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RETURN TO THE EAST

BROOKLYN RECLAIMS THE BLACK ART FORM KNOWN AS JAZZ

BY ANDREW SCHROCK • PHOTOS BY BASIR MCHAWI

"What you're about to hear is not jazz, or some other irrelevant term we allow others to use in defining our creation, but the sounds that are about to saturate your being and sensitize your soul is the continuing process of nationalist consciousness manifesting its message within the context of one of our strongest natural resources: Black music. What is represented on these jams is the crystallization of the role of Black music as a functional organ in the struggle for national liberation... Alkebu-lan is the unfolding of this progress as music-meaning. It is sound-feeling."

—Weusi Kuumba, speaking on "Invocation" off *Alkebu-lan* on Strata-East

This spoken-word introduction amounts to a manifesto, reclaiming the Black art form known as "jazz" for use as a liberating, transportive vehicle. The eloquent description of it as a "functional organ" describes the role of sound within the East organization well. Music gets the blood pumping, makes it easier to digest messages, and sets the mind racing. If music is the medium, the message was a potent mix of unity and Afro-centrism. The East was founded in 1969 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, above all else, to educate. The East organization was born at the same time as the Uhuru Sasa Shule, or "Freedom Now School," encompassing it and serving many other purposes, such as being a center for political thought and a musical venue.

The East's origins can be traced to when the New York City Board of Education made a series of widely unpopular political maneuvers in the late '60s. In response, the community requested and for a short time gained political control of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district in 1967. Eventually this "experiment" came to a close as the board regained control, terming it a failure, but the community retained the idea that the African American majority required their own community-led educational system outside that of the public White-controlled system. In summer of 1969, the East organization was formally founded following several years of discussion and organization "between a group of astute high school students (the African American Student Association in and around Bedford-Stuyvesant and Fort Greene) and committed adults (African American Teacher's Association and community members) who would soon struggle to develop an appropriate institutional and cultural context for education for nationhood." (Konadu)

Kwasi Konadu's recent book, *Truth Crushed to the Earth Will Rise Again*, is the defining tome on the East. It details the complex workings of how the organization flourished for over a decade. The East and its primary location at 10 Claver Place in Brooklyn was not just a storefront or music hall, but a way of life. The Uhuru Food Cooperative was created as an alternative to unhealthy modern supermarkets, "Sweet East" served up African fare daily, Akibu Mkuu bookstore provided literature for studies, and the Mavazi Clothing Cooperative sold a range of African clothing and other goods. Konadu also discusses the numerous and varying political theories the center drew on to create a place of learning and culture. Special importance was placed on the example of Ghana, which was proving to be a viable independent nation under Kwame Nkrumah's leadership. Also prominent were the teachings of Malcolm X and the Kawaia doctrine of Maulana Karenga and the U.S. Organization. East co-founder Jitu Weusi describes it in his 1996 essay, "The East Legacy": "We never became hung up in organizational chauvinism. We attempted to learn from all groups and organizations. We also avoided intense ideological debates. Instead, we tried to find the useful aspects of all the philosophies vying for our attention during this tumultuous period."

The most predominant "useful" aspect of Afro-centric philosophy was Pan-Africanism; that is, that all people of African origin are brothers and sisters, equally responsible and worthy citizens of Africa. The doctrine was fully integrated into the group's life from the ground up. Following the requirement of *Ujima*, or collective work and responsibility, members of the East were expected to fulfill obligations according to their level of commitment and position. The



Gary Bartz performs at the East.

East's progressive tendencies were the antidote for ambivalence, which was particularly interesting to the younger generation who helped to found it. However, one criticism leveled at the organization as contributing to its eventual decline is that members were poorly paid. Being part of the organization necessitated such sacrifices, which seems at odds with the East's goal of providing a sustainable environment.

An article from the November 1971 issue of *Music Educators Journal* delves into the difficulties teaching European music to inner-city youth. Author Harry Morgan notes, "Music has become an important, and often crucial, component in the life stream of the black community. It is a potent social, political, and religious force." The inner-city teen connecting to their heritage through music was an idea with ample promise. Nationwide, schools were still in upheaval over school desegregation and coming to terms with their new identities. These ideas, intellectually appealing but implausible on the national level, were being put into practice in the East organization. They were answering the questions: What if the gap between traditional music venues and schools were fused? What if modern jazz, given the right environment, could be used as a way to connect and communicate?

Musical "happenings" started early on in the organization's history, in 1969, as "The Black Experience in Sound." It was the first venture of the fledgling organization, which gives some indication of the importance the members put on artistic expression. This music left not only several vibrant recordings, but also a striking visual archive. In



October 2004, an exhibition of East photographs taken by Basir Mchawi, Mensah Wali, and Ogundipe Fayomi was arranged at Yolele African Bistro. The exhibit was an attempt to "begin to set the record straight" about the East and the role it played. The trio was in a good position to do so. In addition to being a photographer, Mchawi was the second editor of the *Black News* magazine, the main communiqué for the extended East community, and Wali organized the weekly musical events. Their contribution is critical, as most of the show dates were not discussed or reviewed in written form, and are evidenced only by scant recordings, pictures, and firsthand accounts. What they have captured is a startling reminder of the depth of the East's pull, and how willing artists were to come play for days at a stretch. The posters advertising the happenings in a given month would be enough to send jazz buffs into a fit of envy. In the photos, Max Roach, Sun Ra, Sonny Rollins, Milford Graves, and Gary Bartz are captured with a sheen of sweat,



Milford Graves.

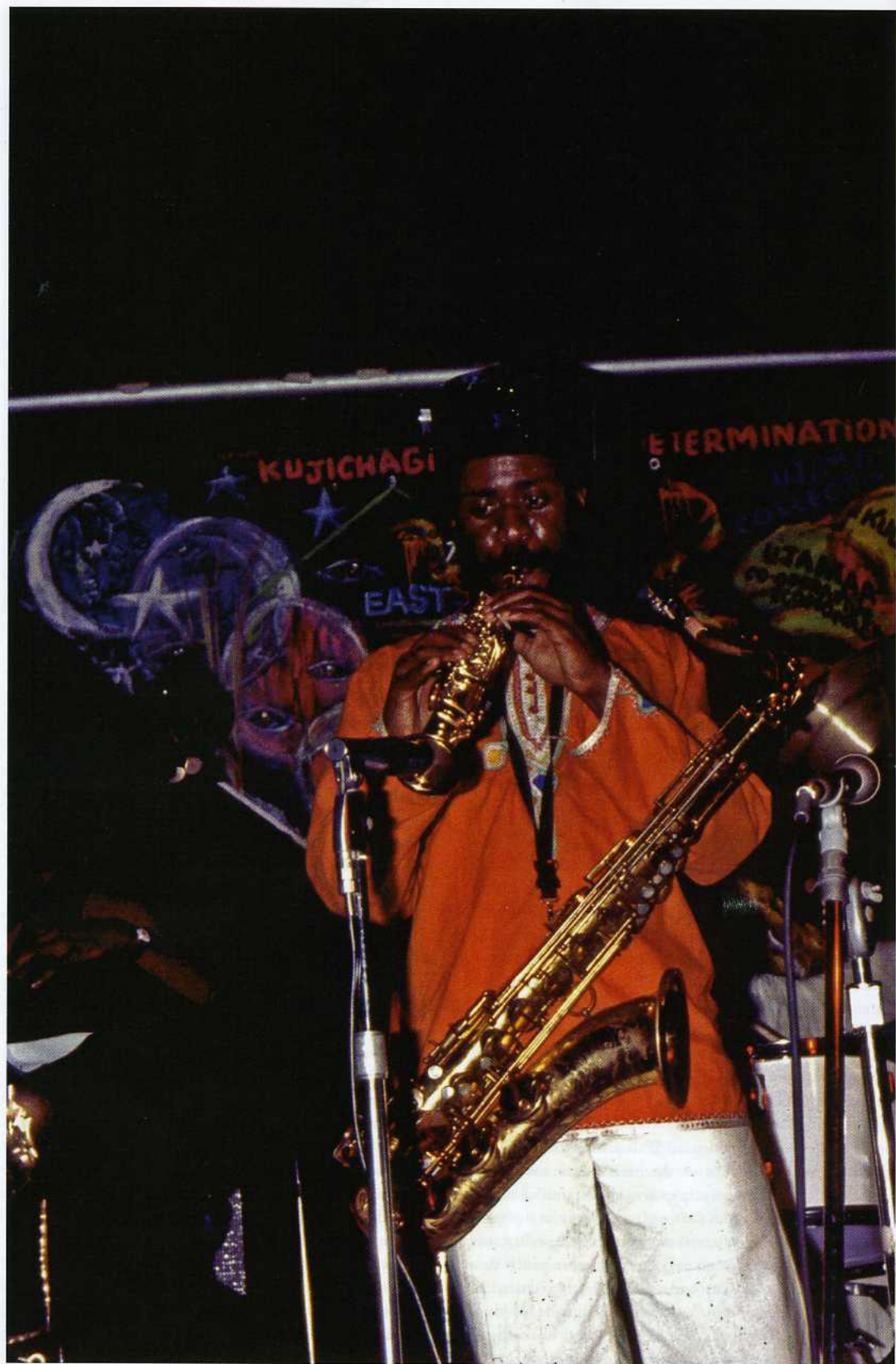
smiling, working instruments tirelessly against a backdrop of psychedelic colors and low ceilings. The photos were a silent reminder to the most vibrant and successful artistic endeavor the center founded, and a touchstone for Black musicians of New York who ushered in a new day for jazz.

The album *Alkebu-lan* on Strata-East, translating to "Land of the Blacks," is the most important related artifact, said to represent an accurate picture of musical life at the East. On this session, the songs were constructed from a fusion of African forms, what could be called various threads of modern "jazz," and pure improvisation. The track "No Words" required musician and non-musician participants alike to use their voices to "create" without the use of language. This kind of *mélange* was common during shows at the East but conspicuously absent from mainstream jazz of the time. The inner cover shows a tree of all the participants, as well as a list of the "Seven Principles" to "create a 'new' African personality in America in order for Africans to build and create in their best interest."

Of these principles, Mensah Wali puts *Kujichagulia*, or self-determination, as one of the most important. Other concepts of the seven principles would be familiar to the musicians as well in their struggles to make a living as musicians: *Ujima*, or collective work and responsibility, was familiar, as well as *Ujamaa*, or cooperative economics. Performers in New York City were quickly being required to rely on each other for their well being. Wali calls "producing their own recordings...one of the themes of the day." There was an almost universal need among musicians to

take charge of their own destinies and finances, and the call was certainly heeded. A complete list of independent music labels started up by musicians in the period would be extremely long but includes Charles Tyler's *Ak-ba*, Rashied Ali's *Survival*, Steve Reid's *Mustevic*, Billy Bang's *Anima*, Improvising Artists, Cadence, JCOA, and of course Charles Tolliver's popular Strata-East. Although the East and the Strata-East label didn't have a close formal relationship, thematically they were very similar. Many of the same players coexisted on recordings and in the physical location, picking up the center's "vibrations" and pursuing similar dreams for "evolution of this music."

From beginnings in Coltrane and Coleman, "free jazz" or "new thing" musicians had to band together. Their volatile and controversial sound led to a plethora of definitions, some of them misleading or derogatory terms created by critics: free jazz, avant-garde, "new thing," anti-jazz, etc. The East wasn't alone in rejecting the term "jazz." Similarly nixing traditional terminology, Archie Shepp put not too fine a point on it by saying, "If we continue to call our music jazz, we must continue to be called niggers. There, at least, we know where we stand." Yet, community feelings differed on the term. East veteran Rashied Ali, best known for succeeding Elvin Jones in Coltrane's band, felt that the term was malleable enough to not require a sudden break to alter the importance of the message. "I really don't think it matters what you call that music because it exists and it's here. I'm not trying to rename it anything," but, "if there's anything to be written about jazz, it should be stipulated



Multi-reedman Pharoah Sanders.



Sun Ra's vocalist, June Tyson.

that it's a Black art form."

Regardless, the East organization saw their music as a return to a visceral, multi-layered form of connection and knowledge transference. Mchawi remembers the period vividly as redefining music and performance: "We talked about 'inner-attainment' and 'edu-tainment.' So it was not just... to be happy and snap their fingers, but there was something more to it." East ventures often had multiple components, and the live events were no different. However spiritual, the economic side of the matter is that they were used as fundraisers for the school. Even a mere \$2-\$5 admission fee was enough to raise a profit and continue the series.

As Black musicians became politically aware and were exposed to nationalist sentiments, the terminology of the period seeped into their discussion, liner notes, and song titles. Frank Wright's seminal album on America is titled *Uhuru Na Umoja*. Another Mtume album with Herbie Hancock on Obe, called *Kawaida*, makes reference to the doctrine of Maulana Karenga and the U.S. Organization, which would serve as primary inspiration to the East in the mid-'70s. Even the name "The East" was conceived as a rejection of Westernized modes of thought and value systems.

It wasn't just a mutable musical style that attracted elder and neophyte African American performers alike. There was a growing disenchantment among professional musicians in New York City. Prime sources of musicians' frustration were their treatment by the scaffolding erected to support the "industry" of jazz entertainment—critics, record labels, and club owners. In the 1960s, most of the venues open to jazz—bars and clubs—were declining in

popularity, and a good number of the remaining ones were run by adamantly exploitative, anti-artist owners. The passing of so many original jazz spirits in the late '60s was a high-profile reminder of the hazards of being a professional musician. Artists lived on a month-to-month basis in an environment fraught with very physical risks of drug use and violence on top of merely being ripped off, which was almost anticipated by this point.

Christopher White's 1973 article "Check Yourself!" succinctly sums it up. "Jazz, a music developed primarily by African Americans, is in the same position that Afro-Americans find themselves in this country. Jazz has been kept separate from but dependent upon external systems that control it." He analyzed the declining state of jazz in the '60s from a performer's point of view, challenging artists to recognize the true nature of the music business as historically abusive and exploitive. "All of these enterprises depended on certain aspects of jazz but not the personal dimension of improvisation... The real spirit of jazz was never accepted or even considered (there was no need to) by the music business." Accepting an art form as worthy is not a requirement in the club owner's rulebook. In a 1973 interview subtitled "Self-determination and the Black Aesthetic," East regular Max Roach said, "It's true we don't have 'jazz' clubs like we used to. But, remember, we were exploited in those places so it's good in one sense that they are disappearing."

In contrast to the bar and club scene, the East fostered an environment where everybody of African descent was welcome. "You wouldn't have to worry about smoke or people getting drunk—we served no alcohol," Mchawi says.



Mrume in deep concentration.



Artistically, the East "had no limits. Folks would play until they're finished," which contributed to its popularity. Non-musicians, poets, and budding musicians were encouraged to participate on stage with nationally known figures, who were stimulated to create the musical statements that they were unable to in other venues. In addition to creative freedom, "the cats loved the fact that Black folks were presenting the music, they loved the fact it was an all-Black audience, they loved the fact the feedback was very spontaneous. People reacted to the music almost [like it] was coming out of their own mouth. It was a good field of play," says Mensah Wali. The East's shows were not seen in terms of performer-audience roles, but rather as a "mutual admiration society."

Throughout the U.S. around the time the East was founded, institutions were slowly realizing their long bias against African Americans. The Black art form called jazz in particular was a victim. Colleges raced to hire well-known jazz musicians, such as Marion Brown or Archie

Shepp. On the surface, this gave musicians respect and a career they sorely deserved, but the gesture of hiring an African American as often the sole member of an otherwise White establishment that didn't have interest in modifying their curriculum smacked of tokenism.

Most major labels felt that the kind of music being created at the East was more than they could safely market, too controversially edgy and without a mass appeal. The irony here of course is that this new music was "cool" as it had ever been, and that while heavily Afro-centric, the audience for the upcoming "loft" movement migration, though small, was also mostly White. Of course, some exceptions existed. Impulse Records found fame marketing Pharoah Sanders, John Coltrane, and Albert Ayler. Arista re-released many critical recordings of the early '70s, such as Human Arts Ensemble, on its Freedom imprint. But even among musicians recording on small, ostensibly respectable, labels, there were grumbings. Actual was accused, most vocally by Archie Shepp, of stealing recordings from musicians for their own profit. Some musicians were frustrated when ESP didn't sell enough copies to garner royalties.

With the blessing of Jitu Weusi, a label called simply "East" was conceived as part outreach and, like the live performances, part "economic venture." James Spaulding, well known for his role as a multi-instrumentalist, Sun Ra regular, and a favorite '60s sideman at Blue Note, assembled an impromptu group drawn from East regulars. The group included Larry Ridley on bass, his brother Michael Ridley on trumpet, Earl McIntyre playing trombone, Doug Fra-



The East, Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn.



zier on congas, and a young Lenny White—who would later perform with Miles Davis and Chick Corea—playing his heart out on drums. Spaulding recalls, “This is probably one of Lenny White’s first recording dates that he had ever done. He was eighteen or something like that, the youngest one in the group.” White’s parents even had to come and drop him off at the studio, for he had no transportation.

“I learned quite a bit [creating the 45]—it was not an easy venture,” Spaulding recalls. After getting the records pressed, it was discovered that they had a bad warp defect. “We had to take them all back and have them all done again, and then after we got that done—then they put the labels on too large,” which meant the needle hit the label in the runout groove on every rotation, kicking it out of place, instead of staying in place silently on every revolution. “That’s about as far as I got with that,” he says. On top of pressing problems, the public response to an “East” record label wasn’t as intense as to live performances. The fledgling

“house” label folded, leaving the 45 RPM single to be distributed mainly by hand and through the center itself.

The organization opted to redouble their efforts back into scheduling live events rather than pressing cumbersome and expensive records. This resulted in one of the most successful synergies of music and culture Brooklyn has ever seen, and the only part of the East founded that remains today: Kuumba, or as it is now known, the International African Arts Festival. The festival was founded informally in 1971 as a “block party” to celebrate the year’s end of the Uhuru Sasa school. In recent years, it has grown to host over seventy thousand people in a festive atmosphere of music, street sellers, and entertainment, although it has long since moved from the 10 Claver Place location that originally housed the organization.

Financially, the East benefited from several astute business alliances, such as their relationship with Xerox, who photocopied issues of *Black News*. The perceived unmarketability of Black music in the jazz community in a perverse way worked to the musician’s advantage with the dawning of the Black Arts Movement and of moderate government interest. As Iain Anderson observed, “Free jazz performers had demonstrated their inability to survive in the marketplace, and thus appeared less tainted by commerce and more worthy of subsidy than other musicians.” Reggie Workman even coined the term “welfare music” because of tax dollars going into jazz. Still, it should be noted that the money given to the burgeoning jazz movement was hardly big money for the government. In 1971, almost ten million



federal dollars were allocated to “music” generally, while a scant \$250,000 went to the “jazz” category.

Ali is one of the only leaders who could call an album *New Directions* in 1973 and give a strong enough performance to justify the title. Like *Alkebulan*, the two side-long songs were recorded in a live performance setting at the East. The second of several important musical documents, Rashied Ali’s work is a worldly manifestation of Pan-Africanism in Black music. In a 1974 issue of *Black World*, Ron Welburn comments on one of Rashied Ali’s solos: “Ali coaxes, cajoles, and demands a language from his instruments that in tonality as well as rhythm reflects the African tradition where those elements (language, tone, rhythm) are one, inseparable entity.”

Indeed, the Black Power Movement, one of the inspirations behind the East, was one of the only groups to enthusiastically accept “free jazz,” and specifically improvisation, as a uniquely African creation. The research behind the connection of Africa to blues and jazz in the U.S. is startling (one of the best books to back up such claims is Gerhard Kubik’s *Africa and the Blues*) and tends to focus on ethno-musical areas such as points of origin for stringed instruments and certain scales. John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, and Ornette Coleman cracked jazz wide open with their modal and free experimentation, which gave musicians the space to re-incorporate different textural elements such as hand percussion and chanting, as well as tonal elements like Eastern scales.

The quartet of Rashied Ali, Fred Simmons, Stafford James, and Carlos Ward takes creative license on this spatial synergy to create a brisk stream of consciousness. The second track turns the familiar Basie tune “London Bridge Is Falling Down” on its head. Ali hasn’t forgotten his jazz roots. Elements of swing are deeply buried, fused with modal “fire music.” Particularly, Carlos Ward on flute pushes the jazz standard up to another level. Critics who dismiss free jazz as sloppy need to hear this in order to see exactly how off the mark they are.

An avid music fan from a young age, Mensah Wali remembers his first personal encounter with Pharoah Sanders, another Coltrane alum, far from the stage. “I knew Pharoah from when I used to sell clothes—when he first came to New York. I was a Coltrane-head from the time I was in junior high school, so I knew Pharoah when I saw him.” Later, when the East started its “Black Experience in Sound,” Sanders was invited with Leon Thomas to play the first show. In 1969, their tune “The Creator Has a Master

Plan” was one of the few genuine hits in the free-jazz genre.

Sanders was so influenced by the center that he dedicated an album to it on Impulse, *Live at the East*. On the session, Sanders is more hands-off than usual. At one point he allows the music to break down to a sparse interplay between bassists Stanley Clarke and Cecil McBee, which prompts wild applause that trails off into clapping in time with the music. Liner-note junkies might notice that if the audience is heard on the track, and it is supposedly “live,” why is it listed as being recorded at A&R Recording? Truth be told, the cost of moving the modern recording equipment down to Brooklyn was prohibitively expensive. The cheaper option, of course, was to do the opposite: ship the East family up to the studios for a faux-live recording session. In an amusing twist, this is true Pan-Africanism: the decentralized African family that can come with you wherever you go.

Given the incestuous nature of forces acting in and around the East, some thirty years later it’s difficult to separate the influence of the East from its peers, and vice versa. Some in the East family feel that the International African Arts Festival has lost some momentum as far as being closely tied with contemporary jazz music, which is hardly surprising given the lack of formal movements in the genre since the 1980s. Maybe the spiritual torch was better passed to the ensuing “loft scene” in the mid- to late ’70s, despite disparities in location and racial constituency. It was to be home for many of the artists at the East, such as Leroy Jenkins, Rashied Ali, and Milford Graves, who used many of its lessons and principles. Self-determination propelled musicians to run their own labels and shows, and, perhaps, so did the idea of using cheap living areas as performance space, as Wali suggests. “This thing about a ‘loft scene,’ I think, also came from some of the cats’ experiences in dealing with the space we were in at the East. It may have been bigger than most lofts, but that’s basically what it was.”

The idea repeated time and again in interviews and articles is that the East resided in a special place and time, a unique intersection of arts, politics, and education. This article is merely a window into that, a glance into the nationwide and local movements and circumstances that propelled a pivotal institution. East members recall that the live performances were almost universally taped for historical benefit, but the location of these tapes is now in question. So while the East organization may have disintegrated during the 1980s, the door remains open for more of its potent music to be discovered—even after so many years—if an audience is receptive. After all, music is only truly “alive” when people are ready to pay attention and listen closely for the message. ●

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