

# Sounds From the Street: Robert Williams on Service, Respect and Art

Transcribed by Natalie Chen

Robert Williams: I always introduce myself as a veteran, and so that's why I'm appalled sometimes when people are so oblivious to the fact that they asked for help, so why look at me so crazy when I ask for some. You asked me first.

And so one of my main objectives out there when I'm distributing the paper is to engage in the minds of the people to get them to wake up and realize we should all have rights.

Adam Kampe: This is Sounds From the Street, where we get to meet the men and women who define Street Sense, DC's nonprofit media center dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. Today, we're talking to artist and former marine Robert Williams.

Robert Williams is frustrated. He's frustrated by the general treatment of those living on the streets, he's frustrated by the discrimination and police abuse, and the feeling of being looked at as less than. But mostly, he's frustrated by the lack of respect given to veterans who so often trade a measurable sacrifice for invisibility on the street. Though disheartened and angry, Robert is resilient, and he's using his creativity to raise awareness about homelessness and homeless vets. He started our conversation reading a short piece he recently wrote called: "Feeling Some Kind of Way."

Williams: And since I was feeling some kind of way, I entitled it that – "Feeling Some Kind of Way." It starts off:

"Love, or hate, every emotion can make you crazy, but neither do entangle me. Tattered is my heart, yet full of love and compassion, broken and shattered. Where do I go? What do I do? No one even sometimes to talk to. Stop. Look. Listen. To what? To who? Do you care too? But for who? Do this or that. Why or when? How did it all begin? And when will it end? Still I shall receive that list no one thought I could achieve. Knowledge I put on a shelf, I should be teaching, yet I'm stretching, reaching, but reaching for what? Is this reality? Or perception? I should've caught it in perception. What's really going on? Is it going on? Really? What? So much of my mind, I have to admit it ain't all kind. So full is my brain, how do I ever even sustain? By his grace and mercy, better hold on to it because baby, I'm still thirsty. I've got to tap deeper into the source, hey, that's it. But of course, caught up because I was stuck up not to do as what I was brought up. Feel sometimes used and pimped, still I must make an attempt. Nothing beats a failure by a try, tired, tired, tired, I should or could just cry."

Kampe: What does "Feeling Some Kind of Way," what does that mean?

Williams: Well I was feeling some kind of way when I wrote the piece, I was at the Pieces Studio and all of a sudden I was just overcome with mixed emotions, scattered thoughts, and so I just began to write as I was feeling at the time. Initially, I wasn't going to turn it in, you know, it was kind of all over the place, but in actuality, after reading it over the third time, I decided that there's gotta be someone other than myself that in some point in time they are, too, feeling some kind of way. You know you can't

exactly point a finger on what you're feeling or where it is it's originating from, you're just feeling some type of way.

Kampe: Do you write often for the paper?

Williams: Yes, at least once a month. The paper comes out currently biweekly, initially I was doing every other month, just getting something in every now and then, but then started getting a lot of requests from some of my regular customers and everything that I should write more often and they seemed to like what I was writing, and I just basically write pretty much as I feel. I do not write according to what I think may or may not be received, I'm not being factitious or anything, but I'm really not concerned with whether it's received or not received, basically what's real. Personally, I don't know how to talk out of the side of my mouth like a politician, the only thing I know how to do is keep it 100, spit it straight out the center, keeping it real.

Kampe: This city needs more of that. The whole world does, but most definitely the nation's capital.

Williams: Most definitely.

Kampe: You're a veteran so just give me a little bit of a backstory as to when and where did you serve, I know you are a marine corps, and so what that transition was like post serving to your experience with unstable housing.

Williams: I entered the Marine Corps in 1978. About a year after having attended college. my roommate burned my apartment down. I come home one evening from classes and my door was open, walls were charred, most of my clothing and books were burnt beyond repair. And so I was forced to withdraw. And that was what I was going to college for electrical engineering. I was forced to withdraw and return home. Being an independent man that I am, felt I should be contributing more. So I needed to do something with my life. So I got my dad I went down. When I joined the only branch of service airline desert marine noted the only branch of services United States Marine Corps. You other veterans you all count too you know, but you all know the deal. I went through boot camp, and South Carolina Parris Allen, which is in diva, South Carolina, called the home in the sand fleas, they sting you worse than mosquitos. From there I ventured to Twentynine Palms California, known as the "stumps" about 65 miles outside of Palm Springs. And finished some schooling, did some schooling for numbers and wat attached to a communication support unit. I was a communications field radio operator. From there I went to Japan, which was a great experience—learned the language, the culture and everything, beautiful culture, and hit a major spice in Japan, Hiroshima, Kisha, Osaka, Kyoto and other places from there to Taegu Air Force Base Korea, finished my tenure of time at Quantico Marine Base out here Virginia, at DBS, trainee officers that obviously Candidate School and communications

Kampe: Do you mind sharing the experience or the story of coming back from serving to what happened?

Williams: I'll say this. I personally, I did work. I was employed, gainfully employed, and a number of areas work startup time with the Chicago Board of Education. I spent a lot of time in Chicago and that's where I spent some of my homelessness and Chicago not so much here in DC, but worked a number of jobs. Upon getting out my first couple of jobs initially was at Fort Minero army base, the motor pool— I dispatched government vehicles. I did construction work. I did. Wow. Matter of fact, I worked with A L Williams and Associates, which is an insurance company. A lot of people now may better know it as

America. They bought A L Williams out, but I used to sell life insurance. And I think that's one of the hardest things to sell that nobody wants to talk about life insurance. As I've done a number of things worked a number of jobs and as Marine, a Marine can do just about anything. A Marine is not afraid to work. As matter of fact by ten o'clock in the morning, a marine has done more than the average working class person does all day, all week long. It was some people asked me when I'm out distributing paper, "Why don't you get a job? Why don't you work? Have you ever worked?" I said "Yes. One of the jobs I had was sacrificing my life for the freedom and security that you are now afforded."

Now there are some services out there for veterans. However, one is not publicized enough. And a lot of instances, an individual go for a particular service and is told, especially in most of the homeless ranks, he's missing a lot of needed paperwork and or identification. So he may go by here and he's told you go here, there, and there. So then he goes here, there, and there. When he comes back to his initial spot, he's told that it's been discontinued. The business has been filled or no longer exists, or he missed the deadline. You know, a lot of veterans that are on the street have become complacent. They've given up, okay? Because they're tired of being lifted up, and then dropped on ahead, promised this, promised that, and then nothing comes to fruition. You know, these individuals fought for your life, they fought for the freedom you are now afforded, they make it possible to go into these clubs, these bars, these restaurants, these shops. I spent astronomical amounts of money and not have to worry about bombs or terrorist rushing while they're enjoying themselves, and then come out and cannot help a veteran with five or ten dollars. You cannot even have the common courtesy or the decency to even look at him to even respond to him. One of my articles starts off like this: "When will it end? Where are we headed to as a people, not just black people, white people, red, yellow or brown people? And to my understanding, there is only one race. Any victory that is achieved by standing on the neck of another is nothing more than a shallow victory, which inevitably be lost."

Kampe: Forgive me for the bluntness or directness of this question, but do you currently identify as homeless?

Williams: No, I'm not I am, I am held, I'm currently unemployed. But by the grace of God and by the legislation that President Barack Obama and Vice President Biden have an action to have all homeless veterans off the street by 2015. I have been afforded a HUD Vash voucher. So I am currently housed and have been, since shortly after returning back to Washington, DC, I returned back here in 2012 after the passing for the home going, both my father and my mother who both passed within six months apart. At that point, I've been into a transitional housing for veterans. By the grace of God, I've been into one that was extremely nice, nice environment, nice neighborhood, unlike most transitional housing or anything for veterans are homeless people period they're generally located in low rent, high crime, drug infested areas, as this was not. I was fortunate once again in that aspect.

Kampe: I know Mayor Bowser and the Department of Human Services has made this pledge to end homelessness for veterans in 2015. Does that afford you a stipend?

Williams: I have zero income. You get on a list, like the thing called section eight, that has existed for some time and many people have been on it for many years. And for a veteran VC housing, I guess there are certain things that will enable you to move more rapidly up the list such as the length of time that you've been homeless, illnesses, and there's a third thing that I can't pull up with the tip of my tongue.

Kampe: Yeah, certain requisites are things you meet, you know, based on your income or physical health or mental health, you can rise through the ranks.

Williams: One has to be strong, you know, you can't not give up. A lot of things are happening all around that's not right. And a lot of society allows so much wrong to be done right in front of the eyes, or they just close our eyes to it. That's why I say they're walking around with their eyes wide shut. My articles have different titles, describing and trying to alert what it is that they need to do. One is "As I open my eyes," one is "control," one is "Change your mindset," one is "Contemplating choices," one is "we should all have rights" that we should all have rights that refers to the homeless community, one may recall the Bill of Rights to be studied in school, or the average homeless person does not have the opportunity or is not afforded the opportunity to exercise those Bill of Rights. So with that particular article, my theater group and I, which I'm a member of the theater group Stage in Hope. We do have a homeless Bill of Rights.

Kampe: That was a veteran Robert Williams. And you can see "The Homeless Bill of Rights," a 45 minute performance of monologues, poetry, and songs at George Washington University's Marvin Center on November 16 at 7pm. So come support the Street Sense theater workshop to hear more Sounds From the Street, check out [streetsense.org](http://streetsense.org) slash audio, or find us on Soundcloud or the podcast app Stitcher. Soon you'll be able to find us on iTunes. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter at Street Sense DC. Sounds From the Street Theme Song: "I need \$1," performed by Aloe Blacc from the album "Good Things," used courtesy of Stone's Throw Records. The song is composed by Aloe Blacc with Leon Michaels, Nick Motion, and Jeff Dynamite, used by permission songs of Colbalt Music Publishing, EMI Blackwood Music Inc. slash Sony ATV. The following songs are found on WFM use Free Music Archive and used courtesy of Creative Commons. Excerpt of "South Rivers Crossing" and "Flood" by Black Hill from the album "Bridges of the South" and excerpts of "The Toro" and "The Zeplin" by Blue Dot Sessions from the album "Arrownot."

Williams: My name is Robert Williams and you are now listening to Sounds From the Street/