

Amiri Baraka Entertains in SF: “Lowku” versus Haiku, Revives Fillmore Spirit

by

Lee Hubbard and Marvin X

Wearing a black suit with a kente cloth tie, Amiri Baraka, celebrating his 75th birthday, was at ease in the center stage at Yoshi's jazz club in San Francisco, as the Howard Wiley trio played. The crowd featured a cross section of racially mixed older men and women who remembered the golden days when Baraka was one of the most controversial poets in the country during the 1960's and 1970's. It was during this time he was one of the main forces behind the Black Arts Movement, which was a reaffirmation on black culture and aimed to change the cultural and social conditions of African American people. In his performance with the Howard Wiley trio playing background music to go along with his poetry which lasted roughly an hour and twenty minutes, Baraka displayed a level of feistiness and political awareness in his works. He performed several of his poems including Newark, which talks about Baraka's hometown and the love he has for the city in its bright and dark time. He named this form of poetry as “Lowku”, a “take off of Haiku, but for the illiterate.” His show was broken into two acts and after performing for forty minutes and taking a fifteen minute break; he came back with some of his most political and up-tempo poems of the evening. “Undirected, misdirected/be unknown to the most except the host,” said Baraka in the poem Funk lore. Baraka also performed Play Dat, which was performed over a fast up-tempo jazz beat. This poem was dedicated to poets John Hicks and Hilton Rueves, who Baraka spent time with before they died. He received a standing ovation. He ended the evening with, “Somebody Blew up America,” which was based on the 9/11 bombings and his interpretation of terror.

This poem caused the then Governor at the time Jim McGreevy to tell Baraka he had to apologize because Baraka was the poet laureate of the state. Baraka refused. The practice of naming poet laureates was ended, which Baraka joked, made him the last poet laureate of New Jersey. Baraka's electric performance showed the power of words. And the performance by the Howard Wiley Trio was equally as solid as they played tunes from Ornette Coleman, “Kansas City” by Count Basie and several other classical jazz tunes.

Earlier in the day, Baraka conducted a book reading and was on a panel discussion with various writers including Cecil Brown, Dr. Dorothy Tsuruta, Jimmy Garrett, Abdul Sabry, Ptah Allah El, Rev. George Murray, and Marvin X who had invited Baraka to the bay area, and others at the Fillmore Heritage Center. His life and legacy was later celebrated at his 75th birthday celebration at the Lush Life Center, which brought back many of the old poets and writers to celebrate his career and writing. "This is bringing back the old Fillmore spirit," said Marvin X. His event at the Media Center opened with a welcome only Charlie Walker can deliver. Then the invocation by Suzzette Celeste, picking up on Charlie's plea for black folks to "get involved and do something for self."

Various poets and writers gave a two-minute praise of AB, including Black Dialogue magazine founder Arthur Sheridan, San Francisco poet emeritus devorah major; the mother of Bay Area journalism, Jerri Lange, Wanda Sabir, Ayodele Nzingha, Zahieb Mwongozi and other poets. The poet segment was facilitated by Ayodele Nzingha, who read a recently penned poem entitled Reasons. Musicians Augusta Collins and Rashidah Mwongozi provided a musical interlude.

After Duke Williams gave the libation, in came a procession of the Linda Johnson African dancers, including Linda, Raynetta Rayzetta and Rashidah, with drummer Val Serrant Tumani. The dancers praised Amiri Baraka at his feet. Queen Rev. Mutima Imani facilitated a blessing ritual inviting everyone to send Baraka love by saying together, "We honor you and respect you."

The dance segment was too much for event organizer Marvin X who was so moved with emotion he broke into tears of joy and was unable to speak for a moment as he began moderating the panel discussion Black Studies and Community. He called up James W. Sweeney who introduced Baraka with a praise poem.

Baraka talked of his work in black studies, including the time he came to San Francisco State University to help establish black studies, after an invitation from BSU leader Jimmy Garrent, who spoke on the panel. Rev. George Murray presented his views, stressing his spiritual work in the community after going to jail during the '68 strike. An English instructor, George became minister of education of the Black Panther Party. Abdul Sabry, a BSU founder, also editor of *Black Dialogue* (a key publication of the Black Arts Movement), stressed the Islamic roots of black studies.

Ptah Allah el, a former Black Studies major, coined the time "Black Studies went to college and never came home." He read a poem on that theme, then introduced Dr. Dorothy Tsuruta of the Black Studies department. She tried to explain the good black studies has done the last forty years but encountered static from her fellow panelists who disagreed with her, citing the failure of black studies to create community projects. Bernard Stringer, a BSU and strike leader, had told Marvin X that black studies lasted one year in the community. Afterwards, reaction sat in and has continued to this day.

UC Berkeley professor Cecil Brown, author of *Hey, Dude, What Happened to My Black Studies Department*, spoke on the origin of the student movement in the south with the protests and sit-ins. He told how the student struggle was throughout the Bay Area, California and the nation. He cited the UC Berkeley student strike. Marvin X was himself the target of Gov. Ronald Reagan's attack on black intellectuals. The same time Reagan attempted to remove Angela Davis from UCLA, he moved on Marvin X at Fresno State University, 1969.

Marvin X said told the audience this event is just the beginning of dialogue on critical issues in our community. The Jazz Heritage Center director, Peter Fitzsimmons was so elated with the turnout that he told Marvin X he has the green light to plan future events at the Jazz Heritage Center and Lush Life Gallery. Marvin X thanks the following for their support: Paul Cobb, Gene Hazzard, Adam Turner, Walter Riley, Rev. George Murray, Terri Collins, Jimmy Garrett,

Christine Harris, Norman Brown, Dr. J Vern Cromartie, Suzzette Celeste, HuNia, Thomas Simpson, Wade Woods, Aubrey Labrie, Duke Williams, Geoffrey Grier, James W. Sweeney, Mutima Imani, Davey D, Eugene Allen, Paradise, Charlie Walker, Khalid Waajib, Emory Douglas, Wanda Sabir, Michael Lange, Duane Deterville, Earl Davis, Ken Johnson, Renee, Leon and Carolyn Teasley.