

# Joe Knew There Was Something Wrong

By Kevin Coval, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

*the 1<sup>st</sup> time i really talked with him, he was yelling at me. it was his first year coaching at Louder Than A Bomb and his Umjoa Manley all-boys Flipside team's first year as well. they lost. badly. a group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored higher than them. Joe was pissed. after the bout he came to me demanding an explanation, justice, retribution, a ribbon, something for his students who worked hard and never won anything. he said the system was unfair, it should be equitable, why was there so much emphasis on competition? at this point in his dissertation, Joe was no longer talking about the slam.*

*Joe knew there was something wrong.*

*over the last 6 or so years he built a powerhouse of a poetry program at Umjoa Manley on the west side in the same neighborhood my Bubbe's family immigrated to from Poland. a neighborhood most Jews had long left except Joe and some staff at Umoja. when i talk about Louder Than A Bomb to teachers, funders, CPS Administrators i talk about how this form of spoken word and hip-hop poetry has the ability to transform the culture of a school. it can take hyper-literate student poets and elevate their social status to that of a star athlete. when i say this i am talking about Joe. about the hours and hours and days and lifetime of ridiculous freestyles and mindful critique and being a father figure to kids who never had one and brother and many times over the only man and white man students at Manley and across the city ever had the chance to see a whole and holy person in care and kindness, Joe is a tzadik a part time rabbi to a mixed congregation able to mix Freire and Biggie in the same pedagogical sermon.*

*the last time we met*

*we spoke about a book Joe was writing highlighting the hip-hop praxis of various community organizations in Chicago.*

*a man whose light was the brightest in the room*

*was constantly giving shine to others.*

*this is what it means to be magnanimous,*

*a selfless servant of the people*

*his presence a mirror of our future selves*

*what he thought and hoped and knew*

*we could be*

*he would push us toward.*

*he saw the best in his students and peers*

*not cuz he was not bothered by our shortcomings*

*he was not immune to our shadow selves*

*he was not blinded to the constant barrage of injustice and dehumanizing state agents*

*in the lives of his students*

*he was wide-eyed and aware.*

*Joe knew something was wrong.*

*why else does an Ivy educated Jewish PHD from Evanston spend so much time scouring the notebooks and journals of 16 year olds in North Lawndale, kicking freestyles at Polk and Sacramento to let his students know it is scary and fun to put your creation into the world and if you mess up, stay flowing...*

*Joe knew something was wrong.*

*knew for a long time, a lifetime feeling the all weight of what he knew*

*he knew his north shore suburban education should extend, not depend on which tax base you were born into,*

*knew that when kids are engaged fully as intelligent beings*

*they will excite and exceed and disap-*

*point regardless of what music they listen to*

*or what neighborhood they live in*

*Joe knew there was something wrong.*

*something wrong with his student's rising body count*

*something wrong with the perpetual violence threatening their walk home*

*something wrong with the gangs and police and sometimes home itself*

*something wrong with how the country stalked and tracked and warred against bodies of the youthful and colorful*

*Joe knew there was something wrong*

*with this world and the world at large*

*He knew the threat of violence was the same for young folks on the west side*

*as it is on the west bank*

*and Joe and I, both jews,*

*talked about the madness of police states and the privilege*

*to walk freely to a family dinner or corner store, across borders*

*and Joe lived between borders*

*engaged in the practice of tikkun olam*

*repairing this world yes,*

*but better put from Joe's labor, putting the fractured and seemingly disparate pieces*

*of the whole together*

*Joe was a connector*

*a bridge between the academy and the block*

*the north shore and north lawndale*

*a synthesis of theory and practice*

*the grit and presence of everyday labor*

*cuz Joe showed up*

*in your life*

*his body warm and graspable*

*his smile and spirit infectious*

*his existence a mountain*

*to climb toward*

*the worlds*

*he saw*

*in you.*

*Joe was necessary  
friend and colleague Idris Goodwin  
told me today*

*and there is something wrong with  
today  
cuz Joe's not here*

*not leaving me messages like he did  
on July 2  
asking how he can help with Brave  
New Voices  
and how excited he was for the 10<sup>th</sup>  
year of Louder Than A Bomb  
and the book*

*and there is something wrong with  
today  
because we have lost a soldier  
on the front lines of the class room, in  
the community  
at the administrative offices of institu-  
tions  
where he fought for the integrity of  
people  
on the people's side of justice*

*a fighter, like his son Rocky,  
for those sometimes unable to make it  
into the ring*

*there is something wrong with today  
and there will be something wrong  
with tomorrow*

*but the energy and chutzpah and  
drive to work hard  
for what must be, lives  
to achieve more and better in our lives  
and in the lives of all  
to right this world  
to maintain and build upon Joe's tire-  
less labor, his legacy  
his ferocity to love  
to throw ourselves fully and furiously  
into our lives and the lives of others  
to have the knowledge that there is  
something terribly wrong  
and yet commit ourselves gorgeously  
and gigantically and courageously  
into the project of making it better*

**Kevin Coval** is the author of *everyday people* (EM Press, Nov. '08) and *slingshots* (a hip-hop poetica) (EM Press, Nov. '05), named Book of the Year-finalist by The American Library Association. Coval's poems have appeared in *The Spoken Word Revolution* and *The Spoken Word Revolution: Redux* (Source Books), *Total Chaos* (Basic Civitas), *I Speak of the City: New York City Poems* (Columbia University Press), *The Bandana Republic* (Soft Skull Press), *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Reporter*, *Cross Currents*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Rattle*, *2nd Ave Poetry*, *The Drunken Boat*, and many other periodicals and journals. Coval writes for The Huffington Post and can be heard regularly on National Public Radio in Chicago. Coval has performed on four continents in seven countries including; The Parliament of the World's Religions in Capetown, South Africa, The African Hip-Hop Festival: Battle Cry, Poetry Society of London, University of the West Indies in Jamaica, St. Xavier's College in Bombay, India, and four seasons of Russell Simmons' *HBO Def Poetry Jam*, for which he also served as artistic consultant. From Jan. 2006 to May 2007, Coval visited 26 states and more than 50 cities during the promotional tour for his first book, performing at over 150 high schools, universities, book stores, theaters, community centers and Union Halls around the country. Co-founder of *Louder Than A Bomb: The Chicago Teen Poetry Festival*, the largest youth poetry festival in the world, Coval is poet-in-residence at The Jane Addams' Hull House Museum at The University of Illinois-Chicago and poet-in-residence at The University of Chicago's Newberger Hillel Center, and teaches at The School of the Art Institute in Chicago