A POET OFF THE OLD BLOCK

By Chicago Tribune

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The two-flat- and tenement-lined streets of the Near West Side are the enduring heart and soul of Chicago`s Italian colony. In this half-hidden patch of yesteryear urban landscape, an immigrant generation of factory hands and construction workers came of age.

Squeezed in between the University of Illinois at Chicago and its medical center, this vest-pocket neighborhood also has produced its fair share of Prohibition-era bootleggers and their present-day netherworld equivalents.
But unless the local stoop-sitting historians are way off the mark, it has been the birthing ground of only one poet: State Sen. John D`Arco Jr., the philosopher-king of Taylor Street.

”I came to my big insight even before I got into this line of work,”
D`Arco recalled, gesturing toward the speaker phone through which he was processing a mixed bag of legal and political business in his Loop law office. It was the start of a workaday round of unpoetic appointments and visits, during the course of which he would explain the unusual route he took from street-corner kid to self-anointed intellectual.

It was an overcast day, and the morning sun was alternately passing out of sight, then appearing again from behind the cloud cover to send peek-a-boo streaks of light through the room`s windows. As an occasional glint highlighted D`Arco`s squarely pronounced jaw and cheekbones, his darkly handsome head would be momentarily transformed into a bronze sculpture of one of his Roman ancestors.
He was dressed in the carefully tailored, expensive-but-under stated suit that is the regular uniform of a younger generation of Chicago politicians.
Yet his whisper-soft voice–and a habit of framing the beginnings and ends of sentences with sweetly accented syllables–seemed more derived from a world of back-fence gossiping than the halls of power.

” Years ago, I said to myself: If people want to be more than passive acceptors of life, they have to know something about philosophy. Sure, let `em read some Hume, maybe a little Kant,” D`Arco observed, while pushing a self- published volume of his verse,” The Product of My Thought,” (Vantage Press, $7.95) across the desktop in his guest`s direction. ” But if they really want to know where it`s at, they`re also going to have to read D`Arco.”

From any other lips, such a declaration would invite a reporter to close his notebook on another chapter in the contagious madness of contemporary society. After all, to enroll your own name in the pantheon of the great thinkers must be sufficient evidence for emergency confinement. But given when and where the 42-year-old D`Arco was raised, there was probably no way for a budding philosopher or poet to proclaim his vocation except to shout it flat- out, without regard for stylistic niceties.

I wanted to see the future
whirlwind reality
devil-may-care philosophy
water spills into matter
sounds at the other end — touching me —
she could see death before it happened
in the form of a bird or a tree
possibilities are endless
I looked in the mirror and
saw what I was afraid of

As in other inner-city neighborhoods, life on Taylor Street always has been determined by a rigid social order, and none of its rungs are reserved for intellectual and artistic callings. For most immigrant groups, those things are a postponed luxury, to be enjoyed only after they had made it into the mainstream and moved to suburbia. Instead, the bottom of Taylor Street`s hierarchy was marked by recent arrivals from the Old Country who worked as sweat-shop laborers, while the top was occupied by the community`s political bosses.

”I was the rich kid on the block,” D`Arco noted while flipping through the stack of call-backs that had piled up alongside his phone.” When you`re 12 or 13, that`s got its good parts and its bad ones, too.” The upside, he explained, was that his father, as alderman and committeeman of the 1st Ward, was the perennial recipient of passes to the Loop theaters that marked the other end of John D`Arco Sr.`s fiefdom.
” I could always take a bunch of guys downtown on a Saturday and treat them to a movie,” D`Arco said.” Afterwards, we`d go over to Fritzel`s for lunch. Can you imagine a 7th-grader signing his father`s name to the check in a fancy place like that? What a smart ass I must have been in those days!” The downside of his grade-school status was that some of the neighborhood kids didn`t wait until now to make that very same evaluation of John D`Arco Jr.`s youthful personality.

Excusing himself, he punched the speaker phone on his desk, summoning his legislative assistant, Rico Paone, from the next office.
” Listen, do me a favor, will you?” D`Arco said when Paone appeared and handed him some of the phone messages that were stacked up on his desk. “ Give them a call about the problem with the campaign office in the 27th Ward. Also, I need a couple tickets to the show at the Chicago Theater for a real good client. ‘Can do?’ ‘Oh, yeah, one thing more, Rico, as long as you`re here. Explain to this guy how we first met.’ ”

Before getting on with his other assignments, Paone noted that he and his patron go all the way back to a street-corner fight in the old neighborhood. After that school-boy encounter, like the biblical David and Jonathan, they become fast, and enduring, friends.

Such was not, D`Arco added, an uncommon way for him to make acquaintances in those days. “When your family is infamous–or famous, depending on what perspective you take,” D`Arco said,” every kid around wants to take you on. Growing up, I had a lot–believe me, a real lot–of fights.”

Considering the nature of the D`Arco’s fame, some of his youthful opponents must have been throw-caution-to-the-winds street brawlers, indeed. For a quarter of a century now, John D`Arco Sr.`s name has scarcely appeared in the newspapers without the qualifying allegation,” the syndicate`s spokesman in City Council.” Or alternately,” the mob`s liaison to City Hall.”

His father himself, D`Arco recalled, was bothered by his clippings only once:” Look at this!” the senior D`Arco had thundered, thrusting forth the newspapers that noted his participation with a group of real estate developers in a downtown land deal. “Now they`re calling me a businessman!”

When D`Arco Jr. was 13, his mother told him that he should prepare himself for even worse notices, since he would have to deal with his father`s public image for a long time. A few years later, his mother`s injunction, and his own philosophical awakening, put D`Arco on a collision course with a fast- thinking reporter.

At the time, D`Arco had an after-school job in U.S. Rep. Cardiss Collins` office. One afternoon, he informed a journalist who called that his boss was absent.
”Well, who are you?” the reporter countered, and when D`Arco gave her his name, she quickly shifted gears to ask what he thought about the newspapers` characterization of his father`s associates.
”I tried out some lines on her that later went into my book,” D`Arco said, while turning to the proper page and finding the text.” `Life is one big question mark, ` I told her, `and within it there are many little question marks. ` ”
In the next morning`s editions, the reporter translated D`Arco`s poetry into a more prosaic quotation:” Asked if his father had mob connections, D`Arco replied, `That is a good question. ` ”
” My father was on the phone to me the minute he saw the papers,” D`Arco said, recalling his first, abortive attempt to bring poetry to the masses.
” `Listen, kid, ` my father told me, `Don`t give any more interviews, OK? `”

”Stab a tree
under a leaf, study ecology,
student of nature, hear vacant voices
hollow man, sparks, fumes, scales
is man a set of symbols marked for sale?

Jesse Jackson, black activist
speaks to kids at Harvard, Brown and Yale
Poverty - a crime against humanity
Symbol - poor people
Representation - a toy to think about
like Vito Marzullo before him
and Rich Daley too”

Standing quietly to the side of a Loop parking garage, on the way to his regular mid-day workout in a gym on the North Side, D`Arco recalled that it was in college that he first acquired a taste for complex philosophical issues.

”Up to then, I was an Ayn Rand type–all cool and rational,” he said, as his car was automatically delivered, without him so much as turning in a parking stub or wagging a finger at the hikers. Such are the fringe benefits of being a powerhouse in the legislature, where he represents the string of inner-city neighborhoods that was his father`s base of power.

” Then one day, I asked myself the most fundamental question of all: Who am I, and where am I going?”

D`Arco was not the only one to wonder about that–especially when, on his first Christmas break from the University of Miami, he returned to Taylor Street sporting the long hair of a 1960s hippie. It was part of a cultural makeover by which the campus radicals had turned him on to the world of books and ideas.

” My father`s attitude was: It`s a phase, he`ll outgrow it,” D`Arco said. ”But Mother must have called every relative on the phone asking them where she`d gone wrong. With my mother, everything is family.” D`Arco recalled this while huffing and puffing his way through the 150 pushups that are a regular part of his athletic-club routine.

His father`s problem, D`Arco continued, was in dealing with some of the new ideas he brought home from college. Taylor Street is a cloistered community, and his dormitory buddies had got him started on authors like Dostoevsky and Nietzsche–from which reading list he began to frame his own set of poetic and philosophical questions.
” One time–by then I must have been home from college and in law school,” D`Arco remembered,” I went to my father and said:

” Man cannot choose to be; He simply is,
And if he is, when is he not? Even after death, he remains matter.”

What the heck is that the senior D`Arco asked?
That is my poetry, Dad, D`Arco Jr. replied, proudly extending a pile of his manuscripts.
Leave that with me, his father countered.

”A week later,” D`Arco recalled,” my dad called me into his office and threw the manuscripts back across his desk at me. `You`re wasting your time with this stuff, ` he said. `I give to a guy to read–and he says it`s no damn good! ` ”

By now he is long since resigned to unkind critical notices, D`Arco noted on his way from a shirt-changing stop-off at his Near South Side condo to the kind of cocktail party that regularly closes out a politician`s working day. The senior D`Arco, though, has long-since turned from skeptic to proud father. The cultural war between the two D`Arco generations ended when Gold Coast bookseller Stuart Brent threw an autograph party for his son`s book, and Mayor Washington showed up. Now, make mention of his son`s poetry, and D`Arco Sr. breaks out in a smile so wide you could drive a Streets and Sanitation truck through it.

Brent recalls that on first leafing through D`Arco`s book he was struck by an intellectual sincerity that transcended the author`s obvious limitations of poetic vocabulary and imagery.” He was patently one of those noble failures–like a Socrates or a Jesus,” Brent said.” At the party I asked Saul Bellow what he thought. `Good, bad, what’s the difference? ` Bellow answered. `The most difficult thing for a human being is to knock on silence. ` ”

D`Arco himself is the first to agree that for a poet the worst possible fate is to go unheard.
” When I was still living in the old neighborhood,” D`Arco noted, as finger sandwiches and drinks were being served in the lower level of the State of Illinois Building. ” I went over to Circle Campus and showed my ideas to a couple of philosophy professors. But they weren’t very receptive.

” Down in Springfield, I gave Sen. Jeremiah Joyce my book–he`s a voracious reader. But the only time the guys in the legislature acknowledge my poetry is when someone on the opposite side of an issue quotes some of my lines back at me–twisting their meaning to support his side of the argument.”

Asked why, then, he keeps up his lonely battle on behalf of the Muse–in between his other obligations, he tries to squeeze in a little work on an expanded edition of his poetry–D`Arco hunched his shoulders in a shrug of colossal proportions.

” I don`t know,” D`Arco replied,” but something inside of me is always making me want to grab people and say: `Hey–I got a hold of the truth. You want a piece of it? ` ”

Then he took up a cocktail napkin and wrote on it:” Look at me!”
D`Arco, who is divorced, noted that he will often go up to a woman in a bar, pose that same question on a beer coaster, and pass it over for her inspection. If she returns it, he adds a response on behalf of the woman:

” How can I look at you if you are a piece of paper?”

For those of his cocktail-lounge students who make it this far in the lesson, a third Zeno-like paradox follows:” Then, if you are a piece of paper, I am looking at you.”

When D`Arco had finished his mini-philosophy lesson–which also is included in his book–an all-too-jaded reporter couldn`t resist asking how frequently this mental exercise helps him get lucky.

” Nah, life`s not like that. Most of the time, the girl says thanks and gets off her bar stool real fast,” D`Arco reported.” Remember what they did to Socrates? Face it, not many people want to go one-on-one with truth.”