

CELEBRATING THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE UGLY

Chuck Perkins
announces the publication
of his first book

By Anita Oubre

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHUCK PERKINS

Chuck Perkins is as “Naturally N’Awlins” as they come. A spoken word artist, writer, poet, activist, and owner of the Café Istanbul performance venue, Chuck is reveling in the excitement of his recently published book.

“Beautiful and Ugly Too” is a collection of original essays and poems that explore the unique and sometimes harsh life experiences that shaped Chuck into the man he is today. Published by UL Press (University of Louisiana at Lafayette), the 178-page book has already begun flying off the bookstore shelves.

Chuck was so enthralled to receive the call about the book's first print run that he jumped in his car and made the three-hour drive to Lafayette to pick up the boxes. “I was super-duper excited and didn't want to wait for the books to be dropped off,” he recalled. “I was excited to see the cover, the artwork, the finished product, and hold it in my hands.”

“The title of the book came from an essay that Langston Hughes wrote in 1926,” Chuck explained. “He was speaking on behalf of the Black creatives who were moving up to Harlem in the early part of the 20th century.”

The book consists of 56 poems that Chuck has written over the last 25 years, as well as nine essays written during the pandemic.

“I wrote my memoir during the pandemic,” he said. “There was nothing else to do besides wake up and eat breakfast, so I wrote. The point of the book is that, through my story, people could know my community, the people I grew up with, the conditions, and how they shaped us, and whether some of us perished under those conditions or made it out to the other side with our mental capacity still intact,” Chuck reflected. “My memoir is still on the back burner, but, for now, I'm excited about ‘Beautiful and Ugly Too.’”

Some of the essays make big political statements, and others are lighthearted stories that reflect on Chuck's childhood. There are poems about racism and violence, but also about family and neighborhoods and coming of age as a Black man in Uptown New Orleans.

An avid writer and lover of books, Chuck can remember writing poetry as early as the sixth grade. “I wanted to write because



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHUCK PERKINS

I discovered Dolomite,” he recalled. “He was this alter ego persona of Rudy Ray Moore with crass and lewd lyrics. We didn't have those albums at home, but my friend Lester had access to them, and he would give me a little taste of the verses on the playground.”

Chuck became a celebrity at Harrell Playground as the neighborhood kids surrounded him and screamed for Dolomite. “I put on these legendary performances. I felt like a superstar and

that made me happy,” he reminisced.

Much of Chuck's poetry revisits the times, places, and people he grew up with in New Orleans' Pigeon Town neighborhood, as one of four siblings. The Perkins family lived across the street from Harrell Playground.

Chuck described his childhood as a simpler time during which neighbors looked out for one another and best friends were considered family. He credits his aunts, uncles, neighbors, teachers,



and coaches, as well as his parents, for his upbringing.

Although he graduated from Alcee Fortier High School, Chuck admits he was “not the most attentive student.” Instead of concentrating on his lessons, he would write poems and short stories. “The teachers knew I liked poetry, and once in a while, if there were a lull in class, I would be asked to get up and read. That was my first experience with performing,” he recalled.

It was during that time that Chuck had his first poem published in the *Louisiana Weekly*, a local publication.

“None of my friends were into poetry,” he continued. “The guys were into sports and I didn’t have a community of people who shared my love of poetry until after I graduated from Xavier University and moved to Chicago.”

It was in Chicago that Chuck felt he had begun to grow as a poet. He was immersed in an environment with like-minded artistic and creative types. Chuck started attending open mic events and performing. When asked if he was nervous in those early days Chuck acknowledged that butterflies were normal in the beginning but he would just “get up there and do what I liked to do.”

These days Chuck hosts his own open mic nights, usually on Wednesdays at the venue he has operated for the last 15 years. “That is the one night when I allow myself to enjoy the event,” he said. “I get to have a cocktail, take a seat, listen to the performers and talk to my people, and it is great.”

Every other night it is business as usual for Chuck who does everything from booking to bartending to taking out the trash. He jokes that he is “the head janitor in charge” but he wouldn’t have it any other way. He reflects on the years he has run Café Istanbul and all the celebrations that he has been part of.

“It helps that I am a super-sociable, extroverted person to do this job,” Chuck

laughed. “I help create memories and see people at some of their happiest celebration times.”

When he’s not running his business or writing, Chuck enjoys bike riding. Seeing the city from a different vantage point on his bike gives him a different perspective. Here is how he explains it.

“You can turn on the news and hear all about crime and the political climate or you can enjoy the lake and City Park. Guys are out fishing. Families are having picnics. People are chilling; listening to music, doing cool stuff and just enjoying life. That speaks to me.”

Chuck also enjoys reading “anything and everything” but he especially enjoys novels, poetry and history. His favorites include Dr. Gerald Horne, an American historian and professor who writes about race, class and imperialism. He noted that he attended an event in New York to hear Dr. Horne talk about his books.

“It was the first time I ever felt like a groupie,” he said with a laugh, adding, “I also love, love, love James Baldwin for his bravery, his political acumen, and his eloquence. I’m spending time right now visiting the classics.”

Chuck has received positive feedback and support from the community on “Beautiful and Ugly Too.” It has been favorably reviewed by such luminaries as renowned historian and author Walter Isaacson, Louisiana Poet Laureate (2021-2023) Dr. Mona Lisa Saloy, and writers



Chuck Perkins with Joan Rivers

from local, national and international publications.

He hosted a book signing at Café Istanbul in early August 2025 and was recognized by the New Orleans Press Club for “From Back-a-Town to St. Charles on Foot.” The essay won first place for Life Style Reporting.

“*Beautiful and Ugly Too*” can be purchased at online at <https://ulpress.org/collections/new-and-featured/products/beautiful-and-ugly-too> or on Amazon or at local bookstores.

Open mic nights start at 10 p.m. on Wednesdays at Café Istanbul, 2372 St. Claude Avenue, on the first floor of The Healing Center.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHUCK PERKINS