

**Below is the complete "Oxford American Ten" Interview from which excerpts were published in the October 2009 online version of *Oxford American***

**OA: What superstitions do you have?**

**CLM:** None really. I pray every morning before I get on the treadmill. (Of course, I do pray while I'm on the treadmill; that's when I'm closest to God, "Please, Jehovah, let it be over! Haven't I completed a mile yet!!!) My morning prayer could be considered a superstition because even though I know that I don't always live by Jehovah's will, I like to tell Him thank you for keeping me from making a complete butt of myself most of the time.

**OA: What would you like to change about yourself?**

**CLM:** I am a control freak and obsessive about order. My wife likes to tell people that I won't go to the bathroom if it is not printed in my daily schedule. I have no spontaneity about me whatsoever. The other day my wife asked me to go to the movies, and I said, "It's Wednesday. You don't go to the movies on Wednesday." I've never been good at thinking on the fly. If my particular plan for something does not work, then that goal will not be accomplished.

**OA: What are you still trying to accomplish in your professional career?**

**CLM:** Becoming the best writer that I can. So far, I have worked very diligently to improve to the level of being average. Understand that, for me, the high-water mark includes Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, Jerry Ward, Kalamu ya Salaam, Ahmos Zu-Bolton, and Reginald Martin. Just like that high school letterman jacket I received for riding the pine those four years, I am just as proud of my average writing abilities because I worked a lot of hours to get to where I am now. In high school—no matter the sport—I went to practice every day, and, likewise, today, I write almost everyday. My goal is to keep writing until I get it right. And, if that means that y'all *gots* to suffer with the poetry and stories that I produce until I get it right, well, I'm willing to live with that.

**OA: What is your hidden talent?**

**CLM:** Comedy! Of course, if no one knows that I'm funny, then it may not be hidden; it may just be that I'm not funny. But, not many people know that I traveled as a working comic for eighteen months when I was in college. It was the worst college job that I ever had. Working at Toys "R" Us, Kroger, a country club, and being in the Mississippi National Guard were all a lot better than trying to tell jokes to people who just wanted me to move so that the naked girls could return to the stage. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say "either take something off or get off the stage!"

**OA: What subject causes you to rant?**

**CLM:** Racial injustice, African people who do not take advantage of the industrious work of our ancestors, and people who drive while they are talking on a cell phone, which includes the Bluetooth losers.

**OA: What is the biggest mistake you ever made in your professional life?**

**CLM:** I missed an opportunity to make a record with Prince. In defense of myself, I misunderstood his question. While we were working on chapters for a book that he was considering writing (and even though I did not get the job I hope that he finishes the book because it will amaze a lot of people) he asked me what I thought about making a recording of my poetry with music. My response was, “I don’t want to be one of those poets who uses music as a crutch or a veil to cover my poor literary skills.” Prince just shrugged, said “okay,” and we continued discussing aspects of the book. Later that day, I realized that one of his sound engineers was at Paisley Park, and it was his day off. When the then publicist asked him why he was there, he responded that Prince called him to come for a special recording that he wanted to do, but now it’s been cancelled. It was a couple of days later when I finally put one and one together. Though I meant what I said about not wanting to use music to cover poor literary skills, Prince is one of the people who inspired me to be an artist. That’s why I wrote the book celebrating and analyzing his lyrics.

**OA: What is one thing that you used to dislike but that you now like?**

**CLM:** Rap music. In 1988, when hip hop finally colonized the Jackson, Mississippi, airwaves, I set my dial to the oldies but goodies station, put in a Prince cd, and never listened to the radio again—except for the *Saturday Morning Blues Workshop*. I just couldn’t believe that songs from *Lovesexy* were not being played to make room for this rap stuff. Over the years, I’ve had interesting conversations with younger poets as well as have attended literary conferences where papers were presented on the merits of hip hop: the lyrics and the music. I’m still not a hip hop head, but I went from loathing it to respecting it. And, I’m proud to say that I’ve made the same transition and progress with white people.

**OA: What profoundly underrated book, album, or movie would you like to champion for us?**

**CLM:** First, even though I had problems with the ending/final chapter of *Push*, I’m glad to see that the novel *Push* by Sapphire is being made into a movie, but a book that I think is well done and addresses an important topic is *Satisfied with Nothing* by Ernest Hill. *Satisfied with Nothing*, is a *Native Son* for a new generation, but unlike *Push* there is no happy ending because for far too many black boys snagged in the web of the salvation of sports there is rarely a happy ending. One album to which people should give a second or first listen is Don NewKirk’s *Funk City* (1989). I always thought that, musically and lyrically, NewKirk would be hip hop’s answer to Prince, but rimes, strip clubs, and violence dominated the 90s. It is a smart and funny record, and the music blends the street sound of hip hop with the exploration and groove of funk. And if you can’t find *Funk City* because it is out of print, then give a listen to Prince’s *Lotusflow3r/MPLS* because he shows that his guitar still cuts down most others like dead weeds and that he is still a funk master. One of my favorite songs is “Dreamer,” which is a tribute to Martin Luther King and Jimi Hendrix. But, “Dance for Me” and “Old School Company” show that funk is alive, and it lives in Minneapolis. If non-fanatics can wade through the really eclectic stuff, they’ll be rewarded with rock guitar and funk grooves that should make all producers turn off the sample

machines. Finally, rent a copy of *Cadillac Records*. What it lacks in historical truth, it recovers in giving the essence and aesthetic of why there is the Blues, and then there is everything else. That's right. I said it. Clarksdale, Mississippi is in the house!!!

**OA:** What is your favorite line from a song?

**CLM:** "The soldiers are marching; they're writing brand new laws. We will all fight together for the most important cause. Will we all fight for the right to be free?" "Free" by Prince.

**OA:** What was your favorite childhood toy?

**CLM:** My NFL Electronic Football Game with twenty-eight teams in their home and road colors. A close second is the fact that my parents had so many books that I used books for building blocks until I was six. Then, one day I opened one, and the rest is....