

RAVENS

THE BLACK ROCK COALITION ARTS MAGAZINE

the  15th + 1st Anniversary
issue

**Sustaining
Self-Determined
Blackness**

writing
by

michael a gonzalez
maya maber
martha redbone
jon e edwards
honeychild coleman
david carter
darrell m mcneil

interview
with

gao
(of the muslims)
jahi sundance
aidan connors
(of the daybreaker)

photo
from

petra richterová
sally a. foxen-mcneil
earl douglas, jr.
laronda davis

MY FAMILY IS FROM THE DEEP SOUTH, TEXAS/LOUISIANA, BUT WE WENT TO HOLLYWOOD WHEN THE EMPLOYMENT EXPLOSION HAPPENED IN CALIFORNIA. I grew up in Los Angeles in a musical household, where music played seven days a week, 24 hours a day, all my life. Growing up in an artists' commune basically with a big family, big Southern family, I started listening to rock and roll as a kid. I knew that there was something different about my home compared to what I saw on TV. **Big Mama Thornton** was going on in my household. I just loved it. It's back in the day where AM radio was mixing up a **Sly Stone** and **Motown** with **Carole King**. It was just open. AM radio was playing most things all the time at the same time.

My parents were educators and artists. My people were all art people. They weren't necessarily in show business, but they were friends with show business people. The Southern family breakfast is a big thing, so it'd be **Little Richard** in the living room having grits at seven in the morning. One of my mom's closest friends was **Ella Fitzgerald**. She'd be over. I'm the youngest. I was told that before I came along **Dorothy Dandridge** was a close friend of my mom's. The Black entertainment world would come over to our house to get soul food and to get gumbo . . . **Papa John Creach**, the great violinist, every Christmas he would come by and bring his violin, and he would play for his Christmas dinner. Every Christmas.

Johnny Otis would come by, and **O.C. Smith**. There was just a lot of music and innovators in music. I got really hip to it at a very young age. I didn't even think it was weird at all these people, who were renowned musicians and entertainers were in my mom's living room, **Arthur Lee**, the singer-songwriter who fronted the group **Love**, was a cousin on my mom's side after he'd been out partying all night, he would show up with his people and basically pass out when they got there. Arthur invented the California sound before The Doors, but his behavior didn't allow him to follow through. Plus, he didn't want to go to Europe when everybody else went to Europe. He was part of the Sunset Strip scene.

I had one of the craziest things happen because my mother wanted me to be Arthur Lee's assistant. So I was riding around with Arthur—he was one of the craziest cats I ever met—that lasted about a week. Arthur pulled a gun on a fan while we were at a place called **Hong Kong Cafe** in downtown L.A. And he was playing a gig and I was his assistant. When I told my mom what Arthur had done, she said, "that's the end of your assistance."

Somehow, before I started being mentored by these out-of-control entertainers—Arthur Lee was one of the most pissed off cats I ever met—my mom thought it was a good idea for me to go to summer camp with **Sun Ra and his Arkestra**. I must've been 12 years old. I ended up on a bus for two or three weeks with Sun Ra Arkestra. I didn't know that they were the craziest jazz band in the world on some spaceland shit. I mean, everybody else had gone to camp and were learning Kumbaya and how to fish and I'm on a bus with 16 Black guys wearing capes. That was my summer camp.

PUNK ROCK KIND OF TOOK US

My parents didn't really want me to be involved in entertainment. They wanted me to be a lawyer or something like that, but it was what it was. As a kid, I knew that soul music moved the world. At least it moved my world.

I met **Stew** [Mark Stewart] and **Art Terry** in high school; Stew went to Hamilton High, and Art and I went to Fairfax, which was known for its performing arts. I ended up hanging with Stew because I was learning how to write lyrics. We made music. There was **Chuck Mosley** from **Faith No More**; we all learned to perform together in Art Terry's garage.

continued..

I had a fake ID, so I had a little juice. Also my family knew club owners. By the time I was 15, I could drive, and I was driving to nightclubs. We all started playing live and the club owners didn't know how old we were. They didn't know we were in ninth grade, tenth grade. My parents had a Seventies-style huge car that we could put the whole band and the equipment in, and we got booked at a college. They paid us what we thought was an astronomical amount of money. So we thought that that's how it was going to go. It took us another five years to actually ever get that kind of money again.

It was crazy. We were in high school and we had a band called **Pending Spectrums**, full band. And we just started writing. We all wrote, and then we all broke out and we did it a whole different way because punk rock kind of took us.

YARD DOG

I started performing in the clubs in California. And I realized that I loved what the punk rockers were doing. And I got to hang out with them, **Black Randy**, **The Germs**, **Siouxsie and the Banshees**. And I knew it was really rock and roll when I heard a Motown song and I'd hear it start off with a guitar. Or when **Tito Jackson** played *I Want You Back* and it started off with a rock and roll guitar. I mean, the Jacksons were one of the greatest rock and roll bands in the history of music. You look at the blues and all the cats out of Chicago and down South—I know white cats didn't start this shit.

I thought, "How do I survive in this? I'm outside of mainstream." I was like a yard dog; basically I had to stay outside in the yard always. So I got comfortable in the yard. So I knew when Stew and I, and Art and Chuck, we started getting, you know, little love from the record labels.

They had an epidemic that was going on in California and around the country with drugs. My parents let me leave home right out of my first year in college and go to New York; it was the beginning of the 1980s. **Jean-Michel Basquiat** was a real good friend of mine. When I first came to New York I gravitated to the East Village and Jean-Michel, who was living there at the time, he was the first cat that I met. It's because of my uncles—**Al Loving** and **Bill Hutson**—renowned artists. So they said "there is this young cat who wants to meet you that's your age."

And that's when I met the guys from **Tackhead** and all the original performers from the start of hip-hop, including **Fab Five Freddy**. I started gigging then. I had put together a sound that mixed punk rock with soul with my band the **Uptown Atomics**. We started gigging within a year. We had Art Terry, **Tarik El Hassan**, **Donald Gilbert**, **Gemini Hodge**, **Kevin B. Fabulous**, **Debra Novell**, Jean-Michel Basquiat. I was told I was too bourgeois and that I wasn't going to make it in New York.

THE BLACK ROCK COALITION

So we had something to prove. Next thing you know, we're playing at the **Mudd Club**. We didn't know anything about publicity. We were just kids doing our thing. And we were making a living on it. I was already about four or five years in the game and a cat named **Bevis Griffin** said, "There's this **Black Rock Coalition** starting a scene of uptown. So I went up there, with Bevis and I say "yeah, man, this sounds like me." So that's how I got tight with them and I started messing with them. I was already doing me.

I met BRC cofounder [writer, musician, and producer] **Greg Tate** in 1982. He wrote for **The Village Voice** so he was downtown. I'd have lunch with him and talk about culture and life. He became a brother to me. So then I met these cats and I started doing shows with them and being cool with them. I felt we were kindred spirits so let me get down with these cats. In a way, they were out in the yard, too.

Before the BRC, I had been to Europe performing. I had met **Chris Sullivan**, the owner of the **Wag Club** and there was this whole New Romantic thing. I got to hang out with the Carter family and **Johnny Cash**; they gave me some money so I wouldn't starve over in London. I was hanging out with **Elvis Costello**, in fact helping, with some lyrics over at the studio. I was doing that before I was in the **Black Rock Coalition**. All of us went from California over to Europe; I went to London and Stew went to Germany and the Netherlands. Art Terry went to Germany.



I had a residency at the Wag Club and I got with **Sony**, had a small deal with them. Then I met the **Black Rock Coalition** (shout out to **Bruce Mack** and **Jared Nickerson** and I went with them and we started rocking rooms, I'm one of the founding members and started rolling with them, and it was bliss while it happened and **Living Colour** got signed and **24-7 Spyz** got signed. And then they went to the West Coast and they got some cats like **Fishbone** and they assembled their army. And I'm like one of the generals, the original generals, you know.

FIRST RECORD DEAL WAS NOT A DEAL

You know how **James Baldwin** and other people of color were ex-patriots and fled to Europe. Well I always say I fled to Europe and then fled back.

With the Sony deal, I made the record and then the engineer, who was being paid well, said "Okay, you've done your job; you guys can go to sleep now I'll take care of the rest." And when I listened to the track the next day, they had airplanes flying through the track. And that's when I decided to not use producers on my records unless I personally chose them.

It got worse. The way they worked it, you would get this advance and you would actually have to pay back all the promotion. You'd have to pay for the secretaries. You had to pay for the meals. And that's one of the reasons I got kicked out of Europe, because I brought that up. The record label would feed me caviar and lobster tails on my dime. A 500-pound meal. But when I asked "Man, why don't you just give me the 500 pounds? I could eat for two weeks on that." They said that they couldn't write me off if they give me the cash.

I was young; they kicked me out, man. I had a record deal. And then they said, well, the president of the company wasn't going to sign the contract until they were ready and that I should go work at a fish and chip shop.

My family got me a ticket back to New York. I got on the plane the next day and basically I had no money at all. I didn't even have money to take the subway to my house. It was crazy.

I didn't have a record come out for 15 years after that. And what I did was I cleaned up the game, I got to my own name. I would sell tracks to TV shows and movies; that's where the money came from. I don't know what would happen if I hadn't gotten into the movie and television business. I wasn't in the Uptown Atomics anymore. I started working with **Mark Batson**, **Fred Cash**, **Donny McCaslin**, who was my horn section leader, **Kevin Johnson**, **Kenny Rampton** who has played with the **Lincoln Center Orchestra** for all these years; **Bob and Ken Kirschner**. We touched each other.

As far as getting paid, like I said, I'd rather have the money. So then the music executives said **JON E EDWARDS** is a trouble man. He's trouble because he's asking questions that entertainers don't need to be asking. That's just the nature of a business that we chose. As far as the question "how do we take back our music, as people of color"—I don't know the answer because how do we take back what we've always owned? We invented rock and we still got rock and roll. The original American music.