

Where the Call Needs to Be Heard

Haki R. Madhubuti

At the time of this interview, the downstairs offices for Third World Press did not have air conditioning, and when I arrived, the whir of fans sounded like the inside of an airplane. In the hallway, a framed print by Romare Bearden warped dramatically from years of humidity. The receptionist said that Mr. Madhubuti would be down in a few minutes. I opened my shirt a bit and prepared for an uncomfortable afternoon. But shortly after his appearance, those concerns disappeared: Madhubuti's expansive office upstairs wasn't at all humid, and his demeanor—direct, friendly, open—let me know conversation would not be strained.

In addition to displaying Third World Press publications and other books, his office featured a variety of art and artifacts, including a large, colorful painting of Madhubuti from the 1960s when he was known as Don L. Lee. Its prominent location almost demanded a response, although my commentary could have been more astute: "That's nice," I said. Haki pointed to the portrait and, in a half-disconnected tone, replied, "Yeah—look at old Don up there."

For most of his career, Haki Madhubuti has promoted the work of other writers, and in listening to him speak, it became clear that his generous spirit has been energized by his own inspiring mentors. Throughout



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the conversation, for example, he repeatedly mentioned the importance of Gwendolyn Brooks, at one point saying, "Ms. Brooks—well, Gwendolyn she's like a mother. That's how close we've become over the years."

Just prior to going to press—on December 3, 2000, almost exactly three months after the interview—he telephoned to say that Ms. Brooks had died. I stopped production of the journal so as to reprint several of his tribute poems to Brooks (he's written many), and to dedicate the issue to her memory. It gave the publication an inescapably elegiac tone, but I'm glad that during our conversation he could speak of her as he did.

Haki R. Madhubuti is the author of more than twenty books, including *GroundWork: New and Selected Poems*; *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?*; and *Yellow Black: The First Twenty-one Years of a Poet's Life*. His many honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as the Illinois Arts Council Award and the American Book Award. In 1969 he founded Third World Press, for which he remains publisher and chairman of the board. In 1969, he co-founded the Institute of Postsecondary Education/New Concept School, and in 1998, he co-founded the Berea Shabazz International Charter School.

The following reprinted material corresponds to works and themes raised during our conversation. The interview took place in Chicago Third World Press on September 1, 2000.

Don't Cry, Scream

for John Coltrane/ from a black poet/
in a basement apt. crying dry tears of "you ain't gone"
Don L. Lee / Haki R. Madhubuti

into the sixties
a trane
came/out of the
fifties with a
golden boxcar
riding the rails
of novation.
blowing

a-melodics
screaming,
screaming,
blasting—

driving some away,
(those paper readers who thought
manhood was something innate)

bring others in,
(the few who didn't believe that the
world existed around established whiteness & leonard berrstein)

music that ached.
murdered our minds (we reborn)
born into a neoteric aberration.

& suddenly
you envy the
BLIND man—

you know that he will
hear what you'll never
see.

your music is like
my head—nappy black/
a good nasty feel with
tangled songs of:

we-eeeeeeeeeeeee sing
WE-EEEEEEEEEEEEEE loud &
WE-BBBBBBBB EEEEEEEEEEE high
with
feeling

a people playing
the sound of me when
i combed it. combed at
it.

i cried for billie holiday.
the blues. we ain't blue
the blues exhibited illusions of manhood.
destroyed by you. Ascension into:

& that BLIND man
 i don't envy him anymore
 i can see his hear
 & hear his heard through my pores.
 i can see my me. it was truth you gave,
 like a daily shit
 it had to come.
 can you scream—brother? very
 can you scream—brother? soft
 i hear you.
 i hear you.
 and the Gods will too.

Are Black Musicians Serious?

(excerpt)
 Haki R. Madhubuti

The black musician's inability to deal with the economic and business side of their profession has ruled them ineffective in the world. This deficiency is not necessarily due to ignorance or stupidity of the economic and business world, but to the immediate priority of their music. In the end, their priority ends up being anti-music and anti-black. There is a saying among black musicians that is articulated many ways—"we make it and they take it." Who own the record companies? White people. Who own the major publications that write about music? White people. Who own all the clubs? White people. Who have authored the so-called "major" texts on black music? White people. Who are the major record distributors? White people.

However, at some point in a man's life, it becomes not enough to keep blowing hot air at the *man*; when do we as responsible people begin to critically assess the collective problem we face? After all, the white boy didn't force musicians to sign padded contracts—all he did was provide pen. We, ultimately, at some level have to admit failure in doing the necessary homework. From the concert hall to the basement "jazz" club from AM and FM radio to the airwaves of UHF and VHF; from record companies to record clubs; from the college concert to neighborhood jukeboxes—we have let Anglo-Saxons, Italians, and Jewish pimps dictate

to our people what they must hear and what they must buy. We have let them, in effect, define what "soul" music is....

The positive side of the whole black music disaster is that we have learned much from what little black music we've received. Most black writers/poets, known and unknown, have at some time or another given credit to black music for inspiration and direction. Black artists have, time and time again, used black music as a source for their growth and vision. Black music is the major impetus other than black life itself for the whole wealth of creativity that we possess. Black music is used at every level of human involvement in the black community.

Amiri

Haki R. Madhubuti

baraka
 "always
 come in a
 place
 later."
 rushin to catch words that came before him
 tho that don't much matter,
 him got his own words, music, dance, dramatics
 & bright ideas even if some of them used cars
 & don't work. but baraka works
 works harder than 15 men his age,
 da, da da, do who been around
 long enough to tell his time
 in places where people have tried to
 beat the beat & tempo out of his talk & walk.
 monk, trane & duke played secrets
 that saved him and us even if we didn't
 accurately hear their da da, doos
 baraka did, they spoke musically to him.
 he gave us his many languages and genius.
 his comin in time is gettin better & best & less late,
 even for this sage still makin up stories
 actin on his own stage & firing truthpoems
 that compel liars & politicians to exit early and often.

I don't think I could have done the work that I have—and been involved with many of the poets nationally—if music had not been a part of my life. In fact, we have published three musicians who are also poets: Gil Scott-Heron, Mari Evans, and Kahil El'Zabar.

FEINSTEIN: As a poet, you're probably best known for the poetry collection *Don't Cry, Scream*.

МАДНУВУТТ: Probably so—as Don L. Lee, yes. Over its life, and it is still in print, *Don't Cry, Scream* has sold close to half a million copies. We never hear of these kind of sales in the United States. I understand that it was not unusual in the former U.S.S.R. for poets like Yevgeny Yevtushenko to sell in the millions.

FEINSTEIN: The title poem to your collection is driven by the music of John Coltrane.

МАДНУВУТТ: Absolutely. And all of that plays into where I'm at today. John Coltrane was a man of integrity more than anything else. Obviously, his music drove me. But for me, he set a standard, set a bar, that a lot of other musicians had not done. Because, indeed, I was influenced by Lee Morgan, Freddie Hubbard, and many of the other trumpet players of the time, but John Coltrane had a spiritual side of him and I think he was on a different mission than the other musicians of his time. And that's how that poem came out.

When I was writing *Don't Cry, Scream* [in the late 1960s], I lived in an apartment about the size of my desk over there and I shared it with other animals. The only luxury I had was music. I didn't have money to go to clubs and things like that, but I would buy many of my records secondhand. My books, too—everything. I grew up in secondhand stores; I grew up in used books stores; I grew up in Salvation Army stores. So it was not a problem for me to go into dusty bins. My personal collection of albums from the '60s and '70s—and I really started buying a lot in the '80s—[totals] about six thousand albums [I'm still trying to decide what I'm going to do with them.] So, yes. The music was critical, crucial.

FEINSTEIN: What about the politics of Coltrane's music? That poem ["Don't Cry, Scream"] was published in '69, within a year of dozens and dozens of John Coltrane poems—which has a lot to do with his death in '67, but more with his music.

МАДНУВУТТ: Right.

FEINSTEIN: So many of those poems interpret his music as political statements related to Black Nationalism.

МАДНУВУТТ: Right. It was highly unlikely to be a black musician coming

out of the '40s and '50s and not be political. The black musicians lived in legal apartheid in the United States. John Coltrane had experienced pain and rejection like most black people. However, it is indeed the artist who must try to transcend one's own suffering in order to paint a picture of a better world. Yes, we hear black suffering in his music, but when he left Miles Davis to organize the Coltrane Quartet—with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, and Elvin Jones—his music sounded like what Albert Ayler called "a visit from another planet," noting that his music was deep peace and spiritual.

FEINSTEIN: Why do you think Coltrane himself shied away from talking about politics?

МАДНУВУТТ: I think he reached a level in his life [in the late '60s] that he truly became himself. He was born in 1926, and by '66 he was just forty years old, which is still young for an accomplished artist.

I no longer go on marches or take part in much street demonstrations. For me, the mission is to write as well as I can, and to build this company [Third World Press], and to build our schools [Institute of Positive Education/New Concept School and Betty Shabazz International Charter School]. Three missions. (My children are pretty much grown now.) For Trane . . . I mean, you grow up in the music community, you see a lot of death, you definitely see a lot of poverty—poverty of spirit, poverty of the material—and you get to a point in your life when you say, "I may not have that much time." Whether he knew that he was ill or not doesn't really matter. You just know that what you see around you is not going well. I think he had moved into another realm of spirit, another realm of knowledge. His knowledge base had increased tremendously. Alice Coltrane obviously was a big part of his life. And I think he thought, "Now I've got to concentrate totally on this music." And he did.

When I heard his music, I heard that very spiritual side. At the same time, I heard anger—but the anger seemed to be a mature anger, saying, "We've got to deal with the problems, but they've got to be dealt with in a way in which more people are not hurt." This is very important, because after I really got into Trane, my whole philosophy changed: "How do we move this community?" Prior to Trane, I was more "anti": anti this, anti that. And when I started seriously listening to Coltrane's music, and reading a lot more outside of my culture, I realized that was not the way to go. I began to concentrate on: "What are we *for*?" Define what you're for, and then do the thing that's not expected of poets: Try to build it.

And that's when I hooked up with Margaret Burroughs and Chart Burroughs at the DuSable Museum [of African American History in Chicago; hooking up with Dudley Randall, who was my first publisher, and who passed about two weeks ago [August 5, 2000]; started Third World Press [in 1967]; and in '69, started the Institute of Positive Education. And I began to write about what we could do. I move away from what I consider to be very boisterous rhetoric to ideas that work.

I think that's what Coltrane was doing in his music: He was moving out toward ideas that inspired. That's how I felt, and that's how the poem came to be. And that's why I think he remains one of the most important musicians to come out of the twentieth century, or any century. His music will live and endure. He was so far ahead of everybody else that when Impulse! finally released *Transition* and *Sun Ship* in 1972—they'd been put on tape in 1965—some people thought that it was still alive because his music was so fresh and innovative.

The Coltrane Quartet was the group all serious musicians listened to and copied. Coltrane reinvented the sound of the saxophone. Most saxophone players incorporated the licks of John Coltrane. The great Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp quickly came to mind.

FEINSTEIN: Who would you say are some of the strongest writers to incorporate jazz into their work?

MADHUBUTI: Baraka would be close to the top of the list. Quincy Troup, Eugene Redmond. Sister out of New York—Jayne Cortez. Sonia Sanchez. I think music has influenced them a great deal, especially Jayne Cortez. She's just marvelous, what she does with the music. Ntozha Shange, also; she's very influenced. Michael Harper has that very important poem, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane." Ishmael Reed is also very good. He's close to Baraka in his use of musical motif. A lot of people don't know that because he's primarily known for his fiction. Askia Touré and Kalamu ya Salaam are master poets who incorporate music in their work.

FEINSTEIN: Reed's fiction is infused with jazz, too.

MADHUBUTI: Oh yeah. He's on it, as is Al Young, Clarence Major, Lucille Clifton, and A. B. Spellman. Larry Neal and Sherley Anne Williams are poets who helped to set new standards in musical poetry.

FEINSTEIN: Why do you think they've incorporated the music successfully?

MADHUBUTI: Well, most of them are still alive and still functioning. Coming out of the '60s, you know, there were a whole lot of poets

like Askia Touré, that hit the scene, but very few of us are still around. They may still be alive, but they stopped producing. But those I mentioned, with the exceptions of Larry Neal and Sherley Anne Williams, are still going very strong, and all of them realized the developmental aspects of good music. The two oldest arts are music and dance, and most black poets and writers understand rhythm and the source of rhythm: The beat, or meter, is music.

I think that listening to Trane, Miles, Louis Armstrong, Duke, Billie Holiday, Bird, Quincy Jones, Shepp, Wynton Marsalis, J. J. Johnson, Ella, Nancy Wilson, and hundreds of others may not be enough to satisfy one's intellectual demands. Over the last twenty-nine years or so, there has been a sizeable body of literature on black music published. Baraka's *Blues People* and *Black Music* [published under the name LeRoi Jones] are excellent. *Miles: The Autobiography* by Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, *Jazz People: As Serious as Your Life* by Valerie Wilmer, *I Put a Spell on You* by Nina Simone, *Coltrane: A Biography* by Dr. C. O. Simpkins, and *Mingus/Mingus: Two Memoirs* by Janet Coleman and Al Young are all serious books on the lives of black musicians and their music. Two excellent books on the cultural history of black music are *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* by Nelson George and *What the Music Said* by Mark Anthony Neal.

FEINSTEIN: You've publicly attacked the quality of recent African American literature anthologies because of important voices that you feel have been omitted. Is Touré among those writers?

MADHUBUTI: Yes, he'd be among them, and Redmond. And Jayne [Cortez]; she's left out of most of them. Sterling Plumpp, Angela Jackson, Julia Fields, Kalamu ya Salaam, Samuel Allen, Naomi Long Madgett, to name a few.

FEINSTEIN: [Henry Louis] Gates [Jr.]'s anthology [*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*] included just one of Jayne's poems. One poem.

MADHUBUTI: That was the main anthology I was talking about. Houston Baker was the person who did the part about the Black Arts Movement, and a lot of the material that he wrote about me was just totally inaccurate and unscholarly.

FEINSTEIN: What would you have changed?

MADHUBUTI: He made a statement about my feelings towards Jewish people in general, as if I'm anti-Semitic, and I'm not. I'm critical—not only of Jewish people but black people, Irish people, Polish people, and so forth. So I thought it was a very small statement.