

THE **REVOLUTION** OF ART ACTIVISM

By Ron Scott

The Black Arts Movement took a radical turn in America as a result of the civil rights movement, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, and the Black Power Movement. During 1960-1970 artists became creative warriors expressing politically engaged work that explored black culture, its roots and historical experience. It was time to define the world in their own terms not through the white perceptions. *Time* magazine (1994) described the Black Arts Movement as the “single most controversial moment in the history of African-American literature—possibly in American literature as a whole.”

The most significant art movement group was formed in Harlem by 50 artists calling themselves The Twentieth Century Creators, serving as a blueprint for black artists. Some of the members; Abdullah Aziz, Taiwo DuVall, Gaylord Hassan, Bill Howell, Otto Neals, Ademola Olugebefola, Okoe Pyatt and Abdul Rahman regrouped, in 1965 as The Weusi Artists Collective. They became the pace-setters for much of the cultural movement in Harlem, and the rest of the country. The tradition of black art is seen in the new art galleries sprouting up in Harlem, as some former members like Olugebefola and Harlem artist Grace Williams continue the Weusi philosophy.

In 1968 The Studio Museum in Harlem became the premier museum dedicated to African American art, an institution that grew out of the Black Arts movement. The development of Black theater

groups with ties to community organizations and its issues were a direct result of the Black Arts movement. Black theaters served as the focus of poetry, dance, and music performances in addition to formal and ritual drama. The most important figure in the Black Arts Movement is Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones). Following the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) made a symbolic move from Manhattan’s Lower East Side to Harlem, where he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS). By 1970 Black Arts theaters and cultural centers were active throughout America. The New Lafayette Theatre (Bob Macbeth, executive director, and Ed Bullins, writer in residence), Barbara Ann Teer’s National Black Theatre, Woodie King’s New Federal Theater, Roger Furman’s New Heritage Theater, and Frank Silvera Writers Workshop under the direction of Garland Thompson led the way in Harlem. These groups are responsible for generations of theater-goers, as well as giving aspiring actors an opportunity to perfect their craft. AUDELCO (Audience Development Committee, Inc.)

was established in 1973 by the late Vivian Robinson to honor excellence in Black Theatre through presentation of Vivian Robinson/AUDELCO Recognition Awards. The awards were created to promote “recognition, understanding and awareness of the arts. Poets in the Black Arts Movement include: Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ed Bullins, Jayne Cortez, Nikki Giovanni, Lorraine Hansberry, Gil-Scott Heron, Maulana Ron Karenga, Larry

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Neal, Ishmael Reed, Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Quincy Troupe, and John Alfred Williams among others. Black writers moved to form the Harlem Writers Guild, led by John O. Killens, which included Maya Angelou, Jean Carey Bond, Rosa Guy, and Sarah Wright among others.

Young dancers pursued their dreams through such dance companies at Dianne McIntyre's *Sounds in Motion*. The Alvin Ailey Dance Company, founded by Ailey in 1958 changed the perception of American modern dance. The company, now celebrating its 50th anniversary, continues to move forward. Dance Theatre of Harlem the first black classical ballet company was founded in Harlem, New York City (1969), by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook. The company's traveling ensemble continues its tradition. James

Brown reflected the movement with songs like "Say It Loud, I'm Black and Proud," Sly and the Family Stone's "Stand," and "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey." Max Roach recorded *Freedom, NOW!*, Miles Davis introduced jazz-fusion on "Bitches Brew," "On The Corner" and "Jack Johnson," as musicians like pianist Don Pullen, Billy Bang, David Murray, Cecil McBee and Sam Rivers forged a free-flowing sound called *avant-garde*.

Today activism is entrenched in the community with such musicians as Craig S. Harris and Bill Saxton, and the New Amsterdam Music Association, as well as the Harlem Arts Alliance. The Black Arts movement opened the door for blacks to define their culture through creative self-expression.