Greg Tate traces a populist history of the black avant garde through James Brown to Kamasi Washington and #BlackLivesMatter

Say It

Loud

First time I ever heard anything ostensibly Black referred to as avant garde was in Amiri Baraka’s 1967 book *Black Music*, where he identified key figures in 60s jazz as its vanguard modernist figures: Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Marion Brown et al. In the book’s fabled ballyhooed concluding essay “The Changing Same (R&B And The New Black Music)” he then retired the avant garde tag and rechristened the sonic sweep of those cats’ musics with this provocative racial and political marker. In that same essay Baraka demands we hear James Brown’s screams as more radical than those of Coleman, Coltrane and Ayler. In the process he upends the conventional hierarchy wherein the least commercially successful music is seen as more groundbreaking and challenging than that of a popular entertainer like The Godfather of Soul. Within a year, Brown was producing music that combined his screams with those of skronk-happy saxophonists St Clair Pinckney and Robert McCullough, whom Brown could be heard exhorting to “blow me some Trane brother”, on a live recording of his hit “Super Bad”. The impact of ideas from Ra, Taylor, Ayler and Coleman can be heard in some of the most adventurous funk of the next decade: Stevie Wonder, early Earth, Wind & Fire, Kool & The Gang, Roy Ayers Ubiquity, Osibisa, Cymande, Gil Scott-Heron & The Midnight Band, Parliament-Funkadelic, Miles Davis, Weather Report and Herbie Hancock’s Mwandishi and Headhunters bands. Those groovy modern laboratories’ inciteful influence on the best and brightest avatars of punk, no wave, hiphop, Chicago house, Detroit techno and jungle can’t be oversold.

Baraka was throughout his career an ardent advocate for what he called populist modernism, a notion befitting a former beat poet whose days spent as teenage fan of gutbucket 1950s R&B informed his belief that unbridled Black working class culture could generate extremely experimental sonics. Check Baraka’s short fiction *The Screaners*, also written in 1967, the same year as the infamous Newark uprising (nec riot) where Baraka was bloodied by the constabulary. It describes a honking R&B saxophonist named Lynn Hope who incites a riotous street demonstration that pits clubgoers against police. The adolescent Baraka’s generation was the bebop generation, whose variety shows might package a Charlie Parker, a Lynn Hope, snake dancer charmsers, comedians and tapdancing hoofers on the same touring bill in the hood.

Over the last 35 years, the advent of hiphop has borne out his prophetic faith in proletarian noise as not only an avant garde seedbed but a hotbed of political action as well.