

Arts & Culture

On Words: Ampersand

By A.D. Carson

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Editor's note: Welcome to the latest installment of "On Words," an occasional series in which faculty members write about evocative words and phrases. A.D. Carson, assistant professor of hip-hop and the Global South, writes about "ampersand," which is represented by this symbol: &. Here, too, he makes the world debut of his new song of the same name. If you like this, subscribe to our "On Words" newsletter.

The symbol for ampersand, "&," is derived from the Latin word "et," which means "and," written in cursive, connecting the letters e & t. The meaning of the symbol remains. In the early 1800s, schoolchildren concluded their recitations of the ABCs with "&," as it was part of the English alphabet. Rather than say, "X, Y, Z, and," the students avoided confusion by saying a version of the phrase, "X, Y, Z, and by itself and." The words "by itself" were delivered in Latin, as "per se." Thus, the phrase was delivered, "and per se and." The & symbol predates the word we use to describe it by more than 1,500 years. "Ampersand" is an example of a *mondegreen*, which is defined as a misunderstood or misheard word or phrase that results from nearly identical sounds. A listener hears a poem or song lyrics & substitutes a word or phrase that sounds similar to make sense of it.

"Ampersand" is the title of the second song on my new album, "I Used to Love to Dream." The track is produced by Marcus "Truth" Fitzgerald. The combination of history, meaning, interpretation & naming make the ampersand fascinating to me. In the context of writing this collection of songs, it feels like a metaphor. It is a symbol, a character that was & still does exist currently & not simply as a remainder, or an addition, or a reminder. It continues to hold meaning; to connect sentences & phrases; to link pasts, presents & futures together; to suggest possibility. Its composition reflects what it was & what it is. What it will be remains to be heard. How we describe it has much to do with how we listen to it & how we choose to make sense of it.

In recent years I have written three albums in Charlottesville, Virginia, & a dissertation album & digital archiving project at Clemson University in South Carolina. Each of those albums, in some manner or another, describe what life was like in those towns – places I lived, with varying degrees of discomfort calling either home.

Home, for me, is a small town of about 70,000 people in the middle of Illinois called Decatur. It's probably best known as "The Soybean Capital of the World" because of the history of major grain processing companies there, or "the original home of the Chicago Bears." Decatur is the current home of most of my family & many friends. It is also the home of my alma mater, Millikin University. Decatur ranked seventh nationally in USA

Today's 2019 "America's Fastest Shrinking Cities" poll & was listed No. 7 for their "15 Worst Cities for Black Americans" in 2018.

My forthcoming album, "I Used to Love to Dream," also connects pasts, presents, & futures. It will be the first rap album published by University of Michigan Press. In fact, it will be the first peer-reviewed rap album published by *any* university press. In addition to writing about Decatur, I attempt to describe other places & spaces where I've lived, studied & created. The project is also about the distance I feel between the past & the present. I took drafts of the songs to the National Arts Festival in Makhanda, Eastern Cape, South Africa, in the summer of 2019. During the entire trip, but especially in the listening & talkback session for the in-progress album at the Black Power Station community arts space, I was constantly reminded of my discomfort in naming & claiming a place that I call home. That discomfort compelled me to finish the album once I arrived back in Charlottesville.

I began writing "I Used to Love to Dream" with the same desire to connect current & past sounds & experiences that have always, on some level, informed my music-making practice. With this project, though, I wanted to extend my critical analysis & reflection beyond the immediate past, as I had done in my previous two "Sleepwalking" albums, volumes [one](#) & [two](#). I would write more personally, about where I'm from & where I'm at & what that means at this moment. The present can sometimes feel so distant from the past that I found myself worried I have no real claim to those previous stories that I have carried with me for so long. The new album is part of the ongoing work of reclaiming & the naming of then, now & what may come.