

INTERNATIONAL HOUSE OF BLUES FOUNDATION CATALYST SERIES PROFILES
*Catalyst Series Profiles provide information about musicians, artists, social activists
and others who have helped to bring about or advocate for social change*

Profile: PURVIS YOUNG (1943-2010)

Personal History: Purvis Young was born in Miami, Florida and grew up in a high poverty area of Miami known as “Overton.” He loved to draw and paint as a child, an interest that he rediscovered as a young adult. When Young was eighteen years old, he was charged with breaking and entering and he served three years in Raiford State Prison. There Young began to paint again and came to believe that it was his calling. After his release, he returned to Overton where he painted for the rest of his life. He died at the age of 67 after a long battle with diabetes.

Cultural Context: As an Overton resident, Young was powerfully influenced by the widespread poverty and crime of the area. Young also came of age in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement. The social impact of poverty and crime and the ongoing challenge of racial relations became key themes in his paintings.

Beliefs & Inspirations: Young drew inspiration from many sources, including his dreams, discarded objects, and the work of other artists. For example, he was inspired, in part, to create his own murals after reading a book documenting the “Freedom Walls” created by young artists in Chicago and Detroit during the 1940s. Young was also motivated by what he saw around him in Overton, and he became the unofficial visual historian of his community and an advocate for change. His work often reflected upon how race can divide communities. As Purvis once said, "If you want to reach the colored town, cross over the railroad tracks. That's the story."¹ Yet Young remained optimistic about the possibilities for change. According to Young, “In all the poverty, the crime, the pushin’ drugs, there is love. There is help. There is a change.”²

Young as Catalyst: Young recorded his experiences with inner city life in hundreds of paintings full of unique characters and symbols. He painted murals on the walls of abandoned buildings known as “Good Bread Alley.” He attached rows of individual paintings to the fences of abandoned lots, demanding that people passing by take notice and consider how racism and poverty affect their society. Young created art with the hope of making a difference. In 2008, he was presented with a key to the city of Miami in recognition of his contributions.



For Reflection: The following questions can serve as starting points for further discussions, activities or projects related to Young’s role in bringing about social change:

- What impact do you think Young’s efforts had on society?
- What do you think were the most significant challenges Young faced?
- What can be learned about working toward social change from this person’s story?

¹ Content drawn from <http://www.purvis-young.com/Artist-Info.cfm?ArtistsID=588&Object=#Bio>

² Content drawn from <http://www.purvis-young.com> (2003).