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Impact and Analysis

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Tribute to the Black Arts Movement

Personal and Political Impact and Analysis

FRED HO

Mao and Cabral

Mingus and Coltrane

Variations on the same tune.

Poem by Fred Ho, inspired by Felix Torres

I CAME OF AGE IN THE EARLY 1970S, ON THE TAIL END OF WHAT AMIRI Baraka calls “the Roaring Sixties.” By 1970, I had entered my teens and my identity awakening began. As I have discussed in many previous articles, the black experience catalyzed my own self-awareness as a Chinese/Asian American. I came to identify with the black struggle in drawing parallels with my personal struggle for self-awareness and identity and for the struggle of Asian/yellow peoples as a whole in U.S. society to end racism, injustice, and inequality and to achieve self-respect, dignity, and liberation.

Even as a teenager, I intuitively recognized that black American culture, particularly the arts, is inseparable from the dynamic of the black liberation struggle. In my youth, I sought to find a comparable connection between

the culture and arts of Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) with our liberation struggle for full equality and justice. In a myriad of forms, including political organization, cultural activism, artistic expression, and cultural production, I have sought to promote the unity of African Americans and Asian Americans, including forming my core band, the Afro Asian Music Ensemble in 1982 when I first moved to New York City to become a professional artist. In this essay, I want to reflect upon how the Black Arts Movement impacted upon my personal development as well as what I believe to be its impact upon the APA Movement and arts.

Many conscious APAs—meaning those of us who are proud to be APA, who are politically conscious of our collective history of oppression and struggle in the United States, and who recognize the ongoing, systematic white racism we continue to endure and resist—have admired the black American struggle and especially what we perceive to be the strength, rootedness, and communality of the black American cultural experience. Much of the Asian Movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s took inspiration politically from the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Liberation Movement (Ho 2000). I continually hear from APAs envy and admiration, a wishfulness paraphrased as “I wish we Asians were more [fill in the blank] like the blacks.” The completions are generally characteristics or attributes the more conscious APAs feel we as a people lack: militancy, radicalism, unity, outspokenness, assertion. Sometimes this is expressed as “Where is our Asian Malcolm X? Or Langston Hughes? Or John Coltrane?”

Certainly the black struggle has had a longer and considerably more developed history and, consequently, a broader and more recognized impact than that of APAs upon American history and society. Much of mainstream America has yet to recognize even our presence in American history and society, with the exception of the model minority stereotype, which has the effect of negating our struggle and portraying us collectively as ethnic successes. However, in a serious study of APA history and political/cultural struggle, there is much to be proud of, to recognize, uphold, and celebrate. While we may not have produced historical giants, we have our inspirational, leading militants and radicals including Carlos Bulosan,

Philip Vera Cruz, Yuri Kochiyama, Richard Aoki, Karl Yoneda, Yun Gee, Mitusye Yamada, Merle Woo, Nellie Wong, Janice Mirikitani, and numerous others. Many of these figures, both deceased and living, do not have published biographies or autobiographies. While more biographical profiles and even some books have recently been published, they have little circulation and receive limited attention beyond a small group of conscious APAs. None of our APA giants are household names.

Until Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley* had withered into relative obscurity during the 1980s. Lee's film (1992) was severely criticized and condemned by many conscious black activists and radical intellectuals. They accused Lee and his film of blatant historical distortion and of diluting Malcolm's revolutionary politics, arguments with which I am in agreement. Even among the greater black American population, familiarity, recognition, and celebration of radical and militant leaders and movements, more common in the period of the 1960s and 1970s because of the heightened level of the Black Liberation Movement, are a lot less today as black firsts. Celebrities who are often accommodationists, integrationists, and politically less-than-militant are given much more attention by the U.S. mainstream media and educational system. Today's black youth may only have a very superficial awareness of Harriet Tubman (who organized and led the first black underground militia against the system of white supremacy in the United States), the revolutionary views of Malcolm X (such as "capitalism is a bloodsucker"), the Black Panther Party, Assata Shakur, and Mumia Abu-Jamal. Indeed, Oprah, Magic Johnson, and P. Diddy are far better known. Even worse, the only mass media image of yellow-black unity today for both APAs and African Americans is probably the Jackie Chan-Chris Tucker collaboration in the *Rush Hour* movie series.

But back in the day (i.e., Baraka's "roaring Sixties" and early 1970s) as a teenager during this period of accelerated political, intellectual, and cultural growth, I recognized that black-yellow connections and unity were much more real, substantial, meaningful, and politically anti-imperialist.

One of the most significant aspects of this period of the late 1960s and early 1970s was the broad popularization of Third World unity and anti-imperialist consciousness and politics. There was much more mass

identification between yellow and black peoples in the United States than what exists today. A lot of this is documented in the anthology that Bill Mullen and I are coediting: *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African- and Asian-Americans*. In 1964, Malcolm X, in arguing for black American identification with, support for, and even repatriation back to Africa, cited the example of China's growing strength in world politics upon U.S. racist attitudes:

The Chinese used to be disrespected. They used to use that expression in this country: "You don't have a Chinaman's chance." You remember that? You don't hear it lately. Because a Chinaman's got more chance than they have now. Why? Because China is strong. Since China became strong and independent, she's respected, she's recognized. So that wherever a Chinese person goes, he is respected and he is recognized. He's not respected and recognized because of what he as an individual has done; he is respected and recognized because he has a country behind him. They don't respect him, they respect what's behind him.

By the same token, when the African continent in its independence is able to create the unity that's necessary to increase its strength and its position on this earth, so that Africa too becomes respected as other huge continents are respected, then, wherever people of African origin, African heritage or African blood go, they will be respected—but only when and because they have something much larger that looks like them behind them. (Malcolm X 1965b, 211)

During this same era, world heavyweight champion boxer Muhammad Ali, stating his opposition to the Vietnam War and his draft induction, echoed the mass anti-war slogan of the Black Liberation Movement: "No Vietcong ever called me nigger." Musician Archie Shepp would compare his tenor saxophone to a Vietcong's AK47 as a weapon against U.S. imperialism. Shepp audaciously proclaimed jazz to be an artistic expression that was pro-Vietcong (i.e., national liberation) and anti-U.S. imperialism. Many less politically conscious music critics and writers disagreed and objected to such politicization of the music.

What these critics and objectors to Shepp's characterization have failed to understand is the fundamental and quintessential nature of black American culture as a culture of an oppressed people, with its strongest and most vital manifestations as forms of resistance to that oppression by affirming humanity (against inhumanity), beauty (against degradation), and truth (against the lies of racist propaganda and white supremacist ideology).

THE ERA OF MALCOLM X AND JOHN COLTRANE AND THIRD WORLD POLITICAL AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION

It was no coincidence or novelty that the radical and revolutionary intellectuals, artists, and activists in black America identified with, looked to, took inspiration from, and promoted and participated in the linking of nationalist and radical politics with jazz, especially the so-called new music or avant-garde represented by the musical avatar of John Coltrane.

While a self-serving and somewhat contrived connection is made by socialist-Trotskyite cultural commentator Frank Kofsky (1970) between Malcolm X and John Coltrane as symbolic statement and as cultural metaphor, there is much credibility and cogency to the comparison. Malcolm X represented the vanguard of revolutionary black nationalism. John Coltrane represented the musical and cultural vanguard. While no overt connections existed between the two giants, it is clear that they both enormously affected and were affected by the *weltanschauung* of the era and considerably contributed to and were shaped by the *zeitgeist* of the sixties. Malcolm X fired the political vision and upsurge in the black liberation struggle in the North American "belly of the beast" to join the worldwide anti-imperialist national liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, Central and South Americas, and the Pacific Islands. Coltrane fired the music and culture with volcanic energy and irrepressible innovation. Both men personified and embodied the apex of black American political and artistic creativity and commitment: gloriously incapable of being co-opted and unquenchable. In many ways, a dynamically dialectical interplay existed

between both political and artistic energies. Political manifestos and position papers by black radical activists often looked to, sought inspiration from, and united with the dynamic energy of the music: As one of the early underground black liberation organizations put it, “The task of the Revolutionary Action Movement is to express via political action the dynamism embodied in Afro-American music” (RAM 1965).

I remember meeting the militant Robert F. Williams after his return from exile in the Peoples Republic of China where he had spent many years with his family. Williams used the term “New African Music” instead of “jazz.”

During this time, I wore dashikis along with other black-inspired and urban influenced accoutrements such as platform shoes and bell-bottom pants, and I carried big leather book bags. I emulated my immediate role models/mentors such as musician/composer Archie Shepp who had a particularly loping-like gait to his walk, who wore secondhand sheepskin coats during the winter, and who held a cigarette in his right hand as he was playing the keys to his saxophone. Even though I never really was a smoker, my brief attempt to try smoking was motivated to posture like Shepp.

There were other Asians who also closely identified with black culture, though of varying degrees of political sincerity and commitment. I remember one was Robbie Ong, from New York City, who then attended Amherst College as an undergrad, who dressed and danced urban black, lived in a black dorm, had connections to New York Chinatown through kung fu and lion dance clubs, took black studies courses, played basketball with the black brothers, and spouted the rhetoric of anti-white black cultural nationalism. Robbie was very good-looking, closer in facial appearance to icon Bruce Lee than I (as he was of southern Chinese extraction, and I’m much more northern Chinese in appearance). I remember he had a gorgeous West Indian girlfriend. Years later, I would run into him on the streets of New York Chinatown, now a corporate lawyer in expensive suits, whose only interest in Chinatown was going out to lunch with his white, corporate lawyer buddies.

Higher education was the boom industry for the predominantly white community of Amherst, Massachusetts, where I grew up. Amherst was

known as both the “Pioneer Valley” for its colonial era roots and as the “Five College Area” for the growing presence of area campuses such as the University of Massachusetts (the largest) and four smaller private institutions: Amherst College and Hampshire College, Smith College in neighboring Northampton, and Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley. During the Cold War sixties, public education was a high growth area as the United States sought to contend with then-rival superpower, the Soviet Union, by investing into the scientific, technical, and professional expertise of its population. The expansion of these five colleges attracted a steadily increasing faculty, staff, and student population, dwarfing the town’s population of about ten thousand by sevenfold during the academic season. A growing minority (i.e., oppressed nationality) community, the vast majority of whom migrated to Amherst, was also impacting upon the area.

The children of graduate students, staff, and faculty of the colleges were diversifying the public school district as well. My two younger sisters and I were among these minority students from about 200 APA families in the area, virtually all of whom were affiliated with the colleges. Growing up in this predominantly white community, we faced a combination of white liberal academia benign racism along with the racism of the parochial and rural white redneck, farming community. Along with the general politicization and heightened social consciousness of the times, the Third World junior and senior high school students (which included me) identified with the Third World college students and attended the activities of these area campuses. As high school students, we would go to parties, social events, cultural performances, lectures, and mobilizations at various Third World locations, especially the New Africa House (a former dorm building at the University of Massachusetts that had been converted to include the offices of the Afro-American Studies Department and Third World student activist offices, a Nation of Islam-run cafeteria, and a hub of cultural and political activities).

While I was there, the five colleges drew a number of illustrious radical Third World faculty, including artists such as the poet Sonia Sanchez (Amherst College’s first chair of Africana Studies); musicians/composers Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Reggie Workman, Roland Wiggins, and Vishnu

Wood; writers Michael Thelwell and Chinua Achebe; and visual artist Nelson Stevens. I especially took advantage of their presence by regularly attending speaking events, performances, and workshops and sitting in on (auditing) classes. The two classes that influenced me the most were Professor Sanchez's "Creative Writing and Poetry" and Professor Shepp's "African American Music" ensemble performance class. Since I still was in high school, evening classes were easier for me. I was very interested in Shepp's other lecture class with its bold title "Revolutionary Concepts in African American Music," but it was given only during the day.

I came to New York City in early fall of 1981 to begin a professional life in jazz. In the summer of 1982, at the invitation of Norman Riley, then directing the Ron Milner play "Jazz Set," with music by Max Roach, at the Henry Street Settlement Playhouse in the Lower Eastside, I was asked to provide after-play music. This was my first professional opportunity as a bandleader. Previously in Boston, I had organized and led small bands to raise funds for community causes, the main one raising money to pay the rent for the Asian American Resource Workshop, a cultural and curriculum-development center I had organized and led while living in that city. I formed a sextet featuring three saxophones (because I played sax and knew most readily other sax players) and a standard rhythm section of piano, drums, and bass. We called the band the "Afro Asian Music Ensemble" (AAME). In the early 1990s, at the suggestion of my then manager, I dropped the hyphen as I politically always found hyphenated identities to be problematic. I took the name from the historic Afro Asian Unity conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in April of 1955, which created the non-aligned movement of newly independent countries and national liberation movements, and which came to be symbolically known as the "Third World" of Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and the Caribbean (Latin America)—independent and self-reliant, part of neither the First World USA-Western European capitalist bloc nor the Iron Curtain Soviet Union-Eastern European socialist bloc. As my core band for over 20 years, it has been my main vehicle as a composer, baritone saxophonist performer, and leader. My large-scale operas, martial arts ballets, and music/theater epics have as an instrumental nucleus the AAME.

BLACK AND YELLOW CULTURAL NATIONALISM

While it is still highly debated, both in general leftist circles and among black radicals, whether a black nation exists and/or the political implications for nationhood (from cultural autonomy to independence), except for a small, self-identified yellow nationalist current in the Asian Movement, most APA activists do not dispute that Asian Pacific Island peoples in the United States are not an oppressed nation (with the clear-cut exception of Hawaii). Black studies scholar Bill McAdoo (1983) has documented the development of the ideology of black nationalism since its inception during the pre-Civil War 1800s. Black cultural nationalism, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, probably most projected and practiced in the Black Arts Movement, with leading practitioners and ideologues such as Imamu Amiri Baraka and Maulana Ron Karenga, adopted an eclectic array of African signifiers and symbolism from assuming new names, taking up new rituals (such as Karenga's Kwanza), donning African styles of apparel, and incorporating African interpretations in artistic forms. Black cultural nationalism has been perhaps unduly criticized for being narrow nationalism in its concentration on lifestyle and cultural practice and tendency to deprioritize political struggle (what today would be termed its preoccupation with "identity politics"). The Black Panther Party particularly struggled vigorously with cultural nationalism, equating it with counterrevolutionary pork chop nationalism. However, mass organizations such as the Congress of Afrikan Peoples, one of the largest black cultural nationalist groups, were actively and consistently anti-imperialist and involved in struggles to fight police brutality, political and economic empowerment campaigns, and building support for national liberation struggles especially on the African continent. What critics of black cultural nationalism have tended not to credit is the role cultural nationalism, with its promotion of African pride and historical awareness, has played as a counter to white Eurocentric cultural aggression.¹

Today, academic Asian American literary critics have used the term "cultural nationalism" to apply to Chinese American writer Frank Chin and others who vigorously espouse views tending to both promote and

argue for an Asian American aesthetic. The implication is that this view is narrow and essentialist. Chin and others were part of the broad and eclectic rise of the Asian Movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, they were not as politically associated with the Asian Movement as many black artists were with the Black Arts Movement, which was consciously the cultural wing of the Black Liberation Movement. An APA political counterpart to the black cultural nationalist movement was a very small bicoastal activist circle that espoused the view of an Asian (cultural) nation. According to veteran activist Mo Nishida, it was primarily based in Los Angeles around people close to the East Wind Collective and New York Asian Americans who had close ties to these people. Poet Lawson Inada wrote an ode-like manifesto entitled “You Know How It Was: An Historical Treatise on the Founding of the New Asian Nation.”²

During the early 1970s, my initial political identity was as a revolutionary yellow nationalist. My primary ideological framework, while anti-imperialist, viewed the source of Third World peoples’ oppression and exploitation as white people and a white culturally created system called “capitalism.” I energetically sought to divest myself of white European influences and acculturation, with primary emphasis directed towards extirpating myself from white social life. I especially oriented myself to African American social life and culture as there was only a very small Asian American community in Amherst, Massachusetts, where I grew up. I maintained a balance of my activism and energies in both a group of Asian American activists and the bigger African American political and cultural activity in the area. Since my youth, I have fairly evenly shared my focus and involvement between both the Asian Movement and the Black Liberation Movement.

For a brief time, I was attracted to the Nation of Islam (NOI) and joined as part of my intent to completely divest myself from white society. Two women members of the NOI especially influenced me. One was an English teacher in my public school, Marilyn Lewis, who was the first black teacher hired by the Amherst public school systems. She was very conscious and introduced the first black experience classes, which catalyzed my awakening. She became a very close mentor from whom I sought guidance and

direction. She was very warm and accessible and generously gave her time to the Third World students. She particularly took a close interest in me and my Chinese American buddy Todd Lee. We constantly sought her out for political discussions as our identity was awakened and energized.

Another influential figure upon me, and a towering figure in her own right in the Black Arts Movement, was Sonia Sanchez. I remember Sonia Sanchez for her warmth and accessibility to students. A very short woman, less than five feet tall, thin, and at that time, dressed in Islamic clothing (she had briefly joined the Nation of Islam during the mid-1970s), she commanded respect and attention from a crowded room of students. Her own poetry reflected both the vernacular language of urban black America and the poetical avant-garde. Written words would be spelled differently, almost phonetically, and have a musical quality when she read them. She rarely ever used her own works as examples and preferred to have students read their own writings in class. For her creative writing class, her assignments were all about constantly writing poems and short stories. While she upheld what she termed “didactic poetry or writing” (i.e., political poetry and writing), Sanchez was never didactic in class, and she set a tone that encouraged student discussion and ease to read in front of the class. She encouraged feedback and commentary from students and gave her own criticisms, which never seemed harsh or critical. This contrasted immensely with another writer, Michael Thelwell, whom I remember came to one of Sonia’s classes as a guest. He sat on a table in the middle of the room and lectured the whole time with his eyes closed as in a stream of consciousness. There was barely time at the end for discussion. He was an example of a didactic lecturer, unconcerned with the students around him, self-absorbed. Sanchez was the opposite, using what I now appreciate and recognize as a dialectical method of teaching. I and my friends would call on her at home, simply drop by, as her house was only a couple of short blocks from the center of town where Amherst College was situated. She didn’t seem to mind this and even received us when she was sick. I remember she drove a Mercedes-Benz, which she parked in the front of her house. Since I was young, I thought to myself that this seemed like a contradiction for a radical to own such luxury things. While even today, I personally am

anti-consumerist and live modestly, I realize that certain celebrity artists, and people in general, will have their peccadilloes. However, her revolutionary poetry, respectful and open personality, and genuine humanism far outweighed her owning a Benz.

Archie Shepp, as I came to experience him, was an even more intensely contradictory character. More than any artist, his work and persona have had the biggest impact upon my own. Even before meeting him, I thought he was larger than life. I voraciously read everything about him and interviews of him. I bought all of his recordings I could, sought out imports when I traveled down to New York City (which had better record stores), and regularly scouted the bins for new releases. What fascinated me about Shepp was the combination of his outspoken militant political views, fused with Marxist influences (I later learned he participated in Marxist study circles when he lived in New York City), and his soulful and incendiary tenor saxophone playing. Shepp had moved his family to Amherst when he joined the University of Massachusetts faculty in the early 1970s. His eldest son, Pavel (a Russian name, possibly from Shepp's former wife, who is of Russian descent), and I attended the same junior high where I came to know him. Pavel played drums (not so proficiently) in some of my ensembles.

Shepp's charisma comes from his reserved personality and the bad boy reputation the press has given him for being such an enfant terrible in jazz. Shepp irked these music critics, beginning with his rejection of the term jazz which he regarded as pejorative. He explained at a forum at Sweet Basil's during the Greenwich Jazz Festival in the 1980s that the word "jazz" came from the French verb "jasser" which means to "chatter nonsensically," or gibberish. Then and today, jazz pundits and commentaries, most of whom are white males, denounce and object to Shepp's views, especially the ones given most publicity from the 1960s.

When I was around Archie Shepp in the early 1970s at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, he was notorious for his tardiness, often coming to class at least an hour late but staying at least an hour longer. A few times I smelled wine on his breath, possibly from just leaving dinner as my class with him was at night. His classes often seemed unprepared and improvised. He would bring in hand-written arrangements of his own and other

composers' works and we rehearsed them over and over again. As drummer Royal Hartigan has often pointed out to me, as we were at UMASS at the same time (Hartigan was an undergrad, and I was a high school student auditing), Shepp allowed anyone to play in his classes, from the most proficient players to the least experienced. Shepp would give everyone a chance to solo, never say anything about how people played. Mistakes would simply be dealt with by repeating over again the difficult passages. While one could complain about the lack of formal rigor in Shepp's classes, his method of teaching was extremely democratic and proletarian as it was totally inclusive and anti-hierarchical, welcoming everyone's participation and contributions, regardless of formal training and expertise.

One of the many strange aspects of Shepp was that the tempo of the piece counted off was not what he performed it at. But we'd catch on and adjust.

Shepp had many harsh critics. A former saxophone teacher of mine, a music department colleague of Shepp, would vent that Shepp was anti-music, since it seemed he didn't care if things were done correctly or were well prepared. Many years later, I'd come to realize that Shepp's approach was akin to communal ritual: excellence and quality didn't matter so long as everyone was included and shared in the experience of music-making. Shepp's professional bands were, for the most part, of high standard. These same critics of Shepp explain this as the result of his being able to hire the top players, a mixture of veterans well versed in straight-ahead jazz with the more free music players, ranging from drummers Beaver Harris and Charlie Persip (formerly of the Dizzy Gillespie big band), trombonists Roswell Rudd and Charles Majeed Greenlee (another Gillespie alumnus), bassists Jimmy Garrison and Cameron Brown and Santi diBriano, among many others. This might be a reflection of Shepp's commitment to the continuum of African American music and his refusal to abide by stylistic and generational boundaries. The many sidemen to Shepp's recordings have included top shelf studio musicians such as bassist Ron Carter to free players such as trombonist Grachan Moncur III.

The Shepp I knew wasn't much of a conversationalist. He'd talk in short, one-sentence phrases. But I knew if he wanted to talk, he could be a master

of conversational charm and the schmooze. I remember when he called me, needing a baritone sax player to perform (for free) in the musical “Lady Day” when it was being staged at UMASS in 1974. My mother answered the phone and recounted to me how Shepp asked, “Is Mr. Fred Houn available?”³ My mother was amused that anyone would ask for me as “Mr.” Fred Houn. I spoke to Shepp at length on the phone. He was very loquacious. He even brought up how people have griped about his lateness. (I thought to myself, did he know I was one of these people?) He was very pleasant, well-spoken, and convincing. Shepp is also a writer and very well read. He can use, I believe as part of cultivating his persona, multisyllabic words that have the effect of intellectual intimidation. Sometimes Shepp’s classes became open rehearsals for his own projects or places to try out his new works by surprisingly inviting heavyweight musicians from New York to sit in. Occasionally, utter chaos would reign as Shepp wouldn’t have parts copied or arrangements fully completed. I remember at one evening class/rehearsal how one of the singers from the male vocal group Reconstruction opened a bottle of wine, which was quickly passed around the room. Since I was then entering the Nation of Islam, I passed on the alcohol. But I remember Shepp was very happy to partake. But as the class got more disorganized, Shepp raised his voice and said, “Let’s not get carried away by the convivialities.” Of course, the whole room quieted, both from Shepp’s commanding figure but also his use of such an erudite word.

Amiri Baraka, years later as I was driving with him, remarked about how schizoid Archie was. There’s the Shepp who identifies with the urban streets and jazz subculture, and there’s the erudite, petty bourgeois Shepp who sends his children to private schools, enjoys the finer European luxuries, and who speaks in big words. The raw brilliance and emotive power of Shepp’s art flows from who he is. The late baritone saxophonist Kenny Rogers, who I had a chance to meet and briefly talk to when I saw him with the late Rahsaan Roland Kirk in Boston, remarked that “Archie’s a genius.”

In what today we would call “playing the race card,” Shepp was a master. My first experience with him doing this was one of my first classes with him. The class was supposed to take place at a trailer classroom, but it was locked (or Shepp had forgotten the key). Shepp called Fred Tillis, a black music

faculty colleague, and asked Tillis if he could come by and unlock the room. I believe Tillis asked Shepp to call campus security to do this as Tillis probably had finished the day and was at home. Shepp then replied in a tone of well-acted sarcasm, “Now Fred, why would they do that for a nigger?” In a short while, Dr. Tillis came by, not too happy, but he did unlock the door.

Another time, Shepp’s class was performing at a local Northampton music club. Shepp had picked me up at my home, arriving almost two hours late. We arrived at the club quite late and Shepp double-parked his car to unload the music stands and the string bass. All during the first set, Shepp was drinking from the bar. During the second break, I noticed commotion outside. Apparently, Shepp’s station wagon was being towed by the local police for being parked in the middle of the street. The angry and somewhat inebriated Shepp was wolfing at the cops, yelling to the effect, “It’s because I’m a nigger that you’re doing this!” Most of us were very embarrassed. At the end of the night, we didn’t stick around to see if we’d get paid (from the small admission charged by the club, which I suspect Shepp kept). Although I had ridden there with Shepp, I certainly didn’t feel like riding home with him and quickly hitched a ride with others.

Years later in New York, I worked with the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS) to sponsor a benefit concert for the LRS’s Black Nation magazine, edited by Amiri Baraka. Shepp and Baraka, while very close cohorts in the early 1960s, even living in the same building in Cooper Square in the Lower Eastside, weren’t really friends anymore, but occasionally teamed up for gigs. A year before, drummer Max Roach, a senior to both Baraka and Shepp, brought the two together to join him for a trio performance in Philadelphia that had a huge draw and was apparently a great show. Baraka wanted to do the same show at Columbia University’s MacMillan Theater to raise funds for the magazine. Roach bowed out at the last minute (claiming he had to go to Los Angeles to receive an award from Mayor Tom Bradley) and was hastily replaced by drummer Philly Jo Jones. I made the arrangements to contract Shepp. My Afro Asian Music Ensemble opened the show and during intermission, as the stage was being reset for the headlining trio, Shepp complemented my band and my music, took a swig from a bottle of whiskey, and took the stage. Since I knew the three of them

hadn't rehearsed and just spent some pre-show time discussing the plan, I could tell that while Baraka was reading, Shepp was guiding the music, performing on saxophone and piano, various standards and free form excerpts to support Baraka's poetry. While not a great artistic event, the audience was very warm to the three. (However, the event drew about 200 people, and lost a lot of money as expectations, largely raised by Baraka, of a full house weren't met. Few new music jazz concerts in New York City can draw over 200 people, as I have come to realize, without tremendous marketing, which is costly and usually subsidized.)

Shepp personified the contradictions of a brilliant and talented black man, imbued with a level of political consciousness about oppression, fired with a spirit of struggle and resistance, but mitigated and distracted by his own petty bourgeois class aspirations. While anti-capitalist, Shepp was never clear or explicit about what he stood for in terms of replacing this system. In many ways, he desired to reap the rewards and recognition of the great white counterparts; on the other hand, the system would only allow acceptable tokens. He insisted on being called "Mr. Shepp," identifying with the titles of bourgeois acceptability. He justified his wearing of European designer suits because American blue jeans on the European black market were luxury commodities. He wanted the most luxurious hotel suites, the finest European cuisine, and all of the rewards and conferred benefits of a celebrity. His personal tastes and consumption were very European and bourgeois. He became very popular in Europe, much more so than he ever has been in the United States, both from his fluency in European refinement and his intellectual leftism (what black neo-conservative critic Stanley Crouch once termed as Shepp's "infantile Marxism"). Kalamu ya Salaam remarked that Archie Shepp was the "most inconsistent and erratic" artist of the 1960s. It seemed every album was either great or garbage. Today, one record reviewer termed Shepp "the Forgotten Man" as he rarely performs in the United States and always without much attention.

Max Roach was another towering musical giant to whom I was exposed during my teenage years. Unlike the younger Shepp, Roach had already entered the pantheon of jazz greats since his youthful days playing drums with the great Charlie "Bird" Parker. Roach's credentials and stature were

uncontested as one of the premiere architects of modern American music. He was also considered to be the best drummer in the world, or one of the best. The only close competitor was the white drummer, Buddy Rich, who Roach, when I interviewed him in the mid-1970s, called “a friend.” I had read interviews of Buddy Rich who always recognized Max Roach with great respect. Of course, Buddy Rich appeared on network television, on such shows as Johnny Carson’s “Tonight Show,” while Roach, I believe, never did.

My impression of Max was that he was a very quiet and humble man, but the second he stepped into a room, you felt that godhood had entered. He composed a short exercise tune called “Dorian” (based on the Dorian mode), with which his students practiced improvisation in three-quarter (waltz) time, with a bridge in three-quarter walk feel. The tune became the rage of every student, including nonjazz ones, practiced constantly in campus piano practice rooms. Even Shepp brought to class an arrangement of it.

In performance, there was no ostentation about Roach. He would simply sit at the drum set like a true master, and just start to play incredible, unbelievable music. There was no swagger to his walk, no cool cigarette in his fingers while he played, and little was spoken. Once I did see him on a Sunday late morning come out of a luxury Cadillac filled with family members, apparently leaving Sunday church services somewhere, and he was dressed in a killer all-white leisure suit with bell-bottom pants. His son, Raoul, and I were the same age and knew each other in high school. While I never took a class with Max, we’d encounter each other in rehearsals and at events, and he knew I was his son’s peer. Years later, when we’d meet professionally in New York City, he’d fondly compliment me, noting how proud he and Shepp were of how much I’d accomplished and achieved. To this day, I’ve never personally ever had a disappointing experience with him, though I have known him to lobby for money for his benefit in funding situations. Max introduced me to the concept of black American culture and music as a continuum, which I adapted to Asian American culture as a diasporic continuum that spanned the traditional cultural heritage to the American-created avant-garde.

Bassist Reggie Workman was also an adjunct faculty at the University of Massachusetts. Workman was less overtly nationalistic and more openly

related to the white music students. He also paid more attention to musical pedagogical detail than Shepp did. Reggie was always prompt and accessible to imparting musical instruction.

The Amherst area has never had the renaissance of Third World culture and intellectual activity as it did during this period of the 1970s, brought about by the student and progressive faculty activism that injected radicalism into the liberal academic area. The papers of the late great radical and revolutionary scholar-activist W. E. B. Du Bois have been housed at the University of Massachusetts. Through the efforts of these activists, the campus performing arts series brought Max Roach's innovative M'Boom percussion ensemble, the Collective Black Artists big band, the play "Ornette," and many other artists, guest speakers, and events.

I met Amiri Baraka for the first time at Hampshire College on the eve of the African Liberation Day demonstration in 1974. There was some disgruntlement expressed over Baraka's honorarium of \$1,000 (which seemed high for the time, but remained at that amount well into the 1980s, as I can attest to from when I was professionally working with him) and that he had required to be flown out immediately after his talk to go to Washington, D.C. for the African Liberation Day demo. However, since I was young and relatively inexperienced, such peccadilloes left an impression, but they were far outweighed by the content of Baraka's talk, a speech he had written repudiating black nationalism for Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. Baraka's ideological and political move to the left was sending shock waves throughout the black movement and was being closely followed and discussed by many, many others, including those of us in the Asian Movement.

THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT AND
ITS IMPACT: MULTIMEDIA COLLABORATION
AS A THIRD WORLD THING

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was the attendant cultural wing of the Black Liberation Movement (BLM) that ignited in the mid-1960s after the assassination of Malcolm X. The BLM (also known as the Black Power

Movement) included an assortment of revolutionary organizations across the United States: the Black Panther Party, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Republic of New Africa, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (and the other RUMs), the Congress of African Peoples, and many other more regional or local collectives and organizations. The Black Arts Movement included a number of arts and culturally focused groups that were, nonetheless, as politically oriented as the political activist organizations, including alternative presses such as Broadside Press, Third World Press, Black World magazine, and Drum magazine. In an excellent yet-to-be-published manuscript by Kalamu ya Salaam (forthcoming) on the Black Arts Movement (*The Magic of Ju-Ju*, the title of which is taken from the 1967 recording by Archie Shepp on Impulse Records), ya Salaam summarizes the main characteristics and contributions of BAM:

- BAM was a national movement, not just centered in northeastern cities, and while Amiri Baraka was the most prominent spokesperson (credited as “the father of the BAM”), the movement had a diversity of organizations around the United States, including the South;
- BAM was a popular grassroots movement, not just involving artists and intellectuals, but energized at the mass community level;
- BAM was radical and revolutionary;
- BAM was multi-disciplinary and innovative, and promoted a “popular avant-garde”;
- BAM built independent, alternative, self-reliant institutions not beholden to white support.

As a movement, many of the artists were actively engaged in cross-disciplinary expressions. Jazz was the central, fundamental creative gospel: quintessentially African American, an innovative and sophisticated art form with far-reaching international impact and influence. I (1995) have elsewhere argued that jazz is the revolutionary music of the twentieth century. Many jazz artists explicitly rejected the term “jazz,” deeming it a racial slur or pejorative appellation, which the makers of the music—the jazz musicians—never really invented. Rather, it was a label made by white

outsiders. Many of the most conscious musicians preferred to call it “the music.”

The Black Arts Movement asserted and promoted the concept of a black aesthetic. Contrary to the criticism that such a notion was essentialist—the accusation of narrow, proscriptive, exclusionary, and dogmatic—the black aesthetic embraced a pan-African scope; asserted and affirmed the presence of African American traditions, forms, and idioms; and by its very assertion, exposed and countered a white aesthetic based upon racist Eurocentrism. If anything, the music embodied and exemplified the black aesthetic by celebrating African antecedents and interpreted cultural practices, forms, and traditions; by valorizing improvisation, exalting soul (or the blues aesthetic); as well as innovation and experimentation (signified by a fascination with and appreciation of hipness). The black aesthetic and the music possess formic characteristics such as antiphony (call and response), multiple rhythmic layering, syncopation, and soloist-ensemble interplay. The black or jazz aesthetic imbued and embodied much of the dance, film, visual arts, theater, and literature of this period. Probably the closest interaction was between literature (especially poetry as an oral performing art) and the music.

The generation of black poets could virtually be called “jazz poets,” both from their deep and profound appreciation of and usage of the music and their close collaborations and social connections with the musicians. Many poets would call upon and perform with musicians, even forming poetry bands. Fewer musicians took it upon themselves to invite poets or to utilize poetry in their performances with the notable exception of Archie Shepp.

Shepp had studied theater and playwriting while an undergraduate student at Goddard College in Vermont during the 1950s. He even had his plays produced in small alternative theaters in Manhattan’s Lower Eastside during the early 1960s. Known for his articulate outspokenness, Shepp was exceptionally literate, a true Timbuktu man, equally at home in the literary arts and music as well as radical political theory. Poetry has been featured throughout his recording oeuvre. A tour de force poem written by Shepp (1985) is “Mama Rose,” written in the early 1960s upon the death of his

grandmother, but a searing indictment of colonialism. Performed and recorded frequently, Shepp's recitation evokes the Baptist preacher, the work hollers of the sharecropper, blues man, and militant orator.

*They say that Malcolm is dead
and every flower is still
but I want to tell you Mama Rose
that we are the victims . . .*

*I want to take this ex-cannibal's kiss
and turn it into a revolution . . .*

*your corpse turned up to the sky like a
putrefying Congolese after the Americans
have come to help . . .*

*your vagina split asymmetrically between
the east and the west . . .*

All of Shepp's poetry is performed with evocative theatrical energy. I have yet to find a poet who can perform or read better than Shepp, who is able to draw from a deep reservoir of musical knowledge and great performative talent.

Another of my personal favorites is Shepp's "Blasé" (1969), recorded on the BYG French label while a number of expatriate black American new music, or avant-garde, artists were laying over in France after attending the Pan African Festival in Algiers in 1969. One music commentator described it, performed by the late vocalist Jeanne Lee, as one of the most brilliant poetical works on sexual and racial politics.

*Blasé
Ain't you daddy
You who shot your sperm into me
But never set me free.*

*This ain't a hate thing
 It's a love thing
 If love is every really loved that way
 The way they say.*

*I give you a loaf of sugar
 You took my womb 'til it runs.
 All of Ethiopia awaits you
 My prodigal son.*

*Blasé
 Ain't you big daddy
 But mama loves you
 She always has.*

While a teenager, I did my own cover of Shepp's "Blasé." In the mid-1980s, I did my own version of "Poem for Mama Rose," which later became part of the libretto to my first opera, *A Chinaman's Chance*. The soliloquy, called "A Success Story Fable: Poem for Vincent Chin," was dedicated to the murdered Chinese American and an homage to all victims of racist violence and murder as well as a poetical diatribe against national oppression ("We will always be foreigners in a land where imported music is called 'classical'").

Shepp's stunning and powerful combination of poetry and music would heavily influence my involvement in multimedia performance. Many of my recordings, since my debut "Tomorrow Is Now!" on Soul Note, have featured poetry, text, and even graphics as part of my multimedia creative expression. I have collaborated with many poets, particularly African Americans, including Amiri Baraka (we had a new music/new poetry trio in the early 1980s with the late drummer Steve McCall), Kalamu ya Salaam (we were The Afro Asian Arts Dialogue), Sapphire, Louis Reyes Rivera, Esther Iverem, Puerto Rican writer Alma Villegas, Chinese American writer Genny Lim, and Tony Medina. I have featured the poetry and writing of many others on my recordings and in my performances, including

Sonia Sanchez, Andrea Lockett, Ann T. Greene, Janice Mirikitani, Brian Auerbach, Ruth Margraff, and others.

Former Celebrate Brooklyn festival producer Burl Hash said, “Archie wrote some great and beautiful theater music” referring to the “Lady Day” musical theater score that Shepp worked on in the early 1970s. Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem-play “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide Once the Rainbow is Enuf” uses Shepp’s music from “The Magic of Ju-Ju” (1967) recording. Shepp prefers to call himself a “folk” musician since he eschews the elitism of the high brow (both concert hall and avant-garde). Indeed, Shepp is both premodern and postmodern simultaneously, drawing upon and juxtaposing elements from the continuum of black culture, interspersed with the modernist European avant-garde with which he is familiar. Invited to collaborate with him—often to mixed results—were performers who played varying African instruments; blues artists such as Julio Finn; straight-ahead players such as Hank Mobley, Roland Hanna, Philly Jo Jones; and electronic musicians such as Jasper Von Jost. On “Blasé,” Julio Finn takes a harmonica solo a half step up in key from where the rest of the music is, a very jarring effect, but effective for the tone and content of this dark, disturbing, and ominous work. On other pieces, such as “Pitchin’ Can,” the results are disorganized, a chaotic mishmash.

I met Shepp when I was a teenager, seeking how to unite radical politics and the arts. The 1970s were a transitional period for Shepp, both musically and, I believe, for the man. As a professor in African American music, Shepp would study, practice, and incorporate the broadness of African American musical culture, learning to play chord changes, composing more lyrical and conventional harmony-based songs. The late Romulus Franceschini described this time in Shepp’s career as the tenor saxophonist seeking to become more of a pop artist. He was writing and recording vocal songs based on the blues, RnB, jazz ballads, and gospel (including hiring gospel singers). Shepp was himself becoming the bridge in the continuum of black music in America. By the late 1970s, after I had left the Amherst area and had much less contact with him except for attending an occasional performance, Shepp had taken up bebop and playing jazz standards as his main repertoire. Yet, his trickster spirit would continue to stymie the jazz critics,

releasing two duet albums with pianist Horace Parlan, one of spirituals and the second of blues songs, that were brilliant in their conception and glorious in the beauty of the simplicity of the material performed with Shepp's idiosyncratic stylization. These two recordings forced once-skeptics in the jazz establishment to recognize his stature as he won *Downbeat Magazine's* Tenor Saxophone of the Year award from the critics. Coinciding with this recognition and certification, a *Downbeat* magazine article on Shepp had the title "Radical with Tenure" in a politically self-congratulatory way of remarking that the once young 1960s militant had matured and discarded the avant-garde for the traditional mainstream. How much of Shepp had ideologically mellowed isn't clear, and perhaps may never be, as Shepp himself is mercurial.

THE GENIUS AND EGO-MANIA OF AMIRI BARAKA

When I was a young teenager, voraciously learning about the Black Arts Movement and the BLM, Amiri Baraka's writings were prominent and highly influential. His genius for poetry is widely acknowledged. A particular emphasis in his poetic and polemical onslaughts has been the vacillation of the black petty bourgeoisie, or middle-class, its assimilationist and integrationist orientation, and its willingness often to capitulate and to compromise the black liberation struggle for token individual gains. It was inevitable that I would study and come to know and to work with Baraka, a leading black revolutionary artist and activist.

By the late 1970s, many of the former leading Third World nationalists in the United States had adopted Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought as their ideology. The group I had joined, I Wor Kuen (IWK), merged with a Chicano-based organization, the August Twenty-Ninth Movement (ATM) by mid-1978, becoming the League of Revolutionary Struggle (Marxist-Leninist) (LRS). A year later, the LRS would merge with Baraka's former Congress of Afrikan Peoples (CAP), now the Revolutionary Communist League (Marxist-Leninist) (RCL). I remember the merger celebration held in Harlem in the cold January of 1979. At least two hundred

people crammed a small auditorium, the largest gathering of blacks and Asians together I had ever seen. My fledging Afro Asian music and poetry band, then called “Frontline,” performed along with the St. Louis-based Infra-Red Funk band, a music group that had formed within the St. Louis chapter of CAP. Two comrades from the former RCL, Kamau and his then wife, Imarisha, would later tell me that the event was truly historic, not just for the political merger and unity, but because they had seen for the first time former extreme nationalist comrades of theirs dance with Asians, and that blew their minds! Amiri Baraka was supposed to be the keynote speaker, but he would not show because of an air traffic weather delay that kept him in Chicago. He had phoned in the notes to his speech to Pili Michael Humphrey, a young leader in RCL from Atlanta. Pili’s own speech, which he composed after speaking with Amiri, was fiery and strong, and I remember one critically important, emphatic point he made in that speech: that the national movements were independently revolutionary. The crowd roared its approval as many misconceptions about multinational unity and the national question in the Marxist-Leninist (M-L) movement tended to be integrationist: that nationality-in-form organizing was narrow and inherently less than multinational formations or forms of organizing. Such a white integrationist position implicitly and sometimes explicitly took the position that uniting with the majority white leftists was more revolutionary than an all-black or all-Third World peoples formation and organization. Pili’s statement, which was the position of the LRS, made it clear in no uncertain terms how we as an M-L group stood on the national question, which was contrary to the predominantly integrationist positions of most of the other groups in the M-L movement.

It was at the post-event after-party, dancing to the Infra-Red Funk band, that my crush began for one of the former CAP/RCL comrades, Jamala Rogers. She was short, broad shouldered, voluptuous, dark-skinned with beautifully rounded facial features. It wasn’t until the early 1990s, after the split and dissolution of the LRS, that we’d begin dating. I was the first non-black man she had ever dated. I’d take her to see Chinese films, to have meals in Chinatown, and to Baja and La Jolla to enjoy the beaches. When I visited her in St. Louis, we visited the black rodeo, a black independent free

school. She jokingly referred to us as “renegade lovers” since we were both outcasts from the anti-socialist majority that had seized control of the LRS by 1989. After several months of a long-distance relationship, I broke off the relationship, realizing that we would never live together. Neither she nor I was willing to relocate from our beloved home bases of St. Louis and New York City, respectively. I also was interested in dating another black sister living in Brooklyn and, at that time, I was subscribing to serial monogamy.

Part of the work of the merger with RCL involved quickly clearing out its office in Newark that was condemned to demolition. I was still living in Boston at the time but traveled down to New York City frequently for meetings and for my own personal enjoyment. The Big Apple was much more exciting than Bean Town. Here were the cultural and political names, and the amount of activity was staggering. In one of my trips, staying with an LRS comrade in Chinatown, we shared a passion for the music. One night, we attended the debut concert of the World Saxophone Quartet at the Public Theater. A who’s-who of black artists was there, including Amiri and Amina Baraka, sitting a table away from us. My friend and fellow LRS comrade, Steve, introduced himself and me to them, and they politely returned the greeting. The next day, a group of us from New York went to Newark to the CAP office and combed through the boxes of files, record albums, and videos. It was amazing the amount of black liberation movement history that we had to throw out as we could only take what we could carry. I remember reading some files that had copies of “Chairman” Baraka’s articles sent to various periodicals and the rejection letters. One in particular I remember that explained its rejection of Baraka’s submission by stating, “We don’t publish advocacy.”

I moved from Boston and Cambridge areas to New York City in the early fall of 1981 and assumed my work in the New York unit of the LRS, which included going to the many events where Amiri Baraka was featured to build support for his case against police brutality. Baraka had been beaten by New York City police on the streets of Greenwich Village during a heated argument between him and his wife. The police claimed that they were responding to a call about a wife being beaten by her husband. Baraka had been arrested and charged with resisting arrest. While many are of the

opinion that he, indeed, had probably assaulted his wife, she later would deny this allegation in public rallies and supported her husband's struggle against the police harassment. I attended the court hearing at which Baraka was defended by famed leftist attorney William Kuntsler, who, in a last minute move, got the clearly sympathetic young judge to commute Baraka's sentence to 90 weekend days at Riker's Island penitentiary.

In effect, the sentence allowed Baraka time off to rest and to write more during his weekends for the next year. Toward the end of this sentence, a big 50th birthday party bash was thrown for him at his home in Newark. I attended many of his parties and house events, which included long-time activists, neighbors, and luminaries such as Verta Mae Grosvenour, Max Roach, Grachan Moncur III, Quincy Troupe, Ben Caldwell, Vincent Smith, and Louis Reyes Rivera.

Kalamu ya Salaam assesses Baraka's contribution and role as the BLM's greatest "propagandist," while Modibo, a CAP-RCL veteran, believes Baraka was "one of the great organizers in the BLM." Certainly during the peak period of the CAP, more than a dozen chapters nationwide were organized. Baraka played a leading role at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana; by organizing many cultural benefits, festivals, alternative theater, presses (e.g., Jihad Publications), and cultural campaigns; and in the struggles and organizing work of the African Liberation Support Committee. His history of work and accomplishments is prodigious. As with any great leader, a strong and capable circle of supporters greatly contributed to the successes and accomplishments. Unlike today, these organizing efforts were done with virtually no paid staff but by activist volunteers. This is distinct from the nonprofit organizations today that have hired staff and rely upon state and corporate funded budgets. However, when the movement waned, Baraka seemed to lose touch with the new realities and conditions. When I began to work with him in the early 1980s, CAP-RCL had faded to only a handful of chapters nationwide. The organizational base and infrastructure was far weaker than a decade before, yet Baraka seemed to operate on the notion that simply by the sheer force of his will could the same level of functioning happen. People have marveled and wondered about his immense productivity. When I asked his

wife Amina about it, she explained that “Amiri has such a strong focus of concentration, he can write even if a party is going on around him.” Indeed, Baraka, unlike the sybaritic behavior of other artists, is very Spartan and is constantly in motion both intellectually, through his constant writing and polemics, and physically, in his ability to go from event to event. He does relax, as I’ve run into him at jazz clubs and shows from time to time. He does like to hang out and converse over a beer or burger.

One of the criticisms of the RCL was its dogmatism and overreliance upon quoting the classic M-L-M texts. I believe much of our movement of that period was infected by Stalin’s interpretation of dialectical materialism. Indeed, Stalin’s short book, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1940), was a movement primer and classic text used in study groups. Stalin tended to view most contradictions at a level of being antagonistic, which was a battle with the enemy. He also tended to characterize politically most contradictions as either/or in which one true and correct proletarian position fought with the enemy, bourgeois line. There was very little synthesis or view of reality as a complex, interpenetration of opposites, but rather, two stark and diametrical opposites for which the one correct line had to vanquish the incorrect one. Baraka’s philosophy possesses much of this influence. On the positive side, Baraka is one of the few Marxist intellectuals and theorists to give sharp, analytic political assessments of artists and cultural trends. However, his views about the class struggle in African American literature and in the music reflect draconian hard-line positions placing artists in either the camp of the people’s tradition of struggle or in the camp of tail Europe, i.e., white assimilation and capitulation to western imperialism. To be categorized by Baraka as tail Europe, doesn’t do much to persuade individuals to rethink their musical and political direction.

Baraka can be a scathing critic, but he is also able to offer programmatic proposals. I’ve often looked to his manifestos for ideas about how to create alternatives. For example, his call for a cabinet position on the arts in the U.S. government has merit. His call for certain American films and important cultural icons to be certified as national treasures of art so that they won’t be sold to Sony or foreign multinational corporations is also a valid reform. With this, I have learned that every critique should come with a proposal for an

alternative. Yet today, Baraka, possibly suffering from delusions about his own role as an agitator and propagandist, is either incapable of or won't do much organizing at the ground level. Exhortations can't substitute or replace the crucially necessary day-to-day, grassroots work that is so lacking in today's U.S. left. The cadre of people who will do this work in a disciplined, professional (but inevitably unpaid) collective mode is what we lack.

For all of Baraka's great accomplishments and impact, his greatest weakness is his inability for honest, soul-baring self-reflection. While much ado has been made about his changes in identity and politics from LeRoi Jones (Bohemian beat poet) to Imamu Amiri Baraka (cultural nationalist) to Amiri Baraka (Marxist), in all of his poetry and writings, there is very little personal feeling and self-criticism beyond the coldly ideological and political. He, unfortunately, is caught up in his own cult of personality. Often his ideological and political battles take on personality wars and are dismissed by many as such, harming the political message and position. His use of arguments *ad hominem*, his frequent use of the dozens as a form of dissing his ideological opponents, often simply suggests ridicule. A recent example was his ferocious condemnation of Ralph Nader supporters in the 2000 presidential elections, accusing those who voted for and backed Nader instead of Gore of having delivered the presidency to right wing fascism represented by Bush. In some ways, his continual fascination with electoral politics since the days of black electoral empowerment strike me as social-democratic: socialism in words but supporting the Democratic Party in deeds. He is less able to persuade than to attack. I believe he is incapable of ascertaining his own impact, especially negatively, upon people when he gets into one of his frothing rants. In recent years, his temper has become testier. Except for his poetry, his writing has become sloppy and sometimes even incoherent. His role continues to be primarily a propagandist and agitator though his effectiveness as an organizer and as a leader has significantly diminished with his incapability to unite and train new circles of cadre and organizers. He continues to be a scrappy warrior-artist: bold, brazen, and brilliant in his rapier-like attacks and critiques of the white and racist ruling class in the United States. Without showing any signs of mellowing (i.e., increasing ideological and political conservatism), Amiri

Baraka, poet-warrior, continues to fight when many others have capitulated to career self-aggrandizement.

UNITY AND STRUGGLE
WITH KALAMU YA SALAAM

I met writer, poet, producer, and cultural activist Kalamu ya Salaam (Swahili name for “Pen for Peace,” formerly Vallery Ferdinand III) in spring of 1989 while my Afro Asian Music Ensemble was at the Houston International Festival, invited by Baraka Sele, curator. Baraka had told both Kalamu and me that we had to meet each other, so a dinner between us, along with our traveling companions, took place in an upscale black restaurant. Ya Salaam and I had both known of each other for a while but had never personally met. I knew him originally from the *Black Scholar* debates in the early to mid-1970s between black nationalism and Marxism, a historic transition period in the black liberation struggle, with tremendous ideological and political debates occurring in the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC). The ALSC was a broad black activist united front to build support for the African liberation struggles in decolonizing countries such as Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, South-West Africa (now Namibia), Angola, and South Africa. The ALSC claimed the leading exponents of black nationalism and the emerging Marxist current in the black liberation movement. Ya Salaam at that time was anti-Marxist and pro-pan-African cultural nationalism, joining with Haki Madhubuti (poet-activist, formerly Don L. Lee) and others against Amiri Baraka (who had been a leading cultural nationalist and had just turned to Marxism), Mark Smith, and a group of North Carolina-based black leftists including Revolutionary Workers League leader Owusu Sadaukai (then Howard Fuller) and Abdul Akalimat (then Gerald McWorter). During this time (by late spring 1976), I, too, had moved from my revolutionary yellow nationalism to Marxism in my second semester at Harvard, highly influenced by the young Marxist organizers on campus (particularly from a small Boston and New York collective called the “Proletarian Unity League”), but I eventually joined I Wor Kuen, having

more unity with them on the national question, during the winter of my sophomore year (late 1976 and early 1977).

Ya Salaam and I were cautious with each other in our first meeting, but each of us asked the other about his views on a number of topics. He attended our performance at the festival the next day. I left our initial encounter with a positive impression about him. Soon after this initial meeting, I took the initiative to telephone him at his home base in New Orleans. We talked further about politics and the arts. I was very positive about his accessibility and openness to me, not at all the narrow nationalist impression I had gotten of him through the published debates. I directly asked him if he was a socialist, and he replied that he supported socialism as a system to replace capitalism but didn't subscribe to or identify as a socialist or Marxist because he believed the ethics of socialism were far more important to him than the theory or ideology. He continues to self-identify as a pan-Africanist. I proposed we work together in a poetry and music duo, and he agreed.

I had just joined a progressive speakers and performers agency called "Speak Out: Artists and Writers," which had received its initial start up from *Z Magazine*, a progressively political periodical headed by leftist Michael Alpert, but, as I would soon learn, decidedly anti-Marxist, especially Marxist-Leninist. (The magazine and its attendant small press, South End Press, would propel the publishing careers of bell hooks, Cornel West, Manning Marable—now three of the most well-known and well-paid integrationist and democratic-socialist writers/pundits/intellectuals of color.) Speak Out had found me a gig at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and I suggested that it become a duo with Kalamu, to promote African-Asian American unity. The sponsors liked the idea, and I immediately called Kalamu, and he agreed to join me. Kalamu also took the initiative to call his contacts in the Michigan area, professor and writer Melba Joyce Boyd and white militant poet-activist John Sinclair. He also found an extra gig for us at the campus at which Melba was then teaching. Kalamu's initiative impressed me. Our performances together went off very well.

Kalamu ya Salaam is truly a jazz poet—adaptable, flexible, not fixed to a set way of reading and performing his poetry—possessing the very

qualities of creative interaction that true jazz musicians have. A number of other jazz poets I've had the experience of performing with were fixed, stiff, and couldn't read any other way but how they've been doing their poems. I was supposed to just simply follow them in their set way of reading. There was no interplay between poetry reading and my baritone sax musical performance. Kalamu can actually interact and interplay with my improvisations. While he, too, like many of the other jazz poets, called for jazz standard tunes to be the framework of many of his poems, he wasn't stuck on just following these melodies and could hear my transitions and departures and new directions and join with me.

As good friends, comrades, and artistic collaborators, Kalamu and I have enjoyed much in-depth discussion, debate, and ideological struggle on a wide range of issues. He has shared much of his thought processes, experiences, and opinions, including his forthcoming book manuscript analyzing the Black Arts Movement, *The Magic Ju-Ju*. For the most part, I believe Kalamu walks his talk. When he let me have a copy of this manuscript to read, I thought it was a major work of great importance to understanding BAM from a participant's point of view and with valuable insights, information, and analysis, and I offered to help him find a publisher. But true to his pan-African nationalist convictions, he wanted the manuscript to be considered only by a black publisher and for it to be targeted to black bookstores and to a black audience, though perhaps a white, leftist small press may have more quickly published it or offered better distribution. He has often said that his audience is a black one, first and foremost. He hasn't sought to cross over to a white poetry or arts audience or institutions. He is a cultural producer, having produced radio programs, festivals, and publications of black poetry and music through black organizations, even though some have been less than professional in their business dealings. He explains his interest in the music and poetry, as well as his interest in China, as having been sparked by the work of Langston Hughes. Hughes had made recordings of his poetry with jazz and had written poems, especially during the 1920s and 1930s, that expressed internationalist solidarity with the peoples' struggles around the world, including the poem "Roar, China, Roar!" for the Chinese revolution. Ya Salaam shared with me the costs and work of

organizing our “Afro Asian Arts Dialogue” (I believe the name, which he proposed, came from a small conference by that same title and theme organized by dancer and choreographer Peggy Choy during the Los Angeles rebellion in 1992).

Ya Salaam is an ardent cultural activist who is firmly committed to black independent cultural production and has self-published many anthologies as well as his own poetry chapbooks. He had criticized an edition of the *African American Review* devoted to the topic of the music when it didn’t even include one black writer. The *Review* offered him the opportunity to edit another volume on the same topic, in which he predominantly included black writers, but others as well, including myself and Irish American drummer Royal Hartigan. Ya Salaam also introduced me to Christopher Small’s book on the music, *Music of a Common Tongue* (1987), which during the early 1990s, he considered the best analysis and understanding of jazz. His own insights into the music, his analytic writings about music and African American culture in general, have been for the most part, very insightful. I remember during the time of our first Afro Asian Arts Dialogue performance at the University of Wisconsin at Madison with Peggy Choy, we had lunch with a jazz professor who seemed to believe the black, free-music avant-garde had been halted and replaced by the rise of commercial fusion jazz in the 1970s. Kalamu took exception and cited another current, the rise of the CTI label and other black fusion-funk music that included artists such as Donald Byrd (who was a hard bop trumpeter-composer-band leader) and the Blackbyrds (a band of his Howard University students who played much more commercial black urban dance music). Ya Salaam also asserts that jazz is a world music, as the black jazz musicians were among the black community’s first internationalists, touring and traveling overseas and returning to their communities with a broader international understanding. Kalamu has always asserted the social importance and impact of the music and black culture. He was the only voice of criticism of Clint Eastwood’s film *Bird* about saxophonist-composer-titan Charlie Parker, in a review entitled “*Bird* Is a Turkey!” published in Canada’s *Coda* magazine. More than anyone, ya Salaam has, I believe, best understood the impact and importance of John Coltrane upon

black music and culture, which has shaped my views in this article. In an interview with ya Salaam, Bill Mullen asked what he felt about my opinion about the enormous impact of Coltrane. Ya Salaam replied that Coltrane's impact was "beyond enormous." Which I concede is, indeed, the truth.

Kalamu ya Salaam and I have worked well together as artists, shared many hours of debate and struggle over ideological and political questions, and are close friends. Our unity has its limitations, consistent with ya Salaam's nationalism. As a nationalist, ya Salaam obviously hasn't taken as strong of an interest in learning about the APA history and struggle and experience as I have taken toward African Americans and Africa. But my greatest disappointment with Kalamu comes from his deliberate silence in criticizing the leading reactionary in jazz today, Wynton Marsalis, and Marsalis's right-wing ideological advisor, Stanley Crouch. Even though Marsalis is Kalamu's cousin, in private to me ya Salaam has expressed his problems with Marsalis's ideological adherence to Crouch. In our many debates and discussions about Wynton, Kalamu would come up with weak defenses for Wynton, such as Marsalis's emphasis on going to public schools to promote jazz to black children while the most noted avant-garde musicians, such as David Murray in particular, do not. Kalamu knows Marsalis's opinion that avant-garde musicians can't read music or that they lack technical rigor for the traditional aspects of jazz are misdirected and remiss, just as 30 years ago the very same charges were leveled at the avant-garde of the sixties. The avant-garde chooses to make music differently, and its merits or faults should be judged not on straight-ahead mainstream jazz criteria, but by its own criteria.

To my knowledge, the two most critically explicit opinions voiced about Marsalis by leading black artists were from musicians Lester Bowie and Julius Hemphill, both now deceased. (The latter called Marsalis an "Uncle Tom" in the pages of *The Nation* and other national publications.) I (1995) have discussed my own criticisms of Marsalis, but suffice it to say, I'm of the position that Wynton Marsalis is to Lincoln Center what Clarence Thomas is to the U.S. Supreme Court: a black neo-conservative, right-wing, second-rater.

My admiration and friendship for Kalamu continues despite our disagreements and differences. His commitment to cultural organizing, to

independent black cultural production, education and training within the black community, based in the south, is exemplary and an affirmation of Cabral's fundamental principle of national liberation movement building for artists and activists to "return to the source."

CREATING A POPULAR AVANT-GARDE:
HOW THE BLACK NEW MUSIC INSPIRED
ASIAN AMERICAN CREATIVE NEW MUSIC

Unlike the avant-garde of a colonialist Western Europe or white North American culture, which isn't necessarily politically progressive or transgressive and may, indeed, reinforce privilege, promote solipsism and self-indulgence, oppose social responsibility and consciousness, and elevate art for art's sake, the avant-garde of oppressed peoples' cultures generally tends to fuel liberation, challenge cultural dominance and hegemony (usually of the oppressor, colonial traditions and forms), and promote rebellion, struggle, dissidence, disturbance, militancy, and opposition to the mainstream and status quo. The African American avant-garde of the 1960s and early 1970s was such a force. The new music, new poetry, and new theater were part of a cultural and social movement for a new society. In a broad sense, the artists sought to deconstruct and support the destruction of the old society of white supremacist, Eurocentric, and patriarchal capitalism for a new society based on full equality, social justice, and "power to the people." The terrain of struggle for these avant-garde transgressors and radicals, these cultural activists, was cultural and artistic, though many also contributed through their social activism as well. Of course, the new jazz, with Coltrane as avatar, was the most potent and compelling wave of artistic experimentation and expressive force. As the late trumpeter Lester Bowie explained, in retort to neo-conservative back-to-tradition exponents, à la Wynton Marsalis, who dismiss the avant-garde as musically invalid and illegitimate, "The tradition of jazz IS innovation."

I would assert that the early black avant-garde, beginning with Sun Ra in the 1950s and extending to the Art Ensemble of Chicago in the sixties and seventies, were precursors and leading examples of a black postmodernism.

The Art Ensemble of Chicago's mantra, "Black Music from Ancient to Future," best signifies the self-conscious reworking, borrowing, re-interpreting, and musical juxtaposing and collaging in their collective performance rites. Sun Ra's cosmic theory and Julius Hemphill's fascination with the Dogon are just examples of this Afrocentric post-modernism that seeks to understand the past with an avant-garde sensibility. Sun Ra was the preeminent forerunner of today's fascination with extraterrestrial contact and visitation and interspecies communication joined with hopes for world peace and unity through man's connection to the extraterrestrial. I disagree with people who try to explain Sun Ra as a manifestation of Space Age modernity. Rather, Sun Ra's extraterrestriality is much more about spirituality than a fixation upon high technology, though certainly Sun Ra was interested in the latest electronic musical instrument. For Sun Ra, music and space exploration would point the way for humanity to develop a higher consciousness for the need for a changed orientation beyond the limitations of earthly material acquisitiveness.

The late 1970s and early 1980s avant-garde in New York's loft scene, however, was, in my opinion, weak and an example of vulgar postmodernism that promotes obfuscation, obscurantism, and empiricism. These black avant-garde musicians and artists of the 1980s New York Soho loft scene had retreated into self-indulgence (hiding or jettisoning the former socially conscious work) and jumping on the white performance art band wagon of Meredith Monk, Philip Glass, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and others. The fire of the 1960s and early 1970s had dissipated into esotericism, ambiguity, and shallow postmodern pastiche by African American artists, such as Bill T. Jones, choreographer Donald Byrd, Bebe Miller, and Carl Hancock Rux, who even questioned blackness as essential.

Just as African American popular culture has been a leading influence upon American popular culture, so, too, does African American avant-garde music and artistic expression have a similar impact upon the overall avant-garde. A small, but important group of APA musicians embraced the music and its philosophical, political, and cultural radicalism. My other essays discuss the who, what, where, when, and why of the so-called Asian American Jazz scene on both coasts, so I won't repeat any of that discussion.

Multiwoodwindist Gerald Oshita, bassist Mark Izu, woodwindist Russell Baba, clarinetist Paul Yamasaki, and East Coast violinist Jason Hwang were free jazz players exploring Asian musical and performance concepts. I met Gerald Oshita before he died in his Japantown studio in the early 1980s. He had a large collection of woodwinds, including a number of unconventional and uncommon ones, which reminded me of Rahsaan Roland Kirk who performed the manzello and the stritch. In the opinion of Asian American jazz impresario Paul Yamasaki (who helped to found and organize the first annual Asian American Jazz Festival in the Bay Area), Gerald warranted props as the first Asian American to be on a Soul Note/Black Saint recording (as a sideman and colleague of Roscoe Mitchell). The Italian-based Soul Note/Black Saint was considered to be the creative new music label of the 1980s by many. In 1984, I became the first Asian American to record as a leader for that label, eventually releasing three recordings and having one of my pieces recorded on a fourth, a recording by the Rova Saxophone Quartet. My first Soul Note album earned much notice both from the circle of Asian American jazz artists as well as from the larger creative new music circle, for the significance of my outing as an Asian American band leader but also for my explicitly radical politics and Afro Asian concept.

One very overlooked Asian American composer/musician/band leader of the late 1970s and early 1980s was the Chinese American Los Angeles-based Benny Yee, who with singer Noboku Miyamoto, had a band called “Warriors of the Rainbow.” Yee had the musical skills to play chord changes and to go between free jazz improvisations and structured and notated arrangements, whereas most of the others mentioned above were primarily free improvisers. Warriors of the Rainbow enlisted highly skilled African American sidemen, including trombonist Julian Priester and saxophonist Bennie Maupin, both of whom had played with such greats as Herbie Hancock. As the name of their band might denote, it was a multicultural assemblage (Asian and African) and was politically militant (“warrior” or “warriors” was commonly an African American conception of someone engaged in the struggle for liberation).

As a young Asian American musician, I sought out other Asians playing in primarily black bands, though many turned out not to be very politically

conscious. Many were Japanese nationals in the United States who embraced and identified with jazz and black music for its cultural iconoclasm, hipness, and alternative lifestyle and cultural norms. I have not met a Japanese national who played excellent jazz motivated and inspired by, and identifying with, black nationalist or explicit anti-imperialist politics.

Indeed, jazz is a cultural commodity of exotic fascination in Japan, along with Europe, where lucrative touring possibilities have existed for black American artists. However, in accounts told to me by Japanese American drummer Akira Tana and other Asians (even Japanese nationals), the tour promoters have at times explicitly told American band leaders not to bring Asian musicians on their tours. White or black artists are viewed as more authentic or exotic, while Asians are viewed as inauthentic and less interesting for marketing purposes.

The Asian American jazz scene was much more active on the West Coast, with the most radical and free music centered in the Bay Area. The scene could be grouped into three loosely connected styles: a jazz fusion scene with its most prominent example being the Los Angeles-based band, Hiroshima, along with Deems Tatsukawa in Seattle, and others; a mainstream straight-ahead jazz group, mostly older generation players such as Filipino pianist Bobby Enriquez, pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi, alto saxophonist Gabe Balthazar (of the Stan Kenton big band fame), and the younger drummer Akira Tana (whose professional career started from touring with the Heath Brothers); and the free creative music players. To George Leong and Paul Yamasaki's credit, when they first organized the Asian American Jazz Festival in the Bay Area, all three scenes or styles would be featured, even if some of the artists didn't particularly care to be or were interested in identifying with Asian America. Another scene which claimed the term "Asian American music" was a pop folk-music style of Asian American performers including the East Coast trio A Grain of Sand and West Coast groups such as Yokohama, California; the subsequent projects by Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo; a loose gathering of musicians based around San Francisco's Japantown Art and Media Workshop, among others. The Japanese American taiko groups were another subset of self-consciously organized Asian American musical activity. Except for the straight-ahead

jazz players, most of the artists and organizers of all these scenes identified with the Asian Movement and community.

The bands Commitment on the East Coast (three black musicians and Jason Hwang) and United Front in the Bay Area (Mark Izu with the half Japanese-half black drummer Anthony Brown, and two black horn players) were primarily new music jazz-focused, though they did perform occasionally at Asian community events.

Rarely have musicians developed any sustained and coherent collaborations across these scenes, possibly due to stylistic differences and the lack of artistic leadership and skills to bridge such differences. However, pioneering efforts between creative new music jazz artists such as Izu, Baba, myself, and latecomers such as Jon Jang, Miya Masaoka, Glenn Horiuchi, and Francis Wong would incorporate traditional instruments and players in cross-stylistic collaborations.

One other major scene that has never really embraced, much less identified with, the Asian American Movement or community is the world of individual new music classical composers who have incorporated traditional Asian instruments and elements into high brow concert music. This scene includes composers such as Chou Wen-chung, Chinary Ung, Chen Yee, Chou Long, Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, Yoshiko Torikai, and Toru Takematsu. These composers more typically subscribe to the art for art's sake position and seek legitimacy from the musical academy and Eurocentric establishment.

ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL PRODUCTION: THE RISE AND FALL OF BLACK ARTIST COLLECTIVES

The Black Arts Movement spawned numerous alternative, community-based collectives and guerilla-style organizations in all disciplines. For music, the most well-known and influential groups were the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) in Chicago and the BAG (Black Arts Group) in St. Louis. I named my first multimedia performance art group, the now-defunct Asian American Art Ensemble, after

the famed Art Ensemble of Chicago, a collective music group that emerged from the AACM that presented ritual-style performances with the musicians in African mythology-inspired make-up and costumes combining indigenous primitive instruments with modern saxophones, drum set, and bass. The late 1960s and early 1970s black alternative music organizations promoted Afrocentrism, multimedia and experimental performances with a strong grassroots community orientation, and collective musical sharing and organizational decision-making. They were attempts to create alternatives from the band leader-as-star syndrome, to foster creative dialogue, to promote unity over stylistic differences, and to build collectively a cultural movement closely aligned with the black liberation struggle.

The Art Ensemble of Chicago promoted their music as “Great Black Music: From Ancient to Future” as a direct expression of their pan-African avant-garde consciousness. By the late 1980s, Bay Area-based Chinese American pianist Jon Jang had started his own record label, Asian Improv Records (AIR) to release his own music. By early 1988, Francis Wong and I joined Jang to expand the concept in the effort to become a leading center of Asian American jazz or Asian American improvised and creative music as part of exerting cultural leadership to the Asian Movement since we were all cadres at the time in the League of Revolutionary Struggle (Marxist-Leninist).

Our record label and production company was modeled on the early black creative music collectives. The first non-Jang recording was my “A Song for Manong” (AIR 003), a collector’s edition LP that featured my Asian American Art Ensemble in collaboration with the Filipino American Kulintang Arts, which performed primarily traditional southern Philippines kulintang music but was open to and seeking to create contemporary work as well. The score I composed was for a large music and theater production by that same name as the third part in my performance art trilogy, “Bamboo That Snaps Back!” which celebrates the resistance struggles of Asian Pacific Americans. This third installment, “A Song for Manong,” celebrated the epic struggles of the Filipinos beginning with the arrival of Magellan in 1522 to the fall of the International Hotel in San Francisco Manilatown in 1977.

By the late 1980s, many of the black alternative cultural collectives had either collapsed or gone the route of social service arts-in-education providers. None maintained the radical, experimental, avant-garde performance thrust. A newer movement was Mbase, centered around alto saxophonist Steve Coleman, with Brooklyn and New York City black musicians. However, it quickly faded as many became disgruntled and disillusioned with it as simply promoting and serving the career interests of Coleman. Elsewhere in Brooklyn, Musicians of Brooklyn Initiative (MOBI) had been started by Lester Bowie and others and had been incorporated as a nonprofit arts organization. But musicians quickly left MOBI believing that it only served the bigger name artists as a conduit to get grants.

In forming my own production company, Big Red Media, Inc. in 1998, I recognized that the collective movement was dead as the political sensibilities and leadership that was a direct result of the Black Liberation Movement had disappeared. Former collective-functioning artists were more interested in pursuing solo careers. This was the same experience that undermined the early 1960s October Revolution movement started by trumpeter Bill Dixon for the purpose of being a black creative music collective that would break from the established recording industry. However, as Dixon tells it, October Revolution member Archie Shepp was secretly negotiating his own record deal with Impulse! during this time. Shepp's position was that he needed the money to pay for the costs of his growing family. Other members quickly became disenchanted, and the group fell apart.

Collective artistic and financial and business decision making can only be viable if the artist members totally submit to the governing mission and principles and are truly able to function collectively, putting self-interest secondary to the goals of the movement. This is especially challenging for artists who necessarily have very big egos and strong personal visions. In the 1930s, similar types of alternative and artist-led unions attained a certain level of importance and collective functioning because they were secretly led by communist cadres. Such collectives require a strong political core that will resist cooptation and careerism.

In the 1970s, black nationalist recording labels also developed, including Strata-East in New York City and Black Jazz in Chicago. While I am not

knowledgeable about the history and final outcome of Black Jazz, I was around the music scene in New York to hear gossip about the demise of Strata-East, with a gambit of accusations ranging from one of the leading musicians absconding with the money to the label simply failing as a viable business. An alternative distribution company, the nonprofit New Music Distribution Service, also collapsed by the early 1980s as well. Certain lessons can be made from all of these experiences about alternative cultural organizing:

- Grant monies are fickle and unreliable;
- A strong political core leadership must exist to maintain the collective context;
- Artists must share in the business work and expect their returns to be contingent upon their shared input;
- The collective must be a guerilla enterprise and rely upon its own earnings.

My production company isn't a collective. It is my own private company whose profits and losses are borne solely by me. Therefore, all final decisions are mine. I believe in this era, without strong political leadership from movement organizations or a revolutionary party, we can enter into mutually beneficial alliances that are primarily or strictly for business interests. Simply sharing the same political ideas and values does not make for a good or viable business alliance. Indeed, the primary consideration, if we are to function with gain and not from altruism, must be serious business principles. We should and must continue to work with community-based and movement organizations, however, but not hold professional expectations. Indeed, I still believe in building movement benefit concerts and cultural events, but no one should expect to be paid, though these events should sell artist merchandise, which can be very successful.

Since the 1990s, a new wave of younger APA spoken word and hip hop-identified artists have organized their own performance opportunities, self-produced recordings, self-published chapbooks, APA student tours, and even national conferences. Like the earlier Asian American music scenes, these younger artists continue to struggle with questions about

Asian American aesthetics and cultural production, including: What makes for a unique and distinctive Asian American artistic expression? How do we make professional careers being APA artists doing APA art when no infrastructure exists within our communities to support this? What are our standards? How do our art and work relate to the broader APA communities, including campuses, immigrants, and APA activism? Who is our audience? What kind of institutions and businesses do we need to build?

While many of these APA hip hop and spoken-word artists recognize the major influence and inspiration of blacks and Latinos in the development of hip hop culture, there is much variegated opinion about whether APA interpretations and expressions range from the imitative to the innovative.

By the 1990s, interest in Asian American music and Asian American jazz had begun to grow among a few cultural studies and Asian American studies professors, including a survey course taught on this topic at the University of California at Berkeley by pianist Jon Jang. A few articles by Susan Asai, Su Zheng, Weihua Zhang, Yoshitaka Terada, Joseph Lam, and others have begun to appear in ethnomusicology journals. A few conferences have included topics on Asian Americans in music. The Asian American Jazz Festival in the San Francisco Bay area continues annually, and a short-lived East Coast festival was organized in the mid-1980s by the Jazz Center of New York (led by Cobi Narita) with curatorial support from artists including Jason Hwang, Akira Tana, and me. Other small community festivals of Asian American creative music have occurred in Boston and Chicago. Ethnomusicology conferences have occasionally hosted performers as well. Taiko, kulintang, and more traditionally ethnic concerts occur more frequently as part of folkloric celebrations and ethnic heritage festivals.

PHONEY AFRO ASIANISMS AND THE WAY FORWARD

During the mid-1990s, the Asia Society of New York City sponsored two consecutive annual Asian American jazz festivals, both of which occurred virtually unnoticed and had low audience attendance. The Asia Society also tried to host an event of African American and Asian American artists that

was also a dismal failure and for which this artist took an adversarial position by demanding my usual performance fee, which the Asia Society declined to meet, thus precluding my involvement. They had asked my collaborator Kalamu ya Salaam in the Afro Asian Arts Dialogue to come, to which he agreed, trying to leverage me to appear with him at a much reduced fee. I later spoke to another invited participant, poet Sonia Sanchez, who confirmed that the event was a sham since she never received her honorarium. For almost a half century, since its founding, the Asia Society had ignored Asian Pacific Americans, as well as controversial topics on Asia and the Pacific Rim, such as the Vietnam War, socialist China and Korea, and the revolutionary and national democratic struggles in the Philippines, Nepal, and Burma. Rather, their focus has been on teaching exotic Eastern culture to, as someone described it, “the wives of upper east-side business men who have business dealings and clients in the East.” The topic of APAs would inevitably broach such controversial topics as racism, discrimination, and inequality. The New York Asian Movement, since its inception in the late 1960s and early 1970s, always regarded the uptown, arrogant, and elitist Asia Society as a legacy of U.S. colonialism in Asia, part of the problem of exoticizing and otherizing the East, hiring white executives in their organization until the 1990s when the first Asian directors were finally hired. One of the biggest insults and travesties of their Asian American Jazz Festival was failing to invite me, a leading Asian American jazz artist who has had an impact on both coasts and who lives in New York City! When repeatedly asked by some press writers and curious individuals familiar with my work as to why I wasn’t invited, the Asia Society has never given a public explanation.

Another new, emerging topic is African American and Asian American relations. A couple of conferences, one at Columbia University in 2000 and another at Boston University in 2001, have occurred, both organized by African Americans at these institutions. Smaller forums and panels have also been organized in different cities, mostly by academics. Most of these events have only minimally included the arts or artists. All have ignored the longstanding work that I have done in this field. The fascination with the topic of black-Asian conflict, sensationalized by the mainstream media

during confrontations between Asian (usually Korean) merchants in predominantly African American communities, wrongly presumes that there is a special conflict of greater importance than a “black-white conflict,” or a “black-Latino conflict.” With the waning of Third World consciousness and unity from the late 1960s and early 1970s, described earlier in this essay, it is not surprising that division and conflict have risen. Certainly, examples of Third World unity and collaboration have never received media attention, except for the crassly commercialized neo-minstrelsy of the Jackie Chan-Chris Tucker *Rush Hour* (1998 and 2001) movies of today. The *Rush Hour* movies don’t even have the fraction of the politics of, say, the 1973 blockbuster *Enter the Dragon* with famed Chinese martial artist Bruce Lee (now deceased) and black American Jim Kelly, playing a black militant character on the run from the police. Kelly’s character remarks about the poverty and oppression he sees in Asia: “Ghettos are the same around the world. They stink.” The martial arts have been a site of much black-Asian-Latino-poor white inner-city interaction and intersection, especially in the forum of popular culture (movies, including kung-fu Saturday afternoon movies on local television stations). Furthermore, the martial arts instill individual and collective uplift (as training for self-discipline, personal and community security, building self-esteem and confidence) among the most highly at-risk youth populations.

While scholarly investigation, analysis, and study of the systemic roots of Third World division are important to an anti-imperialist consciousness, many of these academic conferences and forums are mired in self-referential language and topics. Furthermore, they do not attract or reach out to community participants. Third World film and cultural festivals, activist workshops, and community forums would be a better approach. But the key to building Third World unity has been coalitions and alliances forged in common struggles, both for local issues and for international solidarity.

The building of our respective movements requires ideological development through the course of building grassroots struggles and organizations. A radical, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary thrust to our organizing and propaganda must be central. The anthology *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* has attempted to summarize,

analyze, and share the lessons of the revolutionary and radical formations and struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s and connect this legacy to today's organizing for the Asian Pacific American Movement. Such projects need to be developed for the Black Liberation Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Puerto Rican Movement, and the Native Movement. At the same time, collaborative anthologies, be they artistic and cultural and/or political, across oppressed nationality movements, need to be developed as well. To get beyond the multiracial and multicultural reformism that proceeds from the premise that unity is mostly attitudinal, we must reaffirm the importance of the oppressed nationality struggles in the United States as national questions based upon the struggle to control land and resources and economic and political power, with a common enemy: the system of U.S. imperialism. Afro Asian unity is not simply learning to appreciate each other's cultures and experiences, but a historical outgrowth of the need for alternative political paradigms that are independent of U.S. white settler colonial integration and Western European hegemony. Oppressed nationalities can share the lessons of their common struggles and build solidarity, inspire one another, and construct a new paradigm that doesn't subscribe to the racialized welfare line and participate in the divide-and-conquer competition over crumbs constructed by the white power structure and its token compradors. Once we have de-Europeanized our orientation, looking to the Third World (both domestically in the United States and internationally) as our main allies and grounding ourselves in an internationalist, global, world anti-imperialist orientation, we can begin the task of true decolonialization and disentanglement from the tentacles of imperialist cultural and economic domination and begin the forward march to liberation and world unity.



NOTES

1. For a comprehensive history of the Congress of Afrikan Peoples (CAP), see the very hard to find *Forward* #3, the journal of the former League of Revolutionary Struggle (Marxist-Leninist), Getting Together Publications (now defunct), published in 1979.

2. Circa early 1970s, in personal files of Fred Ho. Inscription by poet Lawson Inada: “Written to commemorate the first New Asian Nation Poetry Reading.” The full text of the poem follows:

*Course you know how it was.
But I couldn't think of anything more fitting to
Commemorate this occasion.
So I thought I'd just run it down to you.*

*That was way, WAY back,
You know those famous dates,
But those first ships knew exactly what was happenin'
The heaviest minds in all of Asia had seen to that
But they didn't quite plan on meetin' up again with
Their long lost brothers,
Those who had cut out when things were bad*

*Now, those brothers have their own culture going
And a beautiful way of being and seeing
Not too different from our own,
Naturally, we got together, grooved on things together
And naturally, left the land and animals as they were
We knew better,
Remembering how some of the 'old folks' tried to
Mess our homeland up
We knew better*

*But also, knew about the ghosts across the oceans
So decided to set up defensive measures in small
Parts of our lands just to keep the ghosts
Off our backs*

*Then things REALLY got nice
That was the start of this New Nation as we know it
People—yellow, brown, black and red—going back and forth,
Or settling, exchanging wisdom and gifts,
We joined our lands together
We had so much to share with each other*

*So when the ghosts came crawling with their crosses to our shore
We sent 'em south
Burdened down with their monstrosities of war
Figurin' to let 'me take out their primitive aggressions in the jungles*

*You know their funny books
 About how some Washington drowned in the Amazon crossing there
 With a cannon on a canoe
 While how some dude named Boone got chewed up by piranhas
 While wrestling a python.
 Those ghosts were CRAZY!
 SHIT!
 They tried to carve their faces on a mountain and then they fell flat
 On their collective ass*

*And about that time we got hip that some of our best brothers were
 Settled there anyway, really doing beautiful in the jungle
 So we got together and tossed the ghosts back to their land we call
 OKLAHOMA
 You KNOW what that means in our language*

*So if you still see some of those ghosts around,
 TAKE PITY
 HELP 'EM OUT
 It's our duty
 They knew they were foolish and called us in to give them color and
 Culture,
 So they too could flourish
 TAKE PITY
 Couple of more generations and they'll be colored, and together,
 And beautiful like the rest of us
 And you KNOW that's how it's supposed to be!*

3. I was known as “Fred Houn” until the fall of 1988 when I legally changed my name to Ho, phoneticizing a problematic spelling of Houn, which was always pronounced “Ho.”

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