sell in order to launch my own publishing venture –I was tired of working for others– and that's exactly what I did. So I sold my collection of first editions—in those days rare literary first editions were cheap, I rarely paid more than five dollars for a book. At that point I had invested three thousand, maybe four thousand dollars, in the collection over the previous 15 years. I sold the collection to UCSB [University of California at Santa Barbara] for fifty thousand dollars.



The agent who made the sale for me took his ten percent. After taxes, I ended up with about thirty five thousand, and that's what enabled me to start Black Sparrow.

A.D.: What made you collect first editions and rare periodicals before Black Sparrow Press came along?

J.M.: I am a born collector. I love that era of writing, 1900-1940, or even prior to that, because I love the work of Henry James and Walt Whitman, for example. My collecting passion began with Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*—I named my daughter Carrie. I think that book is *the* first great novel of the 20th century. I collected all the people you've heard of from that era—D.H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, etc.—and over time I built up an impressive library of first editions. Also included were the moderns, starting with Charles Bukowski. That's the collection I sold to UCSB.

A.D.: What was the main reason for launching Black Sparrow Press?

J.M.: Many contemporary poets that I admired, everybody from Charles Bukowski, to Robert Creeley, to Robert Duncan, etc., didn't have a regular, reliable publisher. I figured that with the experience I'd had building up the commercial supply company I might be able to build up my own publishing company. Over time I was able to accomplish just that.

A.D.: So the idea behind starting out Black Sparrow Press was publishing all those great authors who didn't have a publisher?

J. M.: Right. Heading the list was Charles Bukowski. I ran into his work in an underground magazine [*The Outsider*]. I was so taken I thought, "My God, this is the Walt Whitman of our day!" I called him on the phone, we were both living in Los Angeles, and set up a meeting. In *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*, there's a foreword by Hank [Charles Bukowski] where he talks about that first meeting. While there, I noticed piles of unpublished manuscripts and typescripts on the floor and in his closet—that was, in essence, the first three Bukowski books I published, *At Terror Street and Agony Way*, *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*, and *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*.

A.D.: It all came from that stack of manuscripts?

J.M.: Yes. Over the years I continued to edit Bukowski's poetry books for Black Sparrow and later for Ecco Press, totaling some 2,600 published poems. There's another thousand unpublished poems out there, in magazines and tabloids, but I didn't want to publish lesser work. Hank would sit in the evening, writing poems and stories, and drinking, and sometimes towards the end of the evening the poems got loose and vague—not his best work. So I edited out those poems. Even to this day, however, I continue to find wonderful old poems buried in obscure literary magazines that I never knew about. You've got to remember there were no computers back then. Everything had to be done by snail mail, I'd write to magazines that never responded, I couldn't do research online, etc. I'm amazed I found as much stuff as I did, first published elsewhere in the 1950s and 1960s.

A.D.: Did you come up with the name "Black Sparrow"? What's the story behind it?



J.M.: The name “Black Sparrow” came from two sources. First, I had admired an elegant Paris press run by a married couple in the 1920s called “Black Sun Press.” Harry and Caresse Crosby published the likes of James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, etc. I was enamored of their use of the term “Black.” Then while I was thinking things over, I received a publication announcement in the mail from a “Purple Heron Press.” Too fancy and somewhat annoying! The sparrow is considered a trash bird, a pest, but very hardy, and no amount of pesticides seems to be able to eradicate them. So I took the elegant “Black” and added the trashy but sturdy “Sparrow.” Thus was born “Black Sparrow.”

A.D.: What about the company’s logotype? I think Bukowski was the first one to give it a try, but you settled on Barbara’s design. Is that right?

J.M.: Yes. Hank made a couple of early drawings, but they missed the mark. Then Barbara came up with her memorable design for the sparrow. She revised the sparrow twice over the years, to its present sleek appearance.

A.D.: When you started Black Sparrow Press, did you still have your old job?

J.M.: Yes, for about two years. It was a very tough two years. My job was from 8 until 5. I was the general manager. I ran the print shop among other things—that’s where I learned about printing. I was there every day from 8 until 5, I would go home for dinner, and then I would go to my Black Sparrow office and work from 7 until midnight or later.

A.D.: Did you do that for two years? That’s tough indeed.

J.M.: Well, I had no choice, and I had no employees then.

A.D.: I guess hiring someone to help you out was out of the question back in the day.

J.M.: Yes. There was no profit yet. You’d be amazed at how quickly those thirty five thousand dollars disappeared. In one year, from 1968-1969, I published thirty five books on my own, three a month, with no help, except from my wife Barbara, who did the designing—I’d like to say that Barbara’s great designs were the result of her efforts alone. I would call her attention to other artwork and designs from time to time, but she always went her own way. Later on, I published D.H. Lawrence’s *The Escaped Cock*, and it had such a big sale, I couldn’t handle it. I tried to do the shipping nonstop on the weekends, but after two or three weeks, still unable to ship all the orders, I hired my first employee. A shipping clerk!

A.D.: So you had your first employee ever thanks to that D.H. Lawrence book?

J.M.: Yes. That was in 1973.

A.D.: Then business picked up and you finally had to hire more people.

J.M.: Yes, I had my shipping clerk, and then I hired an assistant, and a bookkeeper. [Editor] Seamus Cooney, who taught at Western Michigan University, had come aboard a few years earlier, and he was a great help. Then over time there were about seven additional people employed directly or indirectly by Black Sparrow, most of them located at our print shop in Santa Barbara.

A.D.: Even though Black Sparrow Press was doing well, you kept the company small.

J.M.: Yes. That we accomplished so much, with such a small staff, still amazes me.



A.D.: When you started out, Black Sparrow Press was a truly small press, and you knew that most small presses barely broke even. What compelled you to keep going?

J.M.: I had built another small company up from nothing, that's what. There was a time, about 1968 or 1969, I was spending more money than I was taking in. One day I sat down to get the orders ready, see how much I was owed, that kind of thing, and I realized I had about sixty days either to move into profit, or go back to work for someone else. About a month went by, and then for the first time ever, more money started coming in than I owed. A glorious moment. From that time on, Black Sparrow was profitable.

A.D.: In those early days, did you ever consider applying for grants or government money to stay afloat?

J.M.: No.

A.D.: How come?

J.M.: *Northwest Review*—I think it was *Northwest Review*—published a thick book listing every small press in existence at the time that sat unread in my office. One night years later, I picked it up, and I found I was one of a few small presses still active. Most of the others, most of whom who relied on grant support, were gone. I think it's better not to depend on other people's money to make you successful.

A.D.: From day one you put out a series of collectibles, special editions of the same book. Did you do that in order to secure some sort of extra income?

J.M.: Sure! They sold quickly and they sold at a premium price. They helped pay for the book's production expenses, and afterwards the paperbacks supplied the profit.

A.D.: What was the nature of those other limited publications that came out via several imprints, such as Burn Again Press, that were actually Black Sparrow books? Why did you do that? Was it just for fun?

J.M.: Yes, they were fun, but another reason was this: I had a group of very loyal bookstores and rare book dealers, and in order to keep them all happy, in order to keep them buying as many Black Sparrow books as they could, I published these other very collectable limited editions via other imprints. I would publish as few as fifty copies, and would let those favored bookstores have them for their own best customers. So it was helpful all around.

A.D.: Those books have become hard-to-find collectibles now.

J.M.: Yeah, some sell for a thousand dollars or more.

A.D.: Going back in time again, when did it become crystal clear to you that Black Sparrow Press could stay afloat as long as you wanted?

J.M.: I guess that actually began in 1971, when I published [Bukowski's] *Post Office*.

A.D.: That made you think that you could probably run Black Sparrow for a number of years?

J.M.: Yes. By that time I had built up an audience for Bukowski's books. He was always our best-selling author. He wrote a book a year. He excited everybody by being so prolific. And we're talking about 200-300 page books, not slim volumes of poetry. Bukowski's readers demanded big, thick books. And they got them.



A.D.: Bukowski used to complain that you didn't put out more books per year. You published one or two books a year, but he was so prolific he wanted more!

J.M.: Really? He never complained to me. I let him do all kind of little pamphlets over time, and then he had *City Lights* books.

A.D.: And yet, that was not enough for him.

J.M.: I published every good poem. I didn't publish the bad poems just to make money. If I had put out a book of really bad poetry, that would have killed the momentum.

A.D.: After the success of *Post Office* in 1971 you realized that Black Sparrow Press was going to be there for the long run. Did you have in mind any specific ideas as to what kind of literature you would continue to publish?

J.M.: I was committed to publishing contemporary American poets, but there weren't too many of them that I admired. I was only interested in free verse. I would tell every Black Sparrow author at the time they signed up, "I am your publisher now, I'll publish everything you write, you don't have to worry about who's going to publish your next book." Certain poets like Edward Dorn, Diane Wakoski, Robert Kelly, Tom Clark, Wanda Coleman, Charles Reznikoff, I published them for nearly forty years.

A.D.: Are you saying that your publishing decisions were primarily based on your own literary taste?

J.M.: Yes, definitely.

A.D.: Do you recall—roughly—how many authors did you publish with Black Sparrow Press?

J.M.: I'd say about fifty... I published Eugenio Montale, he was the most famous living Italian poet at that time. I did a Montale book, and then he got the Nobel Prize for Literature... I had to like a book before it was published.

A.D.: Did you do all the reading?

J.M.: Yes.

A.D.: I know publishers can't pick favorites, but are there any authors or books that you are especially proud of?

J.M.: I am proud of all my poets and all my books, but Bukowski will always stand out.

A.D.: And besides Bukowski?

J.M.: I loved Charles Reznikoff. He is such a wonderful neglected poet. He had a lifetime of no real success, often publishing himself. He wrote great poetry from 1918 until the 1970s, when he died. He was an important American poet who was not appreciated until the end of his life. And I had many other favorites.

A.D.: What about Wanda Coleman?

J.M.: I loved Wanda Coleman. She was the one Black Sparrow poet that I pampered and babied. When she was in financial hot water, which was all the time, she knew she could call me in the middle of the night—which she did many times—because she needed a quick two hundred dollars to get by. She became angry at me when I sold Black Sparrow. Her reliable publisher suddenly vanished, and she didn't like it.

A.D.: That's too bad. I think she passed away late last year.

J.M.: Yes, a few months ago.



- A.D.: You just said that Coleman became angry when you sold Black Sparrow Press.
Was it hard for you as a publisher to deal with so many authors over the years?
- J.M.: Well, they would send me their work, and they would get back a beautiful book in return—Barbara’s covers were amazing. Black Sparrow books sold well and generated author’s royalty. What’s not to like? I got along very well with all my authors. No drama at all.
- A.D.: Authors are known to be touchy, especially when it comes to editing their books.
- J.M.: I rarely had to drastically edit anyone’s book. My authors knew what they were doing. Thing is, they were all jealous of Bukowski. They would sell about 1,500 copies and he’d sell 20,000 copies. The other poets would say, “Well, maybe I don’t sell as well as Bukowski, but without Bukowski Black Sparrow wouldn’t be able to publish me.”
- A.D.: Bukowski was clearly your best-selling author. Who came in second and third?
- J.M.: As far as poetry goes, I would say Diane Wakoski. There was a time when her books sold as well as Bukowski’s. But after a while his sales took off, and he left everyone behind.
A sale of as few as 3,000 copies, that’s all I asked. I could make enough money on the sale of 3,000 copies to pay production costs, royalty to the authors, salaries, and so forth, with something left over. However, when a book sold in the tens of thousands, that made everything much easier!
- A.D.: Having Bukowski allowed you to publish the other authors that you liked.
- J.M.: Right.
- A.D.: When sales were good, how many books did you—roughly—print per year?
You said you printed 35 books one year in the late 1960s.
- J.M.: Yes, there were 35 separate titles published in one year late in the 1960s. That was a unique moment. Many of those 35 books were poetry pamphlets.
- A.D.: What about later on? Just before you sold Black Sparrow Press in 2002, I guess you were publishing more books per year?
- J.M.: Actually, less. Over the last fifteen years the books we published got larger and larger. No more small books. By that time, we were publishing just twelve books a year, plus the occasional limited edition by Bukowski or one of my other authors. I was publishing Wyndham Lewis. His books were out of print since the 1930s, and he was such an important writer and painter. Editing a book like that would take almost a year to get it ready for the printer. Things were going as fast as they used to, and we still managed to do twelve books a year plus the occasional collectible.
- A.D.: Didn’t you reprint Wyndham Lewis’ *Blast* 1 and 2, and then put out *Blast* 3 as a tribute issue?
- J.M.: Those were big sellers for me. We sold more than twenty thousand copies in all.
- A.D.: That’s a lot!
- J.M.: Yes, it is. Lewis was an important writer. Back in 1915, he got everybody who was anybody to contribute to the two volumes of *Blast*: Ezra Pound, Ford Maddox Ford, T. S. Eliot, all the important English authors of the day. The Black Sparrow editions of *Blast* had (and still have, from another publisher) a continuing academic sale as important classroom textbooks for university English majors



here [United States] and in England. You should have seen the thousands of letters I got from professors who would say, "You can't let it go out of print, I've been teaching this every year for ten years, it's a great teaching book."

A.D.: Let's talk briefly about Bukowski now. You put out *Post Office* in 1971 and it was a good seller. That was shortly after the verbal agreement where you promised him a monthly \$100 check for life, if he quit his job at the post office to write full time.

J.M.: Yes, and soon he was receiving more than that. By the end of the day, I was paying him \$10,000 every month. And then, at the end of the year, I'd pay him whatever was still due.

People ask me, "How did you manage to keep Bukowski loyal to Black Sparrow?" There were many big publishers that wanted Bukowski. I answered that question by asking, "If you were guaranteed a \$10,000 check every month, would you walk away from that?" How could he walk away? In many of Hank's letters to me, he'd say, "Don't worry, John, nobody is going to publish me but you. You were there for me when I needed you, and I'm not going to abandon you when you need me." Hank was very loyal. Let's say he'd gone to Random House. What do you think they would have done to his books when they edited them? They would have squeezed all the juice out! As a publisher, you had to give Bukowski plenty of leeway to do what he wanted to do. It would have been a terrible mistake for him to go to a commercial publisher. Bukowski, all the way back to that first book, *At Terror Street and Agony Way* in 1968, never bothered to select the poems for his own books. He would send me everything he wrote, by the week. I would keep his manuscripts on file. Then once a year I would go through the manuscripts, pick out two hundred pages, three hundred pages worth of poems, put them in order, do whatever small editing was necessary, and send Hank the proposed manuscript. He never changed a thing. If you read his letters to me, he says about *Hot Water Music* [1983], "I understand very well what you are doing, and it works." Not that I did a lot, though, I didn't have to. Just a little touch here and there. Another thing, Hank didn't have his MSS on hand. He'd make two copies of a poem, send one to the magazines, and the other one to me. So most everything was kept in my office. I was free to select poems for a new book, from any year, from the oldest to the most recent. That way I could make the richest possible selection.

A.D.: One more question about Bukowski: what did you like the most about his work? What was there that you thought it was so good? You said before he reminded you of Whitman!

J.M.: He was in a sense a contemporary Whitman. I stand by that. But when he was a young man writing out of anger and despair, he wrote the kind of poem you find in *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills* [1969], poems that took risks, with long, extravagant lines. He took every chance in that book, and made it work. Later on, his poems became more direct and more



focused. If you compare *The Days Run Away* to *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* [1992], there's a profound sea-change, because he was changing. He was becoming wiser with age, he could see and understand more.

[German agent and translator] Carl Weissner once said, "God, I love the early poems, the wild poems." I replied, "Yes, they are great. But now Hank is wiser, smarter. He can say twice as much in half the space." And he could. Hank's last poems are like shafts of light that go straight to the heart.

A.D.: He's more of a philosopher in his late poems. Those poems are very powerful and moving.

J.M.: Oh, yes. Linda [Bukowski] pointed out, "He's become a Buddha. He's interested in Buddhism. He thinks that way now." And you can see in his poetry that his poems had become more profound. There's a small seven word poem ["art"] where he says, with one word printed above the next, "as / the / spirit / wanes / the / form / appears." That's what happens to many writers of both poetry and prose. The "spirit" that first animated them begins to fade, and then they get caught up in "form." Bukowski was never interested in "form" for its own sake. He wrote in free verse right to the end.

Finally, there's a wonderful novel he wrote in his final days, *Pulp* [1994]. It was a send-up of hard-boiled detective writing, a la Chandler and Hammett. It's a very funny even profound book! If Hank hadn't died, I wonder what he would have written next?

A.D.: I remember him saying he was tired of writing about himself and that's why he was trying new avenues. Some people don't like that book, but I think it is funny and very well done.

J.M.: I agree. If some people are looking for a confessional or autobiographical Bukowski book, that's not what it is.

He died in 1994, and I had many wonderful unpublished poems left over. I began to gather them into books. I started with *Betting on the Muse* [1996], a four-hundred-page book, then *Bone Palace Ballet* [1997], a three-hundred-page book, and so on. Finally there were another seven books, poems written from the 1950s to the 1990s, published by Ecco Press.

A.D.: You said you sold Black Sparrow, and I was wondering about that. How come you chose to close up shop when business was still good?

J.M.: That was easy. I had been working since high school, and then with Black Sparrow for almost another forty years. I sensed in 2000 that the publishing industry in the United States was on the verge of collapse. For many years we had three or four hundred bookstores that bought books from us regularly. Then there were another thousand or so bookstores that bought occasionally. By 2002 our market had shrunk drastically, independent bookstores were going out of business left and right, we were now selling to the 100 independent bookstores that were left. Everything else sold was going to either Barnes & Noble or Borders. We had those two big customers, and yes, they were buying lots of books. We would get huge orders from each, once a week. But Borders was on the verge of collapse, and Barnes & Noble was living on borrowed time. I saw the end of the book industry as I



knew it. I could have continued, but right at that time HarperCollins came to me and offered to buy the publication rights to Bukowski, Paul Bowles, and John Fante. It was a godsend. Black Sparrow would not have survived for the next ten years. There are no bookstores left!

As for Ecco Press, the part of HarperCollins that now publishes Bukowski, Bowles, and Fante, they have taken wonderful care of those books.

A.D.: Is Bukowski still selling well?

J.M.: Yes. The books that I sold to Ecco, are all still available and have been reprinted many times.

A.D.: I heard through the grapevine that HarperCollins offered you a very good deal back in 2002 for Bukowski, Paul Bowles, and John Fante. Can you disclose a ballpark figure? What really caught my attention, though, was that you sold the remaining Black Sparrow Press inventory to Godine for \$1. Is that right?

J.M.: The amount paid to me by HarperCollins for publication rights shall remain confidential.

I always liked David Godine. I sold him the rest of my back list, well over a hundred thousand books, for \$1, on the condition that he would continue to sell them, continue to pay the author's royalty, and reprint them when possible.

A.D.: In retrospect, how do you assess Black Sparrow Press' importance in the small press arena?

J.M.: Black Sparrow remains one of the only self-supporting, highly successful, widely distributed, purely literary presses.

A.D.: Talking about small presses, do you think they are history? Or is there a future to them?

J.M.: It may be a while before there is another period like 1960-2000 that will support independent literary publishing the way Black Sparrow was supported.

A.D.: With everything going digital and people reading ebooks in their electronic devices, small presses might have a tough time in the future because most people may no longer buy print books.

J.M.: Everybody I know has a Kindle. You can travel around the world with a Kindle, or just across town, and have tens of thousands of books at your disposal.

A.D.: Do you have a Kindle?

J.M.: No.

A.D.: I'd like to wrap it up with a question you might find trite. After all these years running Black Sparrow Press, do you have any regrets? Would you have done things differently?

J.M.: How many people get to live out their personal dream? To live on their own terms? And be involved with so many talented authors? Black Sparrow's books finally spread all over the world. We sold our beautiful books in France, Italy, Germany, South America, Mexico, Canada, England, and here in America. I'm kind of embarrassed to even refer to the thousands of letters we received saying, "Your books are absolutely the finest I've ever seen! What are you going to publish next year?" I never heard a breath of complaint against Black Sparrow. We did what we did as honestly and in the best way we could. We supported many authors and their careers.



Black Sparrow finally accomplished exactly what we set out to accomplish so many years ago. No regrets at all.

A.D.: Thanks, John.

J.M.: My pleasure.

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