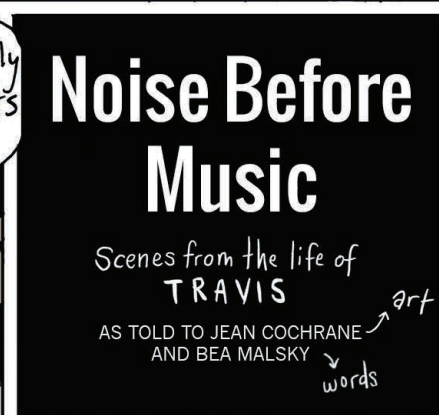
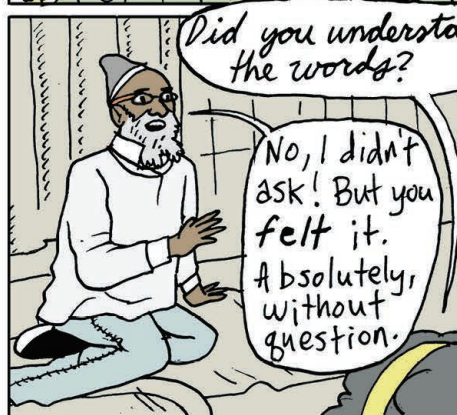
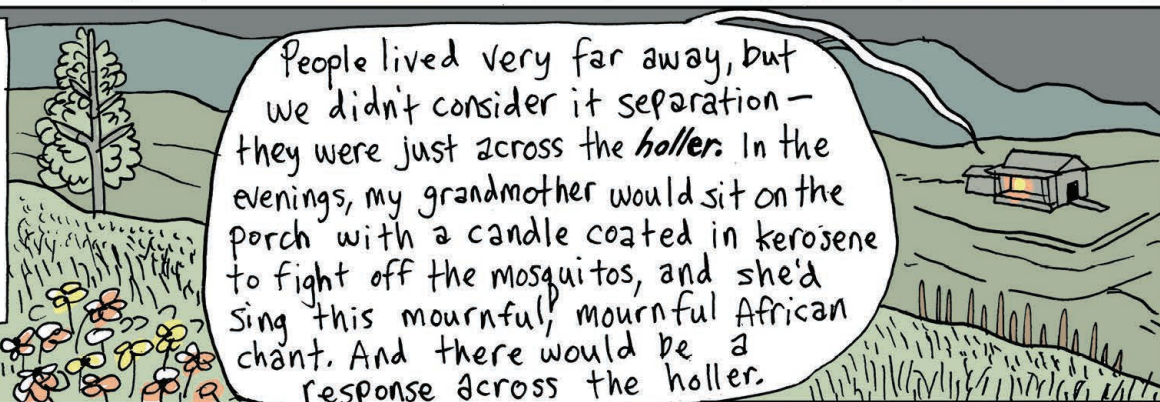
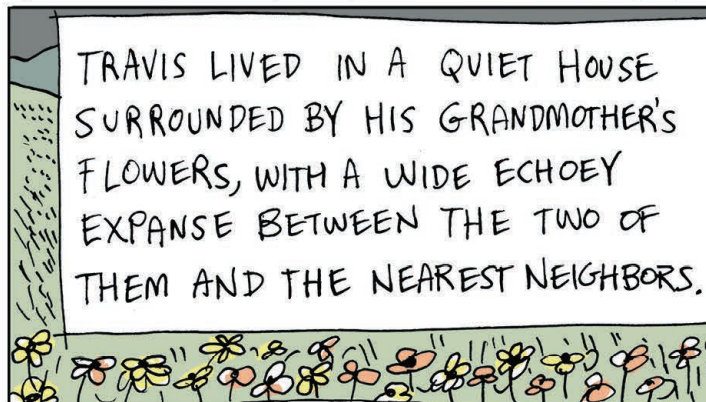


# SOUTH SIDE WEEKLY

NOVEMBER 26, 2014 \* ARTS, CULTURE, AND POLITICS \* SOUTHSIDEWEEKLY.COM \* FREE

TRAVIS, THE PROLIFIC PERFORMANCE ARTIST, WAS BORN ON SEPTEMBER 23, 1946 IN ITAWAMBA COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI. LATER THAT SAME WEEK HIS MOTHER LEFT FOR ST. LOUIS, LEAVING TRAVIS WITH HIS GRANDMOTHER—A WOMAN WHO RARELY SPOKE.



Scenes from the life of  
TRAVIS

AS TOLD TO JEAN COCHRANE  
AND BEA MALSKY

art  
words



TRAVIS HAS BEEN PERFORMING IN CHICAGO WITH **ONO** SINCE 1980, DRAWING ON GOSPEL TO CREATE NOISE THAT IS SOMETIMES DISTURBING, USUALLY STRANGE, OFTEN SUBLIME.



ONSTAGE, TRAVIS WEARS ELEGANT DRESSES, OFTEN BRIDAL WHITE, OR INTRICATELY CRAFTED COSTUMES. THE WORDS HE INTONES—WITH A BAND THAT FALLS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN FUNK AND INDUSTRIAL—ARE FULL OF RELIGIOUS IMAGERY AND REFERENCES TO THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH.



TRAVIS HOLDS A MASTERS FROM NORTHWESTERN, WHERE HE STUDIED ARCHITECTURE AND GRADUATED WITH A 4.0. HE PAINTS AND WRITES TIRELESSLY—HIS HOME ON THE FAR SOUTH SIDE IS ENTIRELY FILLED WITH HIS WORK. NEVERTHELESS, HE'S BEST KNOWN AS A **PERFORMER**.





GROWING UP IN MISSISSIPPI, TRAVIS SANG AND PLAYED PIANO AT CARTER'S CHAPEL CHURCH, PART OF A CLUSTER OF HOUSES BUILT BY HIS GREAT-GREAT-GRANDPARENTS.



The boys hated me for that. I had no male friends. They hated me for not just piano lessons, but because I was so *punk*. It was punk-ass, it was sissy. It was the girly thing to do.



IN FIFTH GRADE, HE STOPPED GOING TO SCHOOL.

I would just wander, and I would hide in outhouses. My uncle Dave was putting in plumbing, and outhouses were these new empty spaces.



I'd spend hours there reading. By the time that happened, I was already considered very far afield.



People thought, "He just doesn't speak."

ONE DAY, WHILE HE WAS WALKING HOME, A GROUP OF OLDER BOYS ATTACKED HIM.

They took off all my clothes, and strapped me to this fence...



I could not abide the sound of my voice, so I would never have yelled for help. It was as if I had never heard my own voice. Silence was much more important to me.

TRAVIS'S AUNT INDIA, THE BEST-DRESSED WOMAN IN TOWN, TOOK HIM UNDER HER WING. THEY WOULD DRIVE TO BIRMINGHAM EVERY WINTER SO SHE COULD BUY THE NEWEST FASHIONS TO WEAR TO CHURCH. ASIDE FROM THOSE TRIPS, WHILE TRAVIS LIVED WITH HER SHE NEVER LEFT MISSISSIPPI.



I relate more to the women I grew up around, rather than the presence or absence of black men.





IN 1963, DREAMING OF THE GRANDEUR OF VIETNAM WAR SHIPS, TRAVIS ENLISTED IN THE NAVY.

Suddenly the world is full of men! Damn.

BEFORE LONG, IT WAS TIME FOR THE *SWIMMING TEST*.

A thousand men in this swimming pool, stark naked, as they say, asshole to belly button. It's the middle of winter, you're freezing to death. For me, it was like the gallows.

Did you know how to swim?

Oh hun, *no!* And then I realized: what's happening to the people who freak out? They were put in the corner in the fetal position. Those men were sent home on medical discharge.

They told you what to do—fold your arms, take one step, and then in you go, put your head back and your body is going to follow—and go all the way to the end of the pool and back. And I said:

"I ain't going home!"

AS A QUEER BLACK MAN IN THE MILITARY, TRAVIS WAS AN ANOMALY. HE IS GRADUALLY RECOUNTING HIS EXPERIENCE IN AN ONGOING ART PROJECT, WITH DAILY DRAWINGS CORRESPONDING TO HIS DAY EXACTLY 50 YEARS AGO.



TRAVIS WAS ENLISTED UNTIL 1969. HE WORKED WITH THE CHICAGO CHAPTER OF AMERICAN VETERANS FOR EQUAL RIGHTS UNTIL 2011, WHEN "DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL" WAS REPEALED.



ART BY TRAVIS — VISIT [latravis.tumblr.com](http://latravis.tumblr.com) FOR THIS CURRENT PROJECT, AND [travistravis.com](http://travistravis.com) FOR PAST WORK.

TODAY, ONO IS WORKING ON A NEW ALBUM. TRAVIS LIVES ALONE AND, AT 68, CONSISTENTLY CHALLENGES THE CULT FOLLOWING HE HAS ACCUMULATED OVER THE YEARS.

