

Belief in Lyric

Aldon Lynn Nielsen

We might well one day find forgiveness, those of us who failed to notice Curtis Mayfield when we first heard the first hit by The Impressions. For one thing, the label on the 45-rpm single clearly identified the artists as “Jerry Butler and the Impressions,” and who on hearing Butler’s baritone wouldn’t be forever haunted? “For Your Precious Love,” he sang, going on to enumerate just what love might mean. They were his words, rolling out over the all too familiar four-chord pop ballad form of the day, that seemingly eternal unwinding C, Am, F, and G. We noticed the guitar endlessly picking out that pattern, but there was nothing that particularly stood out about it, as cleanly intoned as it was. We didn’t know it was played by the same man who was adding the high tenor to the mix. That man was Curtis Mayfield, and when Jerry Butler soon went out on his own, it was with Curtis Mayfield on stage beside him, playing guitar and supplying songs, the very songs that made “The Ice Man” so memorable. By the time we heard “He Don’t Love You, Like I Love You,” it was harder to ignore Mayfield, whose high harmonies moved in glorious tandem with Butler through the choruses. That same tandem movement made other songs stand out from the mass of pop molasses, songs like “Find Yourself Another Girl,” “I’m A’Telling You,” and so many more. But it was when Curtis Mayfield became the clear front man for The Impressions that the world began to realize the breadth of his abilities. “Gypsy Woman” was just a hint of what was to come, and when Mayfield joined Sam Cooke, Bob Dylan, and others in penning songs that spoke

from and to the rapidly gathering storms of social change, he quickly became the very poet of the civil rights era. “Keep on Pushing,” “This Is My Country,” “We’re a Winner” were anthems for an age, and when Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions sang “People Get Ready,” the people got ready. The Impressions crossed over, found acclaim in venues far removed from the Chitlin’ Circuit, and made a lasting impression. Their formula was not new; Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and so many others had brought gospel and pop together, seemingly reuniting gospel with its sometimes forsaken blues roots, sometimes wedding it to the most earthy of love lyrics. But the ethereal harmonies of The Impressions added, as it were, a new note to that mix, a note that even someone as “out” as Jimi Hendrix would borrow for his soaring “Electric Lady Land,” a song that mimes The Impressions’ harmonies, mining them for soul in an intergalactic psychedelia that in turn influenced late Curtis Mayfield production techniques. In the 1963 film *Lilies of the Field*, West Indian actor Sydney Poitier plays the role of a man who instructs a group of Eastern European Catholic nuns who have set up shop in the Arizona desert in the proper singing and enunciation of the song “Amen,” a song so instantly recognizable that many filmgoers thought they had heard it, that it was an old spiritual, not the new composition by the writer with the seemingly unlikely name of Jester—Jester Hairston. Poitier won his first Oscar for that film, as well as a Golden Globe, and the film itself won prizes at festivals around the world. Curtis Mayfield saw the film and was determined to cover the song with The Impressions. The resulting record became the first hit for the post-Butler group that Mayfield hadn’t written himself. The Mayfield arrangement of Hairston’s song was meant to point both backward toward the past of black and unknown bards and forward into the new world the civil rights movement presaged; the recording opened to the strains of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and moved to a marching rhythm suited to the determined youth of the day. The song went to number one on the R&B charts and charted at number seven on the pop listings, a significant accomplishment for any black artist in 1964 and one that rode the cresting wave of the folk revival as it met and merged with emerging soul and socially conscious lyric poetry.

This set the pattern for so much that was to follow. When The Impressions sang “I’m So Proud,” nobody on the dance floor thought the singer spoke only of his girlfriend. “The Woman’s Got Soul” was not just a love song; it was a paean to a new black beauty. As the 1960s rolled on, so did the songs, and Mayfield’s “Check Out Your Mind” was of a piece with the poetry increasingly heard everywhere by such poets as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Don L. Lee, and Jayne Cortez. High school kids would dance to The Impressions and would recite Baraka’s “SOS.” Moving into his solo career, Mayfield took all of this along with him, adding fuzz guitars, wah wah pedals, and a healthy dose of post-Santana Afro-Latin percussion to his already heady dosage of black pride and political determination. His first, eponymous solo album set the course for all that would follow. There were the riff-based songs that anatomized our social predicament, such as “Don’t Worry, If There’s a

Hell Below We're All Gonna Go," or the great dance floor jam "Move On Up." And there were still the breath-stopping melodies of songs like "Miss Black America" and "The Makings of You," a song that was also a hit for a resurgent Richie Havens as he evolved from open-tuning folk hero to post-Woodstock electrified ambassador of all things hip. This proved to be the winning formula for Mayfield's contribution to the explosion of great soundtracks for not so great movies during the high-tide period of blaxploitation films. Mayfield's *Superfly* remains to this day the touchstone of that remarkable flood of productivity that brought us Marvin Gaye's *Trouble Man*, Osibisa's *Superfly T.N.T.* (script coauthored, believe it or not, by one Alex Haley), Bobby Womack's *Across 110th Street*, and the soft-buttered soul of Isaac Hayes's *Shaft*. Mayfield's driving title song, along with "Pusherman" and "Freddie's Dead," in many ways represented the peak of his riff-driven songs, which were appropriate for an action film, but the soundtrack still had room for something as deeply moving as the ballad "Eddie You Should Know Better." As searing as "Freddie's Dead" was in *Superfly*, the tracks Mayfield composed for the 1977 film version of Miguel Pinero's devastating prison play *Short Eyes* seemingly leave an audience utterly without refuge; that is, until we get to "Need Someone to Love" and realize that even in this darkest corner of human despair, Mayfield finds his characteristic grounds for optimism in the resilience of our need for one another. Mayfield also composed two additional classic film soundtracks of the era, *Sparkle* (which was a hit both in the original film score and a subsequent LP in which Aretha Franklin sang all the songs), and *Claudine*, given its own sparkle by the incomparable voice of Gladys Knight. More than a decade after his start alongside Jerry Butler and the Impressions, it was Curtis Mayfield who still had something original to say to us, something new to do in the swirl of gospel, jazz, folk, pop, and soul that truly was, as Motown called itself, the sound of young America.

Mayfield's career was nearly ended in a freak stage accident when a set of lights fell on him during a concert in Flatbush, New York. He was partially paralyzed, no longer able to play the guitar on which he had written and performed so many of his powerful songs. But here's the freakish coincidence that will bring us back around to Baraka. Amiri Baraka wrote and spoke often of the influence of his grandfather, Tom Russ. Russ appears in several of Baraka's poems, as well as in the short story "Suppose Sorrow Was a Time Machine." His grandfather's life, Baraka learns from his grandmother, was sadly diminished, much as Mayfield's would later be, when a streetlight was dropped on Russ's head. Mayfield, though, continued to perform after his rehabilitation from the accident, and his final album, *New World Order*, showed that, even though he had to sing lying on his back, he still had much to say about the changing world around him. And he lived to see his earlier works return in later movie soundtracks and in innumerable samples. The sounds of Curtis Mayfield and his poetry lived on inside the songs of our lives well after his death in 1999.



Photograph of Amiri Baraka by A.L. Nielsen.

For many years, the Washington, D.C. Pacifica radio station, WPFW, featured two programs hosted by Jerry Washington. One was called “The Bama Hour” and featured the more down-home side of rhythm and blues, but because Mayfield’s music, as urbane and sophisticated as it could be, was plenty funky (witness “Freddie’s Dead”), Washington, the “Bama” in question, included it in his playlist. “The Other Side of the Bama” was a program in which Washington put the spotlight on his jazzier side, and Mayfield could be featured there just as readily. An ongoing segment of Washington’s programs was something he called “the inner message in the music.” The Bama would play a sequence of three or four songs, and it was the job of his audience to discern the common link among them. Sometimes it could be the same bass player bowing a common, allusive strain; other times it might be a thematic link in the lyrics. Always, the segment called upon listeners to get inside the music in a way that commercial radio did considerably less often. Top 40 radio might ask listeners to figure out that three songs all mentioned bells, but they were far less likely to ask their audience to notice a common chord structure. Even the monochordal, riff-driven music of a Muddy Waters tune like “She’s Alright, She’s Alright” contains interior pockets of wild invention (just listen to what the harp is doing alongside the lead guitar); close listening to the interior geography of recorded sound often brings such rewards. The artists who place these treasures inside their songs are looking for listeners who will join with them in the improvisation of new cultural experience.

And this is just what bassist/composer William Parker accomplishes with the performance work he has titled “The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield.”



Photograph of William Parker by A.L. Nielsen.

This is a work still little known in the United States, although it was warmly received at several European venues and enjoyed a particularly warm welcome at the 2007 Guelph Jazz Festival in Canada before finally appearing as an official release on the Aum Fidelity label out of Brooklyn, New York. “Every song written or improvised has an inside song,” Parker tells us, “which lives in the shadows, in-between the sounds and silences and behind the words, pulsating, waiting to be reborn as a new song.” What Parker has in mind is not what students tell their composition teachers when they say they had ideas “behind the words” that somehow didn’t appear in writing. What Parker is after is the unfolding of possibilities written into the music by its original inventor. Much as a Charlie Parker would discover fresh melodic potential suggested within the chord changes of the Gershwins’ “I’ve Got Rhythm,” William Parker explores

the territory between the towering peaks of Curtis Mayfield's recordings. Parker recalls the sense in which the 1960s really did seem to have a soundtrack, a soundtrack that, as he puts it, brought all musical modes together into a circle marked "People's Music," with lyrics mapping demands for "reclamation of land, self-determination, and right to change existing structure rather than assimilation into a quagmire called progress." Forty years following that eventful decade, Parker works changes on existing structures, fleshing out Mayfield's charts in one place, merging them in another, stripping still others down to their barest skeletal shapes. "Inside songs" means, as well, the insertion of the new into the old, "placing soliloquies between the wings of hummingbirds," which, it turns out, is an apt description for what Parker's ensemble achieves as Amiri Baraka inserts assertive poetry among the Mayfield lines being sung and improvised by Leena Conquest. "The new song," according to Parker, "although still connected to the mother is still separate with its own heart, lungs, and soul. It was never the goal to do a cover." Much as Curtis Mayfield, going to see the movie *Lilies of the Field*, would find the echoes of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" lurking inside the melody of "Amen" (also, by the way, the word that appears on screen where audiences would normally have expected to encounter "the end") and would rework that folk melody to a stirring civil rights march, Parker sets out to, as he puts it, "build another house out of the same wood they build basses and violins with, wood struck by purple lightning bolts."

One sign of Parker's methodology was heard in an early European performance of "The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield," a 2001 performance at the Banlieu Blues Jazz festival in Paris that is excerpted on the official CD release. For this program, Parker added a chorus of ninety children singing, children gathered from the Paris suburbs, which has also been the territory over which much of the French struggle with issues of race and rights has raged. Among the numbers performed in Paris were "This Is My Country," making a statement about postcolonial French politics every bit as strong as when Mayfield first sang it in the American context, and, as if simultaneously providing a testament to Mayfield's staying power and a comment on post-Cold War racial oppressions, "New World Order." Mayfield's late career composition offers a stirringly melodic chant in response to the colder climate of Bushian braggadocio: "It's a New World Order, a brand new day / a change of mind for the human race." The effect of hearing this chorus repeated by the French schoolchildren is hard to describe, but I can't help hearing something else stirring within Parker's revision of the song, another inside song that he had heard and may have wanted us to hear. There have been many school children singing many choruses in R&B and hip hop over the years, to the point that it has become as de rigueur as the seemingly inescapable gospel choruses that every successful hip-hop artist employs sooner or later; however, there are undeniable touchstones, including Stevie Wonder's use of such a device on the instructive "Black Man" from his magnum opus *Songs in the Key of Life*. But few would disagree that the godfather of this approach was James Brown and his anthemic 1968 recording "Say

It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," a song that heralded a new world order if any ever did. Unforgettable is the chorus's call and response, as each time Brown shouts "Say it loud," he is answered by a large group of school children shouting back, "I'm black and I'm proud." The song was recorded in Southern California, and what few of us knew at the time was the interracial composition of the children's chorus. Brown had sent to a nearby school for children to appear on the session, and the result was a mixture of white, black, and Asian kids all proudly chanting "I'm black and I'm proud," an encompassing black aesthetic of the sort encouraged by Stephen Henderson in his *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Parker's gathering of French children, many of them immigrants, from the troubled outer reaches of Paris, is a way of reminding us of the signifying weight of Brown's and Mayfield's works for our harrowing times and of bringing renewed hope to trembling spirits in a parlous age. A kindred spirit arises from Parker's use of the New Life Tabernacle Generation of Praise Choir on a version of "This Is My Country" recorded in New York.

Parker's placement of the poetry of Amiri Baraka works similarly to unfold a race-time continuum linking new times to the era of Mayfield and Brown, which was the era in which LeRoi Jones was transformed before our eyes into Amiri Baraka. With the possible exception of Jayne Cortez, no other contemporary poet has worked so often and so tellingly with jazz musicians. Much as Coleman Hawkins and Mary Lou Williams played with the young lions of succeeding generations of jazz artists, renewing their own art while encouraging the new, Baraka has appeared and recorded with generations reaching from the bebop of Max Roach to the hip hop of The Roots. His poetry was a source of inspiration as Curtis Mayfield turned increasingly to socially conscious lyrics, and the music of Curtis Mayfield was seen increasingly by Baraka (not everybody in the Black Arts agreed about this) as a revolutionary creative force. Baraka is one of the few poets capable of improvising from his existing texts in a way truly suited to the expansive improvisations of today's post-free jazz innovators. So, the poet who gave us "Heathens," now joins the vocalist on "If There's a Hell Below, We're All Gonna Go." The poet who wrote and read "Calling all black people," now conjoins his political lyric inventions to the vocal artistry of a woman named Conquest. In the true jazz tradition, no two performances of Parker's work are alike. The performance at Guelph opens with a dirge-like, free jazz section, with Baraka's opening poetry slipping in and out of the rising and falling horns in spoken-word counterpoint to Leena Conquest's vocals (which recall to my mind the wordless singing of Abby Lincoln in performances with Max Roach of "Tears for Johannesburg"). Howard Mandel, writing immediately afterward, seems to have been reviewing the ghost of white journalism's Amiri Baraka of four decades ago rather than the poet who appeared on stage. Mandel reports from the scene that "bassist William Parker grooved with drummer Hamid Drake, while singer-dancer Lena [sic] Conquest wailed and Amiri Baraka ranted on themes of Curtis Mayfield . . . the vital jazz rhythms and Ms. Conquest's gospel-like fervor redeemed Baraka's archaic

anti-white agit prop, most inappropriate here/now, virtually a museum piece.” Recordings of the event will confirm what anybody who has read Baraka’s poetry of the past forty years would already know: there was no “anti-white” anything in the performance, but then Mandel proves unable even to spell Leena Conquest’s name accurately. The poem that slowly emerges from the swirling collage of sound is Baraka’s controversial “Who Blew Up America,” a poem whose anaphoric “who” serves as a poetic counterpoint to the sung and said “Whys” of the opening measures, which in turn echo the title of Baraka’s epic poem “Wise Why’s Y’s.” Baraka has explained that if you ask enough “whys,” you might get “wise,” although Mandel was patently not in an asking mood in 2007 and was more inclined to record his own prejudices than to register the poetry that was actually coming from the stage. Just a month later, the program in Venice begins with the band and the poet, Baraka, offering a prelude and questions, seemingly unfolding from the central question with which he and Parker opened the Guelph concert. In the wake of “Who Blew Up America,” Baraka now asks, “Where is everything, after all,” as Conquest’s voice rises alongside his verses. Having asked who and where, Baraka next asks another question, his first “why” of the inside songs, “Why we so crazy?” The piece eventually works its way back to the opening themes of Guelph, Baraka now reading, “Someone Blew up America,” before returning to his anaphoric “Who.” Performing the concert in Rome in April of 2004, Leena Conquest’s vocals on “People Get Ready” are interwoven with a recitation by Baraka on the theme of the people’s desire for self-realization. In the storm of music that follows, an open improvisation among the horns to a driving rhythm from Parker and Drake, Baraka’s voice is one of the instruments contributing to the “Ascension”-like wave of sound breaking on the possibility of uprising. That suggestion of the Coltrane legacy is rendered all the more immediate later in the Rome concert when, mining yet another inside song from the core of Mayfield’s compositions, “Freddie’s Dead” turns into “A Love Supreme” as the horns break into one of the most recognizable four note passages in the literature. In another passage, we hear a new satiric lyric about how “Negroes are older than anything.” The poem nestles inside “We the People Who Are Darker than Blue,” and Baraka opens by observing, “Before blue is black / after red is black.” From that spectral analysis, Baraka delivers a meditation on the varied colorations of history and thought. “Negroes know shit they don’t even know they know,” he intones. Take that Donald Rumsfeld. At times in these performances, Baraka, always attentive to the sonic qualities of his verse, actually begins to sing some of the lines. As if finding an inside song inside the inside song, Parker and company suddenly break into “Pardon Me Brother,” and Baraka cites “What did I do to be so black and blue,” that Andy Razaf lyric that takes us from the epoch of Fats Waller and Langston Hughes, through the midcentury contributions of Ralph Ellison, and back into the blacker than blues arts. All of this finds its allusive echo in a repeated line from Baraka, “If we can remember the words . . .” As the musicians play farther and farther out, we’re reminded that several stars

of the free jazz firmament are on hand: Dave Burrell on piano, Hamid Drake on drums, and Parker himself, a veteran of Cecil Taylor's units, among others. The piece reminds us that the wildest of the free jazz and the most structured of soul and pop coexisted in our minds and in our ears in the 1960s, much as Gwendolyn Brooks and Amiri Baraka found themselves on the same page at the Fisk Black Writers Conference. As the horn section returns to an R&B chart worthy of the Howard or the Apollo or the Regency Theaters in their heyday, Sabir Mateen's alto sax unleashes a Sun Ra-style free improvisation, the mix recalling those moments when, against a backdrop of strict structures, James Brown would loose Maceo Parker to tear away at the tune, or when, as in "Super Bad," he'd tell Robert McCollough to blow him some Trane. Through it all, Baraka plays his poem like a master musician taking his instrument to the furthest limits of its capacity, much the way that Pharoah Sanders found that he could produce tone clusters on the supposedly one note at a time saxophone by overblowing in a controlled way, and then taking it further still. Baraka's poem unravels the ancient African DNA that lies coiled in a strand deep inside the songs of Curtis Mayfield and makes it available for a recombinant twenty-first century lyric politics.

This was William Parker's intent in bringing these master musicians and Baraka together within the structures left us as a legacy by Curtis Mayfield. Parker says that we need "those who can self-ignite and keep the fire of compassion glowing, who will never forget the despair on the faces of people who think their only hope is 'basketball.'" Parker took his "Inside Songs" to Paris, to Italy, to Brooklyn. Kalamu ya Salaam has said of Curtis Mayfield that he "was the master[;] no one else could so eloquently lay into the downsides of our psyches and still inspire us to move on up." William Parker lays into the insides of that Mayfieldian moving psyche and invites us to join him there. "I Plan to Stay a Believer," he says, and that is the best laid plan. Poet Al Young has written of the "song turning back into itself," in the way of poets doubling that preposition's direction to school us in how the song, in turning to its own inside, becomes, turns into itself. William Parker and Amiri Baraka, following in the wake of the late Curtis Mayfield, show us once more that if you play far enough outside, you find yourself once again, as Little Anthony and the Imperials used to sing it, back on the inside.

Works Cited

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