



Mr. Perry Alonzo Hall

September 15, 1947 - April 19, 2020

The passing of Mr. Perry Alonzo Hall, age 72, on Sunday, April 19, 2020, at his home in Durham, North Carolina, is being announced by his son, Omari Alonzo Hall.

Perry Alonzo Hall, Jr., was born September 15, 1947. Father, husband, brother, friend, colleague, activist, musician, poet, author and intellectual, family patriarch, historian and genealogist, he was a relentless voyager across both terrestrial geographies and interior spaces.

Raised up in the historic Brewster Projects in Detroit by parents Phyllis Loraine Beard Hall and Perry Alonzo Hall, Sr.—along with siblings Charles Jerome, Emily Charlotte, Harriet Loraine, Arthur Raymond and Patricia Anne, and sometimes Norman Leonard, Perry, or Lonnie, as his family called him, experienced the rich culture of a neighborhood filled with successful Black businesses and the music of this country's most revered artists. Perry's early beginnings, both in exploring the rich culture of a thriving Black community with his brother, Charles, and in participating in the rise of Black consciousness during the tumultuous 1960s, shaped his later struggles to incorporate the Black historical experience into the American historical experience. He recognized both the contributions and the significant impact Black people have on American society.

A scholar from a very young age, and described by one of his Northern High School

teachers as one of the two or three smartest students he ever had, Perry graduated as president of his senior class in 1965 with a full academic scholarship to the University of Michigan. In 1966, the year after Perry graduated Northern High School, Northern students went on strike. Perry returned to Detroit during that period to work as a volunteer teacher at the “Freedom School” established for striking students at a local church.

As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Perry was a member of the first

generation of Black students that aggressively pushed majority white colleges and universities for courses that acknowledged the reality of Black life in the United States. As Perry wrote later, the courses he took in sociology, history and literature when he first entered college, “failed in their ability to encompass our realities.”

In a two-year hiatus from academia, Perry hitchhiked across the country a number of

times. He spent the summer of 1970 in Detroit working at Ed Boyer’s Insight Magazine. At the magazine, Perry was part of the team that conducted a group interview of Black Detroit-area Vietnam veterans, faithfully recording their raw and poignant battlefield stories, their outrage over the lack of jobs for returning veterans, and the decline and abandonment of minority neighborhoods in the city. While at Insight, Perry first met and worked with Geneva Smitherman, who would become a valued colleague in his subsequent career in African American Studies.

Later, as a doctoral student at the Harvard University School of Education, Acting Director of the Wayne State University Center for Black Studies, as a lecturer at the University of Alabama Birmingham and, finally, for 28 years a

tenured faculty member in at University of North Carolina, Perry continued the fight to legitimize and expand the field of African American Studies as a fully enfranchised, academic department. It is this career of struggling against white resistance and bureaucratic inertia, while compiling a record of brilliant intellectual achievement, that Perry recounted in his book, *In the Vineyard, Working in African American Studies*.

Perry was also deeply involved as an editor and writer in the creation of the 1981

National Council for Black Studies Report on Curriculum Standards. In addition, Perry wrote numerous papers published in the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *Word: A Black Culture Journal*, and the *Journal of Negro Education* and other academic journals. He contributed the essay, "African American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation" to the book, *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*," edited by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao. He also wrote "Commentary," included in *Black English and the Education of Black Children and Youth: Proceedings of the National Invitational Symposium on the King Decision*, edited by Geneva Smitherman.

Academically, Perry paid particular attention "to the importance of folk, popular, or traditional forms of expressive culture in understanding the overall context of black life in any given historical moment," as he wrote in *In the Vineyard*. "The core of African-based orality on which folk/popular culture is based suggests that oral forms such as music can tell about more aspects of the story of black people than customary literary sources alone."

It was his childhood spent in Detroit—immersed in a city where blues, R&B and Motown thrived, and where he grew up playing the piano at family gatherings that featured all

forms of gospel, holiday and responsive singing—that created Lonnie’s readiness to both believe in and investigate black folk/popular music traditions as a primary means of shaping African-American communities and culture. The strengths and talents of his multi-generational family also inspired Lonnie to undertake the work of researching and writing the history of both the Hall family, and the larger extended Beard clan, and sharing those stories at both small and large gatherings of the family in which he came to assume the role of a true patriarch. As the griot of the Beard family, Perry’s piano playing would encompass his family’s experience from the heavenly Silent Night led by the family matriarch, his grandmother “Ms. Emma,” to the earthy Stormy Monday Blues led by his Aunt Helen and improvised on by all members of the family.

Perry was fiercely dedicated to his family and the annual family retreats.

These were

gatherings visualized by he and other elders in the family, as a way of bringing the family together as it began to grow too large to gather in one house. Since 1977, these gatherings of between 70-100 family members were also opportunities to help the family grow in other ways—through workshops on finance, health, and small business incubation. It was at these retreats in later years that Perry, the family’s griot, began presenting his research to the family—adding historical context to family history as he followed his maternal family from the Reconstruction period through his grandmother’s migration to Detroit from Mississippi in the early 20th century. He also researched his paternal history, going back to 1799 and the migration of his great-great grandfather from Kentucky to Michigan. His role as family griot was a natural progression from his role as a scholar of African American history and a way to merge his roles as scholar and griot. Perry wanted to be sure his family benefited from the knowledge contained in the merging of historical fact and family lore.

As an adult, Perry was also a friend and colleague united in solidarity with a

multi-racial,
multi-cultural universe of working folks, artists and scholars. “No one worked harder to make himself clear about complex matters than Perry. He was sometimes disappointed when people didn’t quite get the details of what he was trying to tell them. But he never intended that he be honored for his effort. His energy was always focused on refining his work so that others might understand what mattered. Ironically, we can still honor him by continuing to explore and advance his work. He may have passed on, but we all can read his writings and hear his voice ring out,” says one friend of more than 50 years.

Perry is survived by his son, Omari Alonzo Hall, his siblings, Charles Jerome, Emily

Charlotte, Arthur Raymond, and Patricia Anne. He is predeceased by his parents, Phyllis and Perry, and his sister Harriet Loraine, and brother, Norman Leonard. In addition, he is survived by his ex-wife Patricia Watson Hall and stepdaughters, Amina Watson-Miller and Angela Watson, as well as his grandchildren, Aya Nyela Miller, Gavin Dean Watson and Damani Askia Miller (who shares his birthday), who lovingly called him Paw-Paw. He will be also missed by his Chicago “sisters,” Judy Hope, Linda Hall and Brenda Phillips, and by his large and close extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews.

Tribute Wall



“ *Mr. Perry Alonzo Hall*

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