

ENTERTAINMENT

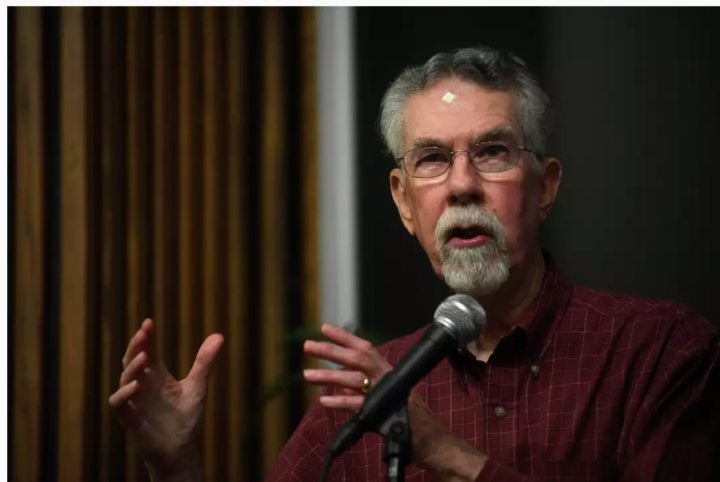
A life in words

By **Kim Brent**, Photojournalist

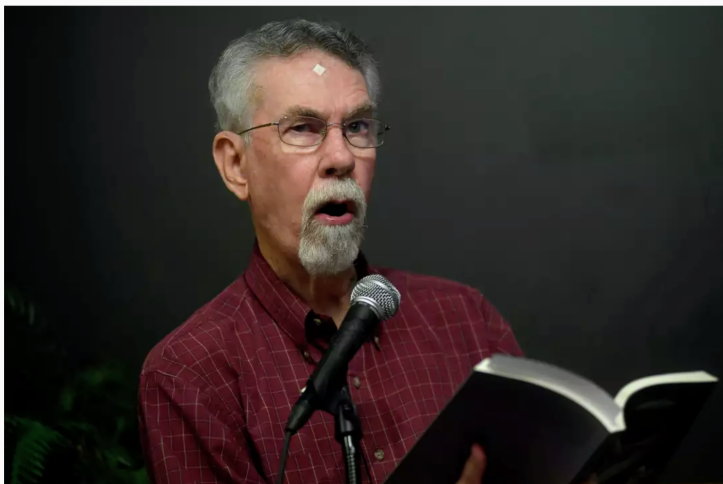
May 8, 2024



Dave Oliphant speaks about his journey as a poet and author during the PULSE release party Friday at the John Gray Center. Photo made Thursday, May 2, 2024 Kim Brent/Beaumont Enterprise
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Dave Oliphant speaks about his journey as a poet and author during the PULSE release party Friday at the John Gray Center. Photo made Thursday, May 2, 2024 Kim Brent/Beaumont Enterprise
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Dave Oliphant reads from his poems during the PULSE release party Friday at the John Gray Center. Photo made Thursday, May 2, 2024 Kim Brent/Beaumont Enterprise
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Dave Oliphant listens to the opening speakers during the PULSE release party Friday at the John Gray Center. Photo made Thursday, May 2, 2024 Kim Brent/Beaumont Enterprise
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Beaumont's Dave Oliphant is known as one of Texas's foremost poets, whose writings tell the story of Texas towns and especially Texan jazz — a music genre Oliphant fell in love with at an early age.

It started when he was given a trumpet to play during a music camp in Oklahoma, where his family lived at the time. His mother thought the camp would be a good thing to keep Oliphant busy during summer break.

But it wasn't until his father, who was a printer before World War II and later an insurance salesman, moved the family from Oklahoma to Beaumont, that "everything began," Oliphant said.

It was "an unbelievable stroke of luck," Oliphant said.

He enrolled at South Park High School, where music teacher Harold Meehan introduced Oliphant to the jazz and classical music that would inspire his life and poetry for decades to come.

"It was just love at first sound," he said.

At least two of Oliphant's countless poems have been written about Meehan.

When Oliphant graduated South Park in 1953, he enrolled at then-Lamar State College of Technology as an English major and continued his musical pursuits as a member of "The Technicians," a collegiate band that was led by Professor Richard Burkart, the band's founder.

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Oliphant's passion for jazz was further stoked when he learned that every day when he walked home from class, he was passing the previous home of Beaumont native and jazz great Harry James.

James was a trumpet phenom, who cut his chops playing alongside local musicians in the primarily Black neighborhood where his family's home originally sat on Neches Street. The home was later moved to East Florida Avenue. James went on to play with the likes of Benny Goodman and Frank Sinatra, becoming one of the biggest names in big band and jazz.

Oliphant switched his major from English to music in his second semester at Lamar.

But after hearing a recording of The Technicians' 1958-released album "Take Four," he realized he'd "fluffed" several trumpet parts on the recording. Despite his love for jazz and the trumpet, Oliphant realized he simply wasn't good enough to make it as a professional musician.

What he was really good at was writing.

Oliphant realized he may not be able to hit the high notes on the trumpet, but he could on paper, waxing poetic about jazz.

He switched gears and focused on writing — a change that forever altered the course of his life and trajectory in a way that was both professional and highly personal.

In 1959, Oliphant was among the poets featured in the first PULSE, Lamar University's literary magazine, which celebrated its 65th year of publication on Friday.

Oliphant still has the first edition, which "was momentous for me," he said. "Everything really started with PULSE."

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Oliphant became even more prolific in his writing, self-publishing his first book of poetry, "Doubt and Redoubt," in 1961 at the age of 22. "I still like some of the poems in that collection," he said.

A year later, Oliphant was awarded the Eleanor Weinbaum Award for his writing. Weinbaum was a Beaumont "mover and shaker and a big supporter of the arts," he recalled. The award solidified Oliphant's dedication to writing, a realm in which he was becoming a mover and shaker in his own right.

But one doesn't make a living writing poems, especially fresh out of college. So, Oliphant got a job teaching high school English. Although he enjoyed sharing his love of literature and encouraging young writers, Oliphant knew he'd best thrive in a university setting. So, he sought his master's degree at the University of Texas in Austin.

While there, he became part of the school's literary magazine, eventually serving as editor.

The pivotal change for Oliphant came in the form of a new exchange program between UT and a university in Chile. Only 15 spots were available, and as the editor of the school magazine, Oliphant was selected.

The experience opened up a whole new world to Oliphant culturally and as a writer.

After graduation, Oliphant felt himself pulled to return to Chile. He taught literature and writing at the Binational University while continuing his own writing about the country and culture, which was fed with exposure to even more Chilean writers.

But the most important person he would meet was a young librarian named Maria Isabel Jofre.

If jazz was love at first sound, it was love at first sight when Oliphant met Maria. She, like jazz, would become the inspiration for countless poems, 55 of which were published in a volume simply titled, "Maria's Poems."

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A year later they were married and returned to the United States, where Oliphant in 1967 took a position teaching at New Mexico Junior College.

His time there was short-lived and nearly ended his career in academia.

Oliphant was fired in early 1969 for defending a Black instructor, whom the college censored for including a poem in his literature class that the college deemed pornographic.

When the ACLU learned of Oliphant's dismissal, they came to his defense, with attorney Paul Phillips taking the issue to federal court.

"His brilliant mind and caring nature saved (my) teaching career," Oliphant recounts in his website biography. "Maria called him (our) diminutive hero."

The incident behind him, Oliphant decided to go back to being a student, moving his family, which now included two children, to DeKalb, Illinois, where he pursued a PhD at Northern Illinois University.

A string of collegiate jobs in America and Mexico ensued. Wherever Oliphant went, he left his mark, inspiring students to write and publish their own literary magazines.

"I always wanted to come back to Texas, though," Oliphant said.

In 1976, he got the opportunity when a two-year assistant professor position opened at UT in Austin.

It was like coming full circle, returning to his home state, whose towns and jazz musicians had been the source of Oliphant's earliest inspiration. After his teaching contract expired, Oliphant eventually found a job working in the university's rare book and manuscript collection, the Humanities Research Center, where he became editor of several publications, peppering his work with teaching classes in the humanities department, including one in music criticism, according to his website.

Until retirement, Oliphant's work as a writer grew, including literary criticism among the numerous works listed in his literary biography.

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His five books — two poetry and three prose — devoted to jazz have led to him being "considered somewhat of an authority on Texan jazz," he said.

Oliphant's most recent publication, "Summing Up: Selected Poems 1962 — 2022," was published by Lamar University Press.

It's the story of 60 years of writing told in 308 pages.

"I've been very fortunate that I've published a lot of books," he said. "I really enjoyed writing. It's been very gratifying."

But it's a chapter in his life that sadly closed in 2020 when Oliphant lost Maria, his wife of 53 years.

"I'm not writing anymore," Oliphant said. "When I lost my wife, I lost my muse."

His love of the craft and reading the works of the next generation of authors and poets remains strong, much of it directed toward the young writers following in his footsteps at Lamar University, where he established the Oliphant Award for Poetry.

On Friday, Oliphant attended the release party for the 2024 PULSE publication — an event he tries to attend annually — and at which he served as keynote speaker.

"We are always so excited when he joins us for PULSE parties," student and author Grace Nicholson said while making his introduction.

Like the students who would follow, Oliphant read excerpts from his work, and even played two jazz songs that included featured Texas musicians Kenny Dorham and Beaumont's own Harry James.

The names were lost on many in the crowd, as were Oliphant's other references to Benny Goodman and even Frank Sinatra. Few hands went in the air when he asked the crowd if they'd every heard of these jazz greats.

"I'm history, but today the writers here are the new generation," Oliphant said. "You are looking forward to everything I've achieved in the past."

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Kim Brent
PHOTOJOURNALIST



Kim Brent is a photojournalist with The Beaumont Enterprise.

She came to Beaumont in September 2014 amid a search for full-time positions after her previous paper in Michigan reduced many staff members. Kim included, to part time.

"I managed to eke out a living by getting a second job in my off time working at the deli counter of a local grocery store," she said. "And let me just say, slicing meat for hours on end is no fun for a vegetarian."

When she's not out covering our community, she loves to paint, knit, read, write and love and be loved by my two kitties, Memphis and Skeets.

"And yes, I also like to take pictures for the pure joy and creativity of it."

Get in touch with her by email at kbrent@beaumontenterprise.com.