

A black and white portrait of Paul Goodnight, a man with a mustache and dreadlocks, looking thoughtfully to the right. He is resting his head on his hand.

# SoulVision®

M A G A Z I N E

**THE GENIUS OF PAUL GOODNIGHT**  
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**February 2020**

# The Genius of Paul Goodnight



*Paul Goodnight, black art royalty. Photo by Mitch Weiss.*

| “Great art moves you.”

Paul Goodnight has dedicated his life to creating art that uplifts and empowers his community. He has seen the destruction of war firsthand and is doing the work to make a peaceful world a tangible reality. Goodnight’s art is beautiful and can be emotionally overwhelming. His subjects sometimes provoke images of the famous (Jack Johnson) and others are common folk who could be a close family member or a neighbor. His paintings can express happiness and freedom, but his shading and color choices can make one sympathize with the struggle and pain of

## *The Genius of Paul Goodnight (continued)*

being marginalized in this world. For many, Goodnight's paintings are cathartic. Sometimes in order to find happiness, you have to overcome tragedy. For a man who has seen tragedy, Goodnight continues to be a positive light for young artists and is forever evolving his craft. He sat down with us to talk about what being a community artist means to him, his creative process, and the projects he's currently working on to make our neighborhoods a much more loving and welcoming place.

“Through art, I can hopefully express myself, along with other artists to talk about what needs fixing in our communities.”

**Where are you from and what was it like growing up there?**

I'm actually from three different places. I was born in Chicago and we were moved to Connecticut and then to Boston and then back to Connecticut. I ended up back in Boston and I have been here for the last 40 plus years, so I suppose I'm a Bostonian.

I grew up a foster child. There were eight of us kids in the family. We were always active and always getting in trouble. We enjoyed each other's company and we maintained a close relationship because we were all foster children – the same. That is one of the things that I admire the most of our foster parents, because we had someone who cared enough to take in eight misfits and blend them together as a family. We came to understand the gift that we had been given. It gave me purpose.

**Were there any blood relations?**

There was a blood sister and brother, Gloria and George. Gloria died recently, but we were all like brothers and sisters; all eight of us.

**Who or what was your biggest inspiration growing up?**

My grandfather was my biggest inspiration. Everyone knew that he didn't lie. To this day, I don't know anyone who never told at least one lie. He was the only person who said what he meant and meant what he said. And he taught me the truth of *clarity*. As a child, I didn't understand it at the time, but I fully accepted it. I realized how important he was as a role model. He was that person that was willing to take on eight children and made sure there was a constant sense of peace and a place in his house for all of us. Now that's God.



*Music Thunder* by Paul Goodnight

**What was the most important lesson you learned in the early phases of your career?**

I think the most important lessons were the lessons that muralist John Biggers gave me. We met in Africa and he was a pure, true mentor. Although he lived in Texas and he came to Boston for a visit or show, we always kept in close contact. During one particular show of his, I badgered him to see my work. I said, “John, I want you to come over to my place to see my work.” And he said, “yes, yes, sure Paul, I will.” Clearly unsatisfied with that answer, I took to repeating my request and asked again, “John, I want you to come by and check out my new work.” Again, not the reply I was looking for, “Soon Paul,

## *The Genius of Paul Goodnight (continued)*

soon.” Now I’m trying to get a specific day from this man, “Well, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday? Exasperated at me riding this man, he turned to me and said, “Paul, let me ask you this question: Are you committed or are you involved?” I told him that I was committed because of all of the things that I learned from him. *Who do we do it for? Why do we do it? What’s our inspiration? Why is this our expression?* He said, “OK, son. That is all I needed to know. You see, it’s like a ham and egg sandwich. I acted like I understood what he was saying for a couple of minutes, although I had no idea what he was talking about. I admitted that I didn’t know what the heck he was talking about. He then gave me a lesson I will never forget. He explained, “You see son, in the ham and egg sandwich, the chicken who laid the egg is involved, but the pig who gave his life (the ham) for the sandwich, now he was committed. Always be the pig, son and I will see your work and so will everyone else.” True to his word, he came over to my studio soon thereafter and I remember telling him, “Damn, John, that was the first time I was ever called a pig and enjoyed it!”

That’s the kind of mentorship that I had. I had a great mentor. I had great teachers, great advocates, and a loving family. And now I have great art colleagues. I think that is the best part of my journey.

**At what point in your career did you begin to feel you had made it?**

Although I’ve shown internationally, been the Olympic artist for both Atlanta and Beijing, I’ll never feel like I’ve made it and that’s a great place to be. I think anytime you think you’ve made it, you deprive yourself the room to go even farther. If that stops you, it means you aren’t curious enough about the gifts that you’ve been given; that you have honed. There is always more to learn. I’m in school right now, learning and honing my skills around sculpture. No, I never thought about making or not making it. I think about growing and evolving. I let the business people do the business—Karl McLaurin does a great job for me—and I let that “do what it does ....” This way, I stay grounded.

**Would you consider any of your work so far to be your greatest achievement?**

No, I like what people like and I’m blessed that a lot of folks really dig my work. You see, your best teacher is your last painting or drawing. So I keep learning. My best is still within me because I feel there is still more to come. But you know, the business of art is a whole different animal. And I think that is why I have Karl and a bunch of other people who understand that the business of art is completely different than creating and teaching art.

**Can you give us an overview of your creative process?**

There are three things I want to see in a piece. Since I work in a medium that is devoid of true movement, it has to first move me. If it does, then I proceed and hopefully, it will move you as an audience. Second, it has to challenge you. It can challenge you from a lot of different



*Salsified* by Paul Goodnight

## *The Genius of Paul Goodnight (continued)*

vantage points. It can be political. It can be racial. It can be in the technique itself. It can be very religious and that sometimes can be very, very challenging. Third, it should entertain you in some ways.

I think if you have those three ingredients, along with the skill set that you've learned, applying what you know, and having the patience to stop and start, to draw over and over again, then you're pretty much in business because the rest is all creativity.

**You have been labeled a “community artist.”  
What does that label mean to you?**

It means that I cannot afford to paint pretty pictures all of the time. My reality and my people's reality is that we live in a community that has a lot of problems. Through art, I can hopefully express myself, along with other artists to talk about what needs fixing in our communities. And that just isn't in my neighborhood, but neighborhoods around the world.

**In the 1990s, you started Color Circle Art to help young artists develop their artistic and business skills. Can you tell us why this initiative was so important for you to start?**

When I got started, I didn't know much about the business of art. Most artists don't know much about the business of art and the business is something that we should be familiar with but not always do. But once you know what another person is doing, you basically have some say in where you want to go. I was lucky enough to find some people who were really in the business, Elba Vargas, was a hard-working, beautiful woman who was really intelligent and a great marketer. She told me not to do the business but to know the business. She wanted me to know the business so when we sat down and talked about the business (contracts, commissions, etc.) that I had an idea of what was going on. Always remember that you are still working to get better as an artist. The art is and has to be your focus. At the same time, knowing the business and working with business professionals is important. Just

remember to not impede your growth as an artist from getting caught up in making deals. It is the art that inspires.

**What advice would you give to young artists who want to get their art noticed?**

Make sure you have a strong enough skill set that you can build on because the art craft is about evolution. You just can't be a one-hit-wonder and then be angry at the world for the rest of your life. If you are always curious, you will always grow.

Also, it is important to start to brand yourself in a way that people are interested in seeing the work you do. If it's consistent and you work hard at your craft, you will taste success. Then you will start to recognize the separation between the business of art, the education of art, and the artists themselves. And then, hopefully, the world will take note.



*Road to Rhythm* by Paul Goodnight

## *The Genius of Paul Goodnight (continued)*

I've been saying this a lot lately: Your JOB is what you're PAID for, but your CALLING is what you're MADE for.

### **How do you relax when you are not working?**

I swim. I'm curious, so I also like to read books. I tell you what people don't feel comfortable talking about but I do, is *intimacy*. Intimacy has a real calming effect and you can take that any way you want to. It can be physical intimacy. It can be mental. It can be a spiritual intimacy.

Bishop Barbara L. King out of Georgia gave me a prayer book (*Daily Thoughts from the Hill*) that I read every day and it sort of sets the tone of where I'm supposed to be and how I shouldn't let what bothers me just linger. I pray with that prayer book every morning and it makes all the sense in the world.



*Back Stair Steps Duet* by Paul Goodnight

### **What's up next? What projects are you currently working on?**

I am working on a Frederick Douglass sculpture. That's why I am back in school and learning how to sculpt. This is just another evolutionary period in my life. We are doing the Frederick Douglass sculpture right here on Frederick Douglass Square in Boston. It is time to salute him here. I wish he were here to see it.

As I mentioned earlier, I hope a new series that I'm working on will have a ripple effect. We are doing a collection of pieces called *The K.K.K. Series* and I make no apologies for that name because I think what we are doing is right. K.K.K. stands for "Kids Killing Kids." There is an epidemic in all of our cities and small towns. Young men and women are destroying their future and our own communities. We have to stop the epidemic of violence because if we don't, then what good are the gifts we are given. We have to deal with the problems in our neighborhoods.

We have seven different artists working on this project and we just need funding to keep it going. We are going to auction the paintings off and the money we make from the auction will be given to the organizations that are keeping kids off the streets. That is our goal and we want to do it in every city with different artists.

Each participating artist has to paint two pieces: one that addresses the problem and one that chronicles the solution. Every one of these artists working with me has to search within their soul. Whether depicting how our culture is being taken away or how we've been bamboozled or learned to hate each other. Art can help us to remedy these issues with a visual medium. *What have we learned? Who are we learning from? Who are our role models? What have our contributions been before we got here and why has that not been publicized? We come from people who are strong and productive and helped build this community and this world.*

## *The Genius of Paul Goodnight (continued)*

“If you are always curious, you will always grow.”

There is one artist named L-Merchie Frazier who is creating a curriculum for the schools. We are finding people who want to contribute because they know that youth violence is a problem in their neighborhoods as well.

I've seen too much destruction. I've been to Vietnam and Nicaragua and Mozambique. Imagine seeing those wars; going to Sierra Leone and helping the amputees there . . . my God. You realize no matter how many weapons you have, you are not going to solve the problem. Weapons and wars are not the solution for humanity. They are part of the problem. Loving yourself first, then others around you seems like the right path to me!