MARK ANTHONY MULLIGAN
You Must Withstand the Wind
Many artists produce work that challenges our preconceptions. Some would argue that this is the role artists should play: to make us look at the world through new eyes. Certain artists provide such outstandingly original and innovative imagery that we stop in our tracks and are transported to new levels of understanding.

Kentucky Folk Art Center is truly proud to present You Must Withstand the Wind, as a tribute to the vision of Mark Anthony Mulligan, whose art compels us to rethink our view of contemporary life. His urban landscapes portray the modern American city as a complex, organic entity, replete with unapologetic commercialism and traffic that races forever through a frenzied maze of streets. The buzz of the city overwhelms us as we explore Mulligan’s landscapes, punctuated as always by billboards and commercial signage that proclaim their message with evangelical zeal.

The triumph of Mark Anthony Mulligan’s accomplishment as an artist lies in the inherent contradiction between his own life experience and his unabashed celebration of the urban habitat. Through his art, Mulligan transforms his environment, a mixture of the real and the imagined. Where most of us decry the proliferation of corporate signage as scars on the horizon, Mark Anthony presents brand name logos like lollipops on a stick, and holds them dear as comforting icons of the modern world. What others see as empty, lifeless, and numbing, Mulligan portrays as brimming over with excitement and energy.

Al Gorman met Mark Anthony on the streets of Louisville in the late 1980s and has maintained a close relationship with the artist ever since. Al’s ongoing friendship and correspondence with the artist (over 350 letters in envelopes covered with drawings and text) have uniquely positioned him to explore the artist’s work, which, for all its starkness, can be extremely complex and highly ambiguous. We are ever grateful that Al agreed to immerse himself in this project.

Mark Anthony Mulligan has lived on the edge since he took to the streets around 1979, challenging the imagination of social workers, psychiatrists, and members of the general public who have encountered him. In this exhibition of his work between 1987 and 2002, we aspire to convey some sense of the brilliance of his highly charged interpretation of contemporary urban life. Mark’s art provides a stark, edgy, exterior window into his unique, interior world. Through his work perhaps we can gain insights into our shared predicament, living in a world where the rate of change seems often to outpace our capacity to understand its long-term implications.

—Adrian Swain, May, 2005
Kentucky Folk Art Center,
Morehead State University
Morehead, Kentucky
Artists are often the first to spot those among their community who have something special happening in their art. Such is the case with Mark Anthony Mulligan. From the moment he presented himself in the Louisville landscape, his originality and genuine qualities attracted other creative people to want to help him. The fact that Mulligan was able to garner a national audience for his work bears out the faith we placed in him and our judgment of his work.

Accomplishing a project on this scale requires the efforts of many people. It may sound like a cliché, but truly, this retrospective was a labor of love. First of all, we must thank Mark Anthony Mulligan for his many years of wonderful work. I know he feels a sense of pride in what he has achieved.

For recognizing that the moment was right to revisit Mulligan's work, many thanks go to Kentucky Folk Art Center and Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. The K.F.A.C.'s board and staff are the leading advocates for the work of self-taught artists within the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Adrian Swain, Curator of the K.F.A.C., deserves the credit for initiating and shepherding this project along. Thank you for your confidence in me. It has meant a lot.

Good friends on the Mulligan journey who deserve recognition for their many contributions include: Chuck and Karolle Swanson, Lynn Cralle and Rodney Hatfield, Susan Reed and all the present and former staff of Swan-son Reed Galleries, formerly Swanson Cralle Gallery. I must also thank Todd Bartlett and the staff of Kizito Cookies. All of these folks have encouraged Mark and shared their primary resource materials ranging from art, letters, songs and memories. All have informed this project.

My deepest thanks go to my family and wife, Patti Linn, for her editing advice and general good cheer in tolerating my mania to complete this project. My brother-in-law Bruce Linn's involvement with Mark Anthony Mulligan goes back to the beginning and his many contributions are a part of the success of this endeavor. Thanks to all of my friends for their good questions, challenges and patience.

I would like to thank all of Mulligan's collectors for sharing their enthusiasm for this exhibit. I would like to acknowledge the roles played by Ann Oppenheimer of the Folk Art Society of America and art columnist Diane Heilenman of the Courier-Journal in helping to get the word out to Mulligan collectors about this show. Finally, thanks to all who helped fund this exhibition.

Albertus Gorman
Louisville, KY

Durrett Lane and I-264 in Early 1970s
Acrylics and pen on wood, 1990
24 x 34¾ in.
Gorman-Linn Collection

Self Portrait 2000
Mixed Media
Size
Collection
Dear Mark Anthony Mulligan,

You are the sign and logo king. Nobody else comes close. Those of us who have been following your career as an artist are proud of you. You did it! For someone with such a powerful need for attention, you achieved recognition for making art. This retrospective of your “greatest hits” is in your honor. We know you are at a crossroads. Whatever happens, we hope you can “withstand the wind.”

Your friend,

Al Gorman
The moral of this song, when you’re treated so wrong, and nothing seems to be worked out, Just withstand the war, and get 100% far, that’s what survival is all about.¹

Louisville, Kentucky’s own Mark Anthony Mulligan is an expressive and complex artist. By whatever term you wish to label him—folk artist, outsider artist, self-taught artist or natural artist—you can come close without fully capturing his achievement. One other designation also applies: contemporary artist. By definition, Mulligan is living and working in the moment. His work engages us—and the spirit of the time we live in.

This exhibition is a collection of Mulligan’s works made between the years 1987 and 2002. This was an enormously productive period for the artist. Between all the drawings, paintings and songs he penned, he easily created over 1,000 pieces. Moreover, the artist freely gave away or peddled many works on the street and these still await discovery.

Who Is Mark Anthony Mulligan?

Mark Anthony Mulligan has been active in crafting his own myth; you cannot easily separate his life from his art. He has insistently incorporated his life story into numerous drawings, and autobiographies are included in his many surviving letters.

Although the details sometimes vary, Mulligan always starts from the beginning. He was born May 20, 1963, a black male. When he was one year and nine months old, he fell from his crib and “damaged his brain”. He cites this incident as the cause for being “bi-polar” and “mentally ill.” He also says people consider him to be mentally retarded.²

Mulligan grew up in Louisville’s West End, a predominantly African-American working class neighborhood. He has one brother and five sisters. When he was young, his parents divorced and he went to live with his father who later remarried. He took youth development classes but dropped out of school after the tenth grade.³

Mulligan admits that, despite his family’s best efforts, when he became a teenager he couldn’t abide by the family house rules.⁴ He kept moving in and out of the house, and by the time he was 18, he was essentially homeless, living in the streets, between mission homes and soup kitchens. Eventually, he started receiving assistance through various social service programs that provided health care and subsidized housing. In the years since, he has been in jail, hospitalized and periodically institutionalized in mental health facilities.

In one-page autobiographies offered for sale on the street, Mulligan usually includes some physical information. As of May 20, 2000, the six-foot Mulligan weighed 358 pounds. He claims to have “high blood and cholesterol” and he says he is “borderline diabetic.”⁵

Since 1986, Mulligan has been a self-described “sign and logo artist”. Other than a few high school classes and encouragement he received in a therapeutic setting, he has received little formal art instruction.

Rubbertown Kentucky in 1974
Color photocopies, 1991-95
8½ x 11 in. each
Gorman-Linn Collection

The West End of Louisville where Mulligan grew up is near Rubbertown, an industrial area that once included a waste water treatment plant, an Ashland Oil Refinery and a Gulf Terminal plant. The sight of these large corporate logos, painted on the side of huge storage tanks with their attendant smoke and steam, left a deep impression on the artist. He committed their details to memory. Rubbertown is the one actual place that recurs throughout his imagery.

Within the genre of folk art there is a tradition of “memory painters” who recall a more bucolic and rural existence. Mulligan does memory pictures, too. Gone are the scenes of grandma milking the cow, replaced by the artist’s remembrances of Rubbertown during the 1970s. His work celebrates commercialization and industrialization.

Mulligan’s art is an interesting historical document in light of the changing demographics of the country. The majority of the population now inhabits urban areas. His art reflects this transition. The artist wistfully regrets the passing of so many brands of gas stations from the local scene as companies merge or go out of business. The morphing of GULF into British Petroleum incited a letter writing campaign by Mulligan pleading B.P. not to change the sign with its bright orange disk. After changes to both GULF and ASHLAND over the years, he felt the world just wasn’t the same.

In a couple of his letters, Mulligan recalls that as a child he was attracted to billboards and all the signage of the urban environment. He often writes about his fascination with Rubbertown. According to the artist:

One day I decided to walk home to Rubbertown, and my people were very angry when I got back. They said a train could have ran over me, or I could have been hit by a car. They said this to keep me away until we pass Rubbertown in our car. I was in the 5th grade when I started sketching pictures of Rubbertown for my friends in my school. They took them home to their parents and they said I got talent. But my parents and teacher told me to stop sketching oil signs and it’s logos. Draw something different. Today they say the same thing about my art.

Mulligan reads more into signage than most people. The signs he looked upon in Rubbertown are full of meanings. In 1990 he wrote: “Now the Gulf logo is also painted very swell on it’s gasoline tank. I enjoy looking at both logos, because to me – both logos on each gasoline tank looks happy. Ashland logo looks like it’s grinning at something. The Gulf logo looks like a big smile, like Ernie the muppet face on Sesame Street.”

Mark Anthony makes surprising connections by constructing spiritual acronyms from his beloved oil company logos. The delight in word play is a constant throughout his art. ASHLAND, ever the favorite, becomes Ask Him Love and Never Doubt, GULF is God’s Undying (or Unique) Love Forever, MOBIL becomes More Bible Lovers, CHEVRON is Charity Ever On. Eventually, the clever Mulligan runs into trouble with a company like EXXON. What can you do with double x’s? In an essay marking Mulligan’s first exhibition, the artist Bruce Linn perhaps stated it best:

One may begin to delight in the puns and possibilities involved in the concept of a “sign” as it relates to both divine and earthly realms. One might also draw analogies between “fuel” and grace, “God” and “Energy” -- imagine “fill’er (one’s heart) up” as a prayer or song of praise! It may be surprising to some to think of this work

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as having the potential for so much religious content. But for most of us who are surprised, and surprised by the suggestion that divinity is in this world—this world of gas stations and fast food chains—is our world! This assumption or insistence is the real source of power in Mr. Mulligan’s work.10

No discussion of Mark Anthony Mulligan can be complete without mentioning that he is a deeply spiritual person. The church, its music and Bible are always a source of comfort and inspiration especially during the many low moments of his life. His mother belonged to a Pentecostal denomination, but Mulligan gravitated towards the Baptist faith. There are episodes in his life (particularly when he was off his medication) when his religiosity would overwhelm him. The most extreme example of this is when he renounced art making and decided to become a street preacher. His intensity at saving souls became too much for the mission houses he stayed in and resulted in his being institutionalized at Central State, a mental hospital.11

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10 Bruce P. Linn, “Mark Anthony Mulligan: An Interpretation,” from the exhibition “Meet Mr. Mulligan,” University of Cincinnati, November 1990.
The city, with its tall buildings, sprawling neighborhoods, miles of paved roadways, and, most importantly, its advertising and signage, are Mulligan’s great subject matter. The urban environment is his home, and he passionately celebrates it. Few people know Louisville as well as he does. He gained his knowledge from studying maps at the library and from years of traveling around town on the city’s bus system. Mulligan has a savant-like ability to recall the smallest details in the most obscure sections of town. He seems to know every convenience store in Louisville!

Mulligan’s cityscapes are both real and imagined. When a place is imagined, Louisville is the clear inspiration. Tall crystalline buildings, with their grids of windows, rise from the ground in a downtown area that is usually situated near the bank of a great river. Interstate run parallel to the river, and highways fly over and through town on their way to other destinations. Everywhere there are colorful signs touting fast food restaurants, gas stations and services of every kind. Everything is given a name and competes for our attention.

Names and labels carry great weight for Mulligan. The art critic Bruce Nixon writes, “Naming carries a responsibility. It is important. In Mulligan’s case, it might even be regarded as a calling.” To give something a name helps to identify, describe, and locate it in time and space. A name or label can become “…a character reference – a notation that introduces the community to those of us who do not know it,” according to Dr. Amalia K. Amaki. As the creator of his own world, designations can be destinations and are portals suggesting their potential meanings. In Mulligan’s work, representational images are always supported by labels and, in the extreme, words can compose the picture in its entirety.

In Mark Anthony Mulligan’s case, labeling also extends past the formality of his given name. Over the years, the artist has given himself a series of colorful nicknames. In songs and letters, he refers to himself variously as: “The Ashland Hillbilly,” “The Sign and Logo Freak,” “The Ashland Man,” “Dr. Chevron,” “The Chevron Flower,” and “Minister Mark.”

Mark Anthony Mulligan’s ability to capture a sense of place and time sets his work apart from many artists. He surprises us by acknowledging the mundane aspects of modern life we often choose to ignore. He finds promising material in the most unlikely places. How many other artists have intuited through their work the importance of big oil in shaping the culture we live in?

Every so often Mulligan creates a real head-scratcher of a piece that seems to anticipate our contemporary climate. The marker drawing entitled “President Island” from 1989 (Gorman/Linn Collection) is such a work. The scene, dominated by a Chevron gas station named after Ronald Reagan, is set in the City of George Bush Acres. In light of what we know about Mulligan’s penchant for spiritual acronyms (i.e., Charity Ever On), his work predicts the confluence of religion, politics and big business. In that filling station, Mulligan presents us with choices. Do we want “self-serve,” “full serve” or “air”? Could it be that in his subconscious, prescient way, Mulligan was picking up on something?

Mulligan’s ability to connect the secular world with the spiritual is one of the most intriguing aspects and accomplishments of his art. In an early, powerful, untitled, marker drawing from 1987 (Linn Collection), we see a giant brown-skinned Jesus towering over a city’s high rises—a reminder that some messages are larger than life.

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Orange Juice Heights
Acrylics and markers on hollow core door, 1995
31¾ x 80 in.
Dale Fleishmann Collection

Petroleum County Ashland
Acrylics and markers on hollow core door, 1991
31¾ x 80 in.
Kentucky Folk Art Center Permanent Collection

Untitled ("Taco Bell Mountain")
Mixed Media on mat board, 1987
28 x 43¾ in.
Bruce Linn Collection
The cityscapes are Mulligan’s most numerous works, and their high vantage point helps characterize them. In between the pre-designed signs and logos, Mulligan is free to construct and name the city with all its clausrophobic activity. Vehicles rush around the streets and are quickly drawn, emphasizing their movement. Their sketchy representations are interesting for being shorthand “signs” for car or truck. Vegetation is noticeably absent, or when it does appear it is treated in cursory fashion. A tree may be represented as a herring bone with a few leaves on its branches. People or animals rarely appear, but when they do, they are simple and cartoon-like.

Mulligan has an endearing way of including the people he knows into his scenes, even when human figures are lacking. It seems everyone the gregarious artist has ever received a kindness from or called a friend has been remembered by having something in the cityscapes named after them. When you know who the people are, it becomes a nice snapshot of small shop life on Louisville’s Bardstown Road. Among the names are current and former employees of Swanson Reed Galleries, Kizito Cookies, Kinko’s and many other businesses.

The cityscapes are made mostly with color markers on poster board or with acrylic paints on panels. Mulligan is fond of using drugstore-quality materials and these dominate his early and late works. Gallery owner and artist Chuck Swanson introduced him to acrylics because Mulligan expressed the desire to paint. Eventually, he was furnished with archival-quality materials and a storeroom above the gallery where he could work. Some of his grandest paintings are on large, hollow core doors that the gallery supplied. Good examples of these works are found in both the Clifford and Fleishmann collections.

The series of acrylic paintings begin in 1990 and end in 1999. Slight, both real and imagined, caused Mulligan to stop working at the gallery, which marked a major shift in the artist’s life. Although he would still visit and bring artwork made elsewhere to the gallery, his relationship with his representatives changed.

Mulligan produced many fine and quickly executed paintings, but the fast drying acrylics, ruined clothing, and the clumsy nature of brushes sometimes frustrated him. He seems always to have been more at home with tools that produced a clean line.

His cityscapes, with their schematic buildings, signage, and bird’s eye point of view, are frequently described as map-like. He also draws maps that are more in keeping with conventional cartographic form. These are among his most visually compelling and complex works. In his maps, Mulligan’s gift and need for naming, alliteration, and word play are displayed to the fullest.

The overall look is of a dense field of intersecting lines representing named roadways. They are a neural net of popular culture references and wholly invented word combinations that pull you into the work. For example, let’s take a trip down the Penny Monkey Freeway, cross over Believer’s Drive in Bibletown near Peppermint Patty Place and Clorox 2 Terrace. Hang a left onto the Burnt July Parkway, go past the Hitler Turnpike, and Scooby Doo Avenue will be on the right. In a typical Mulligan map, this goes on for hundreds of roads and names.

Mulligan’s sense of play, and his desire to amuse us, also manifest themselves in connect-the-dot pictures and seek-and-find puzzles. The connect-the-dot works never create a recognizable image. They seem to reinforce the difficulty of finding easy meaning in life. The seek-and-find pieces usually test one’s knowledge of the City of Louisville of which Mulligan is the acknowledged master. Their most striking feature (other than their inherent humor) is their visual appeal, a kind of “concrete poetry” the artist is able to pull off using the images of letters and words running together.

Throughout Mulligan’s career he has been attracted to making black and white and color photocopies of his drawings and songs. With his compulsive nature, there may, perhaps, be deep satisfaction to be found in pressing a button and producing as many duplicates as wanted. Mark Anthony Mulligan produced hundreds of

copies. In his hands, photocopy technology becomes his poor man's printmaking device. The resulting multiples provided material he could peddle to people on the street, and they served as calling cards, announcing his vocation as an artist. At first, he valued his originals and the copies equally. Eventually, his gallery alerted him to the difference, and he began asking less for the copies.

The color photocopies of Mulligan's works have many points of interest. In some instances, the photocopy intensifies the colors of the original, increasing their graphic punch, creating works much different from the originals. Because Mulligan would reduce or enlarge his designs, if you were unfamiliar with the originals, these copies would seem oddly indeterminate in scale. The dimensions of the originals are the one detail Mulligan does not include on his pieces. No doubt many of the artist's color drawings will be lost outright or fade away because the materials were not lightfast. Those that were copied will at least give us some sense they existed at all.

A frequent criticism directed towards self-taught artists is that their work doesn't develop over time. Many stick with a tried and true formula that works for them from beginning to end. (The same criticism can be directed at academically trained artists as well.) With Mulligan we find a variety of invented visual forms, and although these occur with less frequency, they are still worth mentioning.

Mulligan did a series of simple, hand-painted signs that incorporate words or company logos. These are the artist's most minimal statements and are extracted from the urban environment. They might include some rule or warning about the speed limit or a parking restriction. Some simply contain street names. The signs are conceptually evocative in conjuring up a sense of place or duty.

Mark Anthony produced still life pieces as well. This genre, with its temporal associations, has traditionally been used by artists to explore the ephemeral nature of life, but Mulligan doesn't use the conventions of a bowl of fruit or nicely composed bouquet of flowers to accomplish this goal. His interests are the mass-marketed, franchised food products that are an omnipresent part of our culture. Tables are set with emphatically drawn hamburgers, with a Diet Mountain Dew or a Big Red to wash them down. These works are clear examples of Mulligan's ability to extract meaning from aspects of our insistent world that we typically close our eyes to as subjects for art.

The artist also produced a small number of works that are curious hybrids of text and images. The outstanding example, and one of Mulligan's best pieces, was completed in August 1998 and is in the Wathen Collection. This pencil drawing has two titles. The left hand section is entitled, "The World in Mark Anthony's Heart!!!" and is a long recounting of his life's story and philosophy of religion and the unity of the races. The right section, entitled, "Underdogs Manor, Rock Eaxton" is a cityscape whose elevated vantage point is distorted as though you were looking through a wide-angle lens. This unusual effect reinforces the cosmological significance of the drawing.

Writing about Mark Anthony Mulligan requires nearly as much hyper graphic intensity as the artist displays throughout his work! There is another aspect of his visual art that is remarkable. Mulligan produced a great number of letters he sent to friends. Many of the envelope covers are decorated with drawings and other information. How some of these pieces ever reached their intended destinations is a credit to our postal system! Reading the recipient's address could be a challenge. Compounding this, Mulligan would put stamps in odd places and frequently added too much or not enough postage. For those interested in postal art, Mulligan has provided us with numerous examples.

Mail from Mulligan included letters, copies of his songs, and small drawings intended as gifts. He can be very generous. His letters are usually titled and dated and reflect a theme or concern he was having at the time. He always prints his words and is generally a good speller. A frequently used phrase "I hope when these few lines reach you, you'll be as well as I am" was often far from the truth. Several letters exist that were written while institutionalized for his mental health. In them, he conveys a sense that he has a lot to say and more than can be captured on a sheet of paper. His words and sentences tumble down the page, getting progressively smaller and tighter, funneling down into the bottom right hand corner of the page.
The formal qualities that Mulligan brings to his art give his work eye-catching presence. Belying the child-like impression his art elicits upon first reading, his drawings and paintings are full of sophistication and purity. He seems never to have been defeated by scale. Whether he was working on a scrap of paper or a large painting, his compositions suit the format. Often, he sections off the picture plane into a blocky patchwork of shapes that he further subdivides and elaborates with detail.

Mulligan's color usage is bold and pure and usually straight from the tube, or whatever marker was at hand. Color moves your eye around the compositions and provides points of interest. In many of his better works, the brightness of his colors heightens their emotional intensity.

Mark Anthony Mulligan's use of line is one of his most expressive elements. His handwriting is the armature he attaches so much meaning to, and his use of words, and their associations, create the details that fill in the space. He forms pattern through line, which helps move the eye along, and conveys a sense of the city's texture.

The cityscape images suggest a sense of space in two ways. In a typical work, the buildings and their cast of signs get smaller as they recede in the distance. Mulligan has a habitual point of view where he floats, above his subjects, like a bird in flight. This creates the feeling that the artist is free and benevolently creating, naming, and observing it all. It reinforces a sense of space and is a diagnostic feature of the artist's work.

Mulligan usually titles his work and provides descriptive information about its creation. Many pieces have two signatures: one printed in block letters the other in cursive. He reassures us with a double-stamp that they are Mulligan-made, and he also lists his media choices. Color markers and pencils, ballpoint pen, and acrylic paint are among the most frequently used materials. Many works also include prices with and without tax. The backs of some of his drawings record the elaborate and correct math he used to determine the tax. The work's completion date is faithfully recorded. His consistency in providing the month, day and year allows us to trace the arc of his career.

Most of Mark Anthony's works were completed in a single sitting. He lets us know how much time it took him to complete the "job", and collectors love this feature of his art. Once he realized that this was one of his "products" selling points, he was sure to include this information. Whether it accurately reflected how much time it took him to make something is debatable.

We find pieces taking as little as three minutes to create to seventeen hours and two minutes for the untitled Jesus picture from 1987, which is the record holder for his visual efforts. The overall record, however, is eighteen hours for "The Melody Station" a collection of 25 songs he assembled into a book in February 2000.

**Find-A-Word**
Pen and markers on poster board, 1993
24 x 18 in.
*Don Buckler Collection*
SONGS AND PERFORMANCES

The songs of Mark Anthony Mulligan are the least recognized part of his creative work. He places great importance in them and considers them equal to his visual art. He often hummed to himself as he drew. He was frequently torn between these two activities, and sometimes thought he should abandon one for the other. In practice, however, both his song writing and visual art overlapped in time and subject matter.

The title of this retrospective, “You Must Withstand the Wind,” comes from a “semi-gospel” song of which Mulligan wrote at least eight versions, and he wrote many songs with different titles that have the same self-reassuring quality. To “withstand the wind … means to cope with your daily troubles.” This song represents as close to a personal anthem as Mulligan ever wrote.

“I have a variety of songs! Some are gospel, some are of Louisville and Jefferson County Avenues, and towns, and some are love songs.” He also wrote songs about his favorite food franchises and their products. Mulligan even penned a few rap songs and wrote some poems.

In form, many of his songs consist of multiple stanzas of two or three lines with a chorus or refrain. They all rhyme, sometimes badly, and he wasn’t above inventing a nonsense word to accomplish this. All are written in his distinctive handwriting and many have drawn illustrations accompanying the lyrics.

Mulligan has written hundreds of songs and compiled at least nine songbooks that he has photocopied, then sold or gave away. Some of these were collections of previously written songs re-grouped together, and a few have new material created just for that specific songbook. His song book masterwork is entitled “Best of Rock-A-Roo Melodies” from October 1990, an impressive, 78-page effort, which includes twenty new songs, 45 drawings, and a seven-page index cross-referencing its contents.

Mark Anthony Mulligan is obsessed with copyrighting and registering his songs. He wrote the Library of Congress often, in an effort to learn how to do this. He does not write music and this is a sore point with him. Instead, many of his lyrics are set to familiar country western tunes or religious melodies. For example, his song, “Thank God for Captain-Ds,” a tribute to a fast food seafood restaurant, borrows its melody from John Denver’s “Thank God I’m a Country Boy”. It rarely occurs to Mulligan that he might be infringing upon the copyrights of others. His preoccupation with copyrights does not extend to his visual productions.

There are many people in Louisville who know Mulligan best from his songs and performances. During his manic episodes he liked to perform at the busy intersection of Bardstown Road and Eastern Parkway. Singing at the top of his lungs and mugging wildly, he posed a major distraction for rush hour traffic. In his way, Mulligan was just trying to gain attention by entertaining commuters.

In a more controlled setting, Mulligan is quite an effective performer. For a time, he was a favorite act during amateur and open-mike nights at Louisville nightspots such as The Rudyard Kipling and Twice Told Coffee House. He also sang his songs during the receptions for some of his art exhibitions. These performances were always positive. For such a large man, his voice is surprisingly high and reminiscent of the old country music divas he enjoys listening to on the radio. If the song calls for it, he will also sing in a lower, gravelly register, keeping time by slapping his hand against his body. Through his voice, facial expressions, and body language, Mulligan’s singing seems well acted and appropriate for the song. He can also be very moving. Emotionally, his songs move from the absurd to the deeply heartfelt. To read one of his songs off the page is one thing, to see Mulligan perform it is a genuine treat.

In discussing Mark Anthony Mulligan, we need also to touch upon his mental health because it has deeply affected the course of his life and the production of his art. His most productive and stable period occurred between 1988 and 1995. During those seven years, he maintained a single residence, enjoyed making art and receiving recognition for it, and formed many of his longest lasting relationships.

Mulligan has a naïve, endearing quality about him, and makes friends easily when given the chance. His sense of humor can be infectious. Which is not to say things were always rosy in those relationships. Occasionally, he would misunderstand a concerned comment about his medication and diet. This could trigger a chill in the relationship, and you might not see him for a while. Once he realized you were only interested in his welfare, he would be extremely apologetic and remorseful. Still, he was always breaking up and making up with the people who were the most concerned for him.

Every so often, Mulligan would “act up” in public or voluntarily become homeless in a deliberate effort to free himself from the burden of responsibilities. When he felt he needed a break from housekeeping, bill paying or personal hygiene, he would in essence take a vacation—or go on “easy street” as he called it. In managed care settings his daily chores and worries would be taken care of for him. In August 1990, he wrote to Chuck Swanson and Lynn Carle on a white paper bag saying:

I’m back on the streets living at missions, because it’s easy living, no LG&E, no South Central Bell, no rent, no life insurance, just free food, food, food, and free boarding at missions. It’s the simple life, the easy life, it’s EASY STREET.  

His biggest regret was that he got kicked out of the Fairlodge Nursing Home in 1986 for resisting being placed on a diet. It was a paradise lost moment for the artist since his beloved Rubbertown and Ashland Refinery were only a few blocks away.

The side effects of his medications were always distressing to Mulligan. He either felt too sleepy or constantly hungry. And over time, the medications also damaged his body. He resented his prescriptions because, in his mind, he equated them with illicit drug use, to which he is fervently opposed.

The social assistance Mulligan received was contingent on his taking his medications. It also required he have a payee or guardian to administer his legal affairs and money. The revenue he generated through the sale of his art reduced the monthly base amount of assistance in effect setting a cap on what he could earn. Because of this system, and the fluctuating nature of art sales, Mulligan never felt he could get ahead. His gallery tried working within his unusual circumstances, but ultimately the artist had other ideas. He wants to live normally and earn his own keep and becomes increasingly resentful of being told where he can live and how.

By the end of 1999, Mulligan began to pull away from his gallery and his old friends who he felt were holding him back. He gave up his apartment, social assistance and medication and decided to seek his fortune on the streets where he could live by his own wits. He enjoyed selling his work directly to people where he could receive instant gratification in the form of attention and a little money.

For a while, he associated with the Kinko’s branch store in Louisville’s Douglass Loop area where he is remembered as something of a local legend. Here he received materials, a willing audience, and occasionally was allowed to spend the night since the store is open twenty-four hours a day. Although his living conditions deteriorated, his ability to make art remained sharp. The last works in this exhibition were made during this period. An outstanding example is “We Shall Overcome Racism!!” from the Ellis Collection. This drawing is intended to be a signboard and is double-sided. The front image shows a crowd of people calling for the unity of the races while the reverse features a play list of songs the artist is willing to perform for a little money.

Since the year 2002, Mark Anthony Mulligan has

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made several bus trips away from Louisville. His desire to become a famous country singer resulted in three trips to Nashville, Tennessee. According to a letter he wrote, the first trip to Nashville resulted in his being institutionalized. Mulligan has also traveled to Chattanooga, Tennessee and Miami, Florida. The details of these trips haven’t come fully to light, but he might have taken some of his art with him. To date, Mulligan’s situation continues to decline, and he shuttles between the streets and mental institutions.

Spicey Noodles Heights
Acrylics and pen on paper, 1994
33 x 41¼ in.
*Baxter Schilling Collection

Underdogs Manor, Rock Eaxton
Pencil on paper, 1998
22 x 28 in.
*Ted & Bridget Wathen Collection

One hopes, in Mark Anthony Mulligan’s remaining productive time, that a second flowering will occur. May he meet with others along the way that recognize his reality, respect it and treat him with sensitivity. How we view the Mulligans of the world is in itself a sign, encoding the state of our society. Will most treatments of the mentally ill become a matter of just relying on medication to relieve their suffering? Or, will we be open to other avenues and processes that create connections and are helpful to all?

Art making isn’t simply therapy for Mulligan. It is the crucial way that he makes sense and creates order from the chaos that, regrettably, has so often defined his life. Throughout his career as a sign and logo artist, it is his art that has held his world together and provided him with some honor as a contributing member of our culture. His art has presence because we can recognize in his insistent way, the human birthright to form and create meaning.

Mulligan himself writes:

God bless every person with a special talent different from the next person. There will never be another you or another me when we pass on. No 2 people are exactly alike. Therefore, no 2 artist work is exactly alike. I think I’m better off painting signs and logos. It’s my calling. It’s my talent. It’s my Gift!23

The noted scholar and researcher on psychiatric art, John M. MacGregor wrote in nearly the same moment that Mulligan appeared on the national scene:

We have come to understand that the worlds within which the insane wander are not alien worlds, but our own. They make visible what is in all of us. However obscure their art may be, our fundamental response to it, as to all art, is the feeling of recognition.”24

The city with its highways and ever-changing signage are so clearly a metaphor to and of Mark Anthony Mulligan. He reminds us through the strength of his art, not just the roads he has named and taken, but calls attention to our own individual journeys. Mulligan has come a long way and has distilled something universal from his own experience. It is this basic recognition that will give staying power to his art long after the petroleum age has ended and all the familiar signs pass into memory.

Albertus Gorman
March 2005
Louisville, Kentucky

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23 Letter from Mark Anthony Mulligan to Albertus Gorman, April 24, 1990.
The Mulligan Family 1974/4631 West Chester Avenue
Tempera and markers on red poster board
22 x 28 in.
*Bruce Linn Collection*

Quaker Park Hills
Markers on paper
18 x 24 in.
*Dale Fleishmann Collection*
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Gorman, Albertus and Bruce Linn. Meet Mr. Mulligan. Exhibition Essays. 840 Gallery, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, November 1990.


## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

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<td>June 1998</td>
<td>“African-American Folk Art in Kentucky,” Kentucky Folk Art Center, Morehead, KY; Southern Ohio Museum, Portsmouth, OH; Kentucky Art &amp; Craft Foundation, Louisville, KY; Mennello Museum of American Folk Art, Orlando, FL; University of Memphis Art Museum, Memphis, TN; Highlands Museum, Ashland, KY.</td>
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<td>Spring 1997</td>
<td>“Pictured In My Mind,” Touring Exhibition: Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; SECCA, Charlotte, NC; and DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA</td>
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