

## Spirit House, The New Fortress

In a few years I had been kicked out of Howard University for not caring about my pre-med courses, for which in shame I then joined the air force only to get undesirably discharged from that visionary operation. Visionary? Because I was charged with being a communist, when actually I thought I was a Buddhist. The Communist thing didn't occur till many years later! But I did learn some things in those two encounters. At Howard, the HBCU, I learned that we, the Afro American people had only the limitations of an abusive neo slavery society that we were able to do whatever in the world existed, for Good or evil, as any other person in the world, except for the psychological and profit enabling prisons created and maintained by the race freaks.

In the service, where I sent poetry out to every great reactionary academic journal only to get them returned so fast I was sure they could not have been read. And where, even as an Airman Second class, Lower Left gunner in a B-36 I became the Base night Librarian who ordered all the books and records, making it one of the great libraries in Strategic Air Command, as we taught ourselves, we clutch of 6 or 7 multinational airmen would be intellectuals the pitch and reach of Western culture, night after night from Hardy to Kafka, from Gregorian chants to Berg. But anyway got thrown out the Error-Farce, as I called it, for being excessively self-educated.

Discharged back home but a quick migrant to NY's Lower East Side, much more primitive than it is now, and fell into clutches of the Beat Generation even though I still walked around in grey flannel and tweed with paisley ties, imagine. But Ginsberg, plus Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Ed Dorn were my closest literary inspirers, after the initial self-medication of Garcia Lorca in College. Plus Brecht, Apollinaire, A Season In Hell. I had break throughs in poetry and drama, books published Plays done. The avant garde success story. But what drove me out of the Rah Rahs of Greenwich Village was the murder, one Saturday, Feb 21, 1965 of Malcolm X, announced to me by a brother running into this book party I was at the 8<sup>th</sup> St book Store, "THEY JUST KILLED MALCOLM!" he was screaming. The next month I had moved to Harlem and set up The Black Arts Repertory Theater, on W130th St and Lenox. Where we began to go out into the streets of Harlem seven days a week with four trucks, one with Music, another with Paintings, the other two with Drama and Poetry, this went on the entire year of 1965. But this was just a preface to the founding of Spirit House.

Most of what I just related is a light scan of the convoluted exactness any detailed discussion of what I had actually done and been through those years since going away to school, the air force, New York's downtown bohemia and Harlem activism. But now, the Black Liberation movement had moved into a higher gear.

I came back to Newark the last day of 1965. Home, a few days, then I found a house on Stirling street, just above downtown Newark, where the interior neighborhoods began to unfold. It was an old three story building, now long gone. I moved in and had it painted light green, with details of red and green, like the flag of a Black nationalist movement. It was to be a site for poetry readings, a theater, a place to hold discussions formal and otherwise and a general

gathering site . It soon became all those things. I had left my first wife and children behind in Greenwich Village when I moved to Harlem. Why, back to Newark. Internal conflict inside the Black Arts organization, which caused it to splinter and I was momentarily sick of the chaos and conflict even though we had done historic work in creating a Black Arts Movement that quickly spread across the country, with Black Arts theaters opening in Detroit, Chicago, Oakland. The Spirit House in Newark was actually a continuation of that work and another organization produced by that trend.

Spirit House was a Black Nationalist operation, as even the painting of the house testified. And as word of its founding and work spread, it became a destination site for young people from across the country. One important reason for the steady expansion of the theater's attraction was a position I accepted late in 1966 to go to San Francisco State to head up a program I called The Black Communication Project, which organized students mainly associated with State's Black Student Union to put together a traveling theater company which would move up and down the west coast bringing black theatrical performances to various venues, schools and public spaces.

The key aspect of this was my meeting the activists who had pulled together Black Arts West, in Oakland, principally playwrights Ed Bullins and Marvin Jackman who later became Marvin X. This group brought activists from Oakland and San Francisco to swell our company, as actors, stage hands, technicians, propagandists. We developed a repertory that featured plays by Bullins, X, Dorothy Ahmad, Ben Caldwell, LeRoi Jones and the Chairman of the BSU, Jimmy Garrett.

It was the premier performances of some of the plays and of the actors as well. Bullin's "How Do You Do" had been done before in the Bay area, and X's "My Old Man" but Jones' "Mad Heart", Ahmad's "Papa's Daughter" was not only a premiere but saw the initial performance by Danny Glover, as an actor, after he was talked into becoming an actor by Jones, who saw him hanging around the group's rehearsals "digging the babes" as he put it. Jones invited him to "do something for the people." And he began. It also marked the 1st performance of a play that had been done at the Black Arts Theater, in New York, and at the Spirit House, "The First Militant Preacher", by Ben Caldwell.

So this project drew some of the principal actors to the East and to Spirit House. Actress, Rosita Broadus (Furaha) was one of the first to come East. She became an actress with the Spirit House Movers and Players, our company's 1st name, later "and players" was dropped. (The theater was up the street from an actual household moving company.) Carl Boissiere was another Black Arts West actor to join the Spirit House. He was featured in the play, "A Black Mass," which was written in Harlem, but 1st performed at Newark's Proctors theater with Broadus, Boissiere, and Sylvia Jones who was later to become LeRoi Jones 2<sup>nd</sup> wife, who became Amina Baraka, to Jones' Imamu Amiri Baraka, name given them by the Imam (Heesham Jabber) who buried Malcolm X.

The theater and poetry performances were one aspect of Spirit House, but the House' very existence inside the Newark community brought changes to its function. We changed the name

of the city to its original charter name, New Ark. This is what the English Christians who settled the city called it, it meant the same thing, but very different, for us. Since we intended it to function as that, a New Ark for us, carrying and caring for a new crew of settlers.

We began to organize within the community. We found out the children couldn't read and moved to change that. We went into the local elementary school, Robert Treat, and began agitating for change in how they were educating. I wrote a large treatise, "Education In Newark." The next step was 'The African Free School', my wife Amina organized, using our Spirit House as the first site, and gathering the neighborhood children as the initial students. The school would also expand in the next expansion of the Spirit House itself.

The next step was the political energization of what the House was to do. The emphasis on the Arts gradually changed. Though the Movers still traveled to various venues even other cities performing. But internally we made alliance with political organization, The United Brothers who were intent on changing the politics of the city itself. Jones' trip to the West coast had brought changes to the Spirit House, principally the influence of Ron Karenga, "Maulana" when Jones visited Los Angeles for what Karenga called, "The First Afro American Wedding" a feature of his organization "US" (as opposed to "Them").

US was organized as a "Kawaida" organization, which Karenga defined as a mixture of Tradition and Reason, using a neo African dress, Swahili language and some utilization of African custom as method and form of organizing and organization. Jones brought these back to Newark and the Spirit House organization began to be shaped by this influence.

There were many twists and turns, unities and struggle in the further development of what had been the Spirit House. What had provoked the emphasis on politics were the times themselves. The King led Civil Rights Movement had raised the Afro American struggle for equal rights to new heights and 50 years later 1963 is being celebrated for The March on Washington and Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech, (Aug, '63) but it now must be celebrated as the year Black people had reached that point of collective consciousness that could collectively respond to Dr. King's brilliant metaphor that "America has given the Negro people a bad check!"

Yet fewer people realize that just a month later, (Sept 63) the Klan put a bomb in the 16<sup>th</sup> St. Baptist Church, in Birmingham, presumably to intimidate the freedom marchers and killed four little black girls. (One bomber was convicted 14 years later) To show the murderous contempt some Americans had for the Black freedom struggle. (Now they will even shut down the government!) We remembered an earlier bombing in 1958 after the success of the King led boycott of Montgomery, Alabama's segregated buses. Klan members blew up Dr. King's home. When Black people responded by showing up in front of King's house, with rifles held over their heads asking, "Dr. King, What shall we do?" King responded by saying, "If any blood be shed, let it be ours!" MY generation, though we came later to respect and love Dr. King thought, "Oh No! It ain't gonna be like that.

In 1967, Newark long writhing under the rule of straight out racist rule in which, as the courts would point out later, 1 % of the city budget was given to The Mob every year. The

Addonizio administration openly stopped a Black Cornell graduate from getting the post as Secretary of the board of Education, this post going to one of Hughie's cronies. The Newark police busted into a Muslim Dojo, a karate school, broke the place up and arrested all the students. At the same time, issuing plans to build a medical school of 155 acres which would annihilate the city's black community. We found out the largest medical school in the country was Johns Hopkins 2 ½ acres.

The broadening political motives of the old Spirit House were confirmed by our creating the Committee for Unified Newark, named by Karenga when he came here to advise us. CFUN still had the neo African look of the Spirit House, but we had begun to organize smaller United Front Organizations to discuss community problems and try to find solutions.

But the overwhelming 1st problem on any of our lists was Police Violence. During this period the police allegedly stopped a taxi driver, Frank Smith and beat him. The rumor was that he had been killed. 'This wasn't true though we and CORE director , Bob Curvin demonstrated with others in front of the 18<sup>th</sup> Ave Police precinct. The last time we demonstrated, among rising rumors of public outrage at the most recent example of police brutality, by the time I walked back to the Spirit House after this demonstration, young kids ran around the corner screaming "They throwing rocks on Springfield Ave!"

And that was very true. The 1967 Rebellion had begun. (Notice I did not say Riot!) A couple of us rode up Springfield Ave to see what was going on. By the time we got there the shooting had started. Windows had been broken out up and down Springfield Ave, from the shops and stores. The rebellion lasted almost a week, at the end 26 dead, 725 wounded, 1500 jailed (of which I and my 2 friends were numbered) 10 million dollars property damage !

We stayed out too late, even stopping to pick up a brother shot in the leg by the Police and took him to Martland hospital. Later he was a key witness in my trial. Since my friends and I were arrested later that evening as we had turned the car around to head home. We saw the red lights flashing, and we were stopped pulled from the VW van and I was beaten, head split open, teeth loosened. I believe the police wd have killed me except for the people in an apartment building who were witnessing the beating and started hollering and throwing things. The police screaming at me as they beat my head. "Yes, we are the devil!"

This last outrage meant that indeed they did know who they were intent on killing and when they stopped, me bleeding all over them and the police car, they didn't take me to jail, but to police headquarters to Spina's office, after they tried to drive a knee into my testicles, Spina adding the d-movie menace , "We got you!" I said with the same cinematic swagger, "But I'm not dead"

The funniest part of this part of the caper was that the police refused to admit they had arrested me. Although my new wife, Amina had literally run up to the hospital, in her bare feet, when she heard from one the witnesses from the block that they had me and were beating me. She found me handcuffed to a wheel chair, a black policeman telling her she better leave or they would start beating her! A wild scene, that turned deeply humorous when my wife called Allen Ginsberg in New York, to tell him they were not admitting I was in jail. Ginsberg, ever

resourceful, called Jean Paul Sartre, in Paris, who called the Newark Police demanding to have information on my arrest. They responded a day or so later, saying they had arrested Everett Jones, a laborer, for possession of two guns!

But all this signaled a deep intensification of our political work and struggles. After solitary confinement, a week or so at Trenton prison, I had a trial, defended by the great Newark lawyer, Raymond Brown, whose concluding speech in my defense was a paraphrasing of Mark Anthony's speech at Caesar's funeral. And I was acquitted.

You can see by now that any deep analysis of what went on at Spirit House and the organizations that developed from it would take a book. But the proper ending of this period should be The Black & Puerto Rican Convention, the mutual Defense Pact between the Black and Puerto Rican Communities signed by Ramon Rivera, local head of the Young Lords and Amiri Baraka, Chair of CFUN, sanctioned by Felipe Luciano National Chair of the Young Lords, (objected to by the local north ward War Lord, Anthony Imperiale who sent a letter to the Governor asking was this legal) all of which became the sharp notes opening the campaign for the first black Mayor, Kenneth Gibson, which CFUN led. Our great victory in that election, and how we danced in the middle of Broad St that night, with a crowd including Jesse Jackson, who flew in that night. Gibson was the first Black mayor of a major northeastern city. But there is so much more to this tale, leading up right to right now with Amina and when our 2<sup>nd</sup> son Ras Jua Al Aziz Baraka, Ras Baraka, is the leading candidate running for Mayor of Newark today. The Past is always Preface! And if you can't vote you can give money!!

Amiri Baraka 10/14/13