

*Being  
Walt  
Whitman*

By Tree Bernstein  
Photos by Chris Jensen

JOHN SLADE WALKS ONTO THE BARE STAGE AT THE OJAI ART CENTER CARRYING A BOOM BOX ON HIS SHOULDER. HE SETS UP THE BOX AND PUNCHES UP THE BEAT – UHN CHOOKA UN CHOOKA UHN UHN – AND LAUNCHES INTO WALT WHITMAN’S “SONG OF MYSELF”:

*I CELEBRATE myself,  
And sing myself,  
And what I assume  
You shall assume,  
For every atom  
Belonging to me  
As good belongs to you.*

His performance lasted about 5 minutes; he’s part of an annual community reading program called The Favorite Poem Project. That evening, November 8, 2010, a dozen others shared favorite poems with an appreciative audience. It was a remarkable transference; John Slade does not just read Walt Whitman, he embodies him.

With his wife Laurie Walters Slade, John Slade came to Ojai in 2001 to teach English Lit, Film Studies, and Theater Arts at Nordhoff High School. His dramatic student productions were praised by a local newspaper for “a reputation for quality and relevance.” He taught and directed at NHS for 11 years, retiring in 2012. That fall in 2010, Slade wanted to introduce his English class to the poetry of Walt Whitman, but was met with yawns. That’s when he got the idea for putting a backbeat to Whitman’s poems and rapping out the lines. “From English to Drama, they woke up,” he says.

The genesis of “I Sing Walt Whitman” is an organically grown Ojai story. From classroom to Art Center, Slade began to build his repertoire of Whitman’s extensive oeuvre, memorizing “sets” of poems: the early “Leaves of Grass” declarative poems; excerpts of letters to Ralph Waldo Emerson; and, later, sad elegies from the Civil War years, such as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed” and “O Captain, My Captain.” Slade’s reverence for the spirit of Whitman’s message came out in song.

Enter Kim Maxwell. Local inspirational theatrical coach and director, Maxwell helped Slade with his first song, “Who Learns My Lesson Complete.” It debuted in 2012 with a troupe of community performers as part of Kim Maxwell Studio’s production of “Lost & Unwilling to Ask for Directions.”

“With Whitman I could have a platform for my spiritual life,” Slade confirms. At an open mic at Bart’s Books, at Libbey Bowl during Ojai WordFest, in Ventura at the Artist’s Union Poetry series, Slade showed up with Whitman under his hat – and swept the room with Old Grey Beard’s ecstatic song and pro-

phetic words.

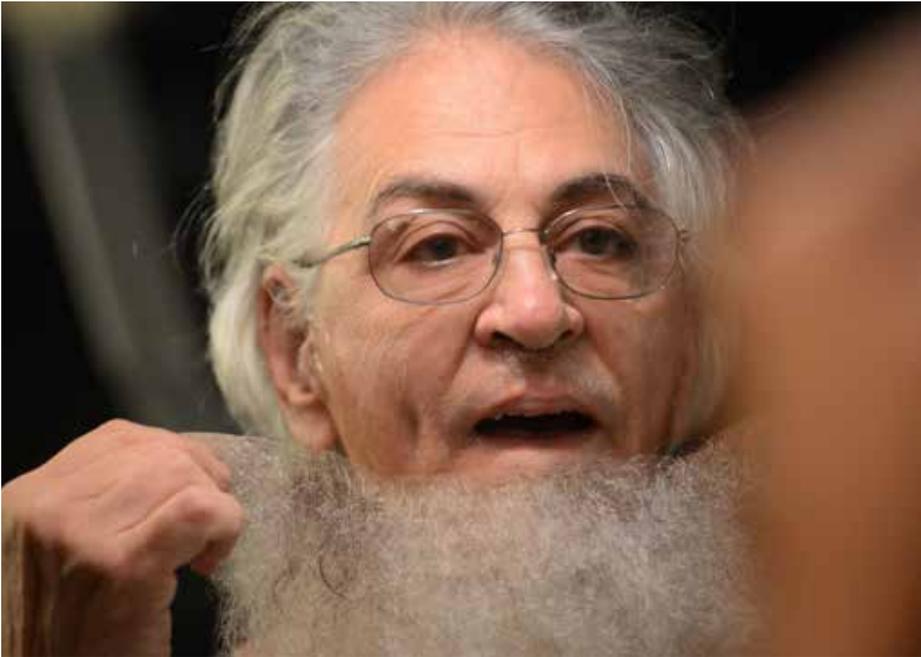
Then came ‘The Beard.’ Early on, Slade adopted the tipped-hat slouch and short-bearded look of a vigorous, yet mature, Walt Whitman. Slade shares similar features with the poet from the early editions of “Leaves of Grass.” (Whitman was the first American author to put his photo on the page – an audacious act for the times.) Nowadays the actor favors the elder poet, and for that, the addition of ‘The Beard’ was required. A wig and beard maker in Kentucky took snips of Slade’s own hair for a perfect match. (At \$600 for chin whiskers, it should be.) With beard and hat, and the old grey overcoat, Slade found his character’s look.

Material for the show is voluminous. He notes, “I probably have two hours altogether – but lots more stored in reserve. If I want to do a Whitman lecture on a topic like sexuality, or environment, or health, or some other favorite subject of his, I can expand and embellish on what my original text contains. I’d have to memorize or read the new material, but that’s allowed.”

Next, the show needed new venues. Whitman was performed locally at the Ojai Valley Community Church and the Unitarian-Universalists Church in Santa Paula. The mix is part Chautauqua-tent revival, part lecture-with-song packaged in poetry. The show played at Oxnard College and the Elite Theatre and had a turn in Burbank and Malibu. It was part of Ken Wilber’s Integral Life Spiritual Conference for New Year’s 2013. By the summer of 2014, the show had short tours in other states, and was well received in Prescott and Sedona, Arizona. The highlight of 2014 was in December at the Mighty Met Acoustic Flashback Benefit for Paraquat Kelley in New York, where George Thorogood and Slash were headliners.

The CD, “I Sing Walt Whitman,” debuted in 2014. Local musicians contributed to the mix with Jimmy Caliri on sax and Hammond B3, April Theriault on tin whistle and vocals, Ken Eros on guitar and drums. The CD was engineered at Eros Creative and

*And that I can think such thoughts as these, is just as wonderful; And that I can remind you, and you think them, and know them to be true, is just as wonderful.*  
— from Whitman’s “Who Learns My Lesson Complete”



Sound here in Ojai. The fruit of these labors, all homegrown. (See *OQ* winter 2014-15 for Off the Shelf review of the CD.)

The music is a big part of the appeal of the Whitman show. As a self-described “shy kid in 9th grade” who grew up in Pontiac, Michigan, Slade found his way on to the stage through his talent as a singer and musician. He was in a band called East Bound Mound with Gilda Radner in his 20s. He played keyboards and was lead singer for the performance comedy/drama group, a sort of precursor to the Saturday Night Live format. The group had a big fan base in Ann Arbor, opening for the likes of Bob Seger and Ted Nugent. Then, in the early ‘70s, Slade came west to Hollywood with his first wife and had some success on stage and in film with roles in “L.A. Confidential,” “Titanic,” and “Slam Dance.” His

discography includes: “Boomer Town” (2006), “I Got Plans” (2011), “Night Crossing” and “I Sing Walt Whitman,” (both 2014).

In the middle of all that, he met Laurie. “It was,” he says, eyes twinkling, “a palpable attraction.”

Laurie Walters is a former television actress, best known for playing Joanie Bradford on “Eight Is Enough,” which aired from 1977 until 1981. In Ojai, Mrs. Slade runs the bi-monthly Shakespeare Salon at the Ojai Public Library, and directs plays. She will direct the upcoming “As You Like It” at the Ojai Art Center, which runs from March 27 through April 19. She is very involved in environmental issues, garnering the 2014 Volunteer of the Year Award from the Ojai Green Coalition. She organized the Green Library for the Green Coalition on Signal Street, and is also active

in Tree People, an organization that plants trees. Slade credits his wife as co-director and producer for the Whitman project. She is also head wrangler of ‘The Beard.’

Comparisons to other one-person shows are inevitable. Hal Holbrook’s “Mark Twain Tonight” (which has been running since the ‘50s) leaps to mind, as does “The Belle of Amherst,” a one-woman play by William Luce, popularized by Julie Harris in the ‘70s.

While somewhat apt, such comparisons fall short of the actual experience of feeling Whitman come alive in a contemporary context. “Whitman was writing for this generation of gay rights, of dignity for people of color, for spiritual inclusivity, for Boomers and for Millennials,” says Slade. It is a show that is refreshingly free of the usual postmodern cynicism. “The good

news is, Uncle Walt’s gospel is amazingly current: His riffs about sex and eternity still sound resoundingly ahead of their time. Before Carl Sagan, Neil de Grasse Tyson, evolutionary evangelist Michael Dowd, and futurist Barbara Marx-Hubbard, Walt Whitman was already teaching us to see the world through evolutionary eyes,” Slade notes. “I’m tired of Richard Dawkins’ material universe. When you take the long evolutionary view, trends look better.”

With a lot of help from his friends in Ojai to bring “I Sing Walt Whitman” into the ready-to-go show it is today, Slade interprets Whitman’s insight and message as simply, “Love is the binding force of the Universe, and that human consciousness is surely headed somewhere.” Evidence suggests “I Sing Walt Whitman” is just as surely on that evolutionary path. 🌱

