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Amiri Baraka 'Blues People' Then And Now At Express Newark

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"Blues People" installation photo at Express Newark. RACHEL VANNI

For anyone without the benefit of an African American studies degree or having spent time in Newark, NJ, the name Amiri Baraka (1934–2014) may be

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unfamiliar. Too bad. When thinking about 20th century writers and thinkers, his peers would be W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison—those type people.

Langston Hughes described Baraka's 1963 book "Blues People: Negro Music in White America," written as LeRoi Jones before changing his name, "A must for all who would more knowledgeably appreciate and better comprehend America's most popular music."

The book did considerably more than serve as the first history of blues written by an African American author. "Blues People" tracked "the path the slave took to 'citizenship'"—Baraka's words from his introduction—through the prism of Black music, blues and then jazz, expanding even further to consider how those genres transformed American social, musical, economic, and cultural history.

"He's the first to give us this sweeping history of African American music and does so through a lens of American citizenship, that you can understand African American political identity from slavery, to freedom, to civil rights, through African American music," Express Newark Executive Director Salamishah Tillet told Forbes.com. "Why that's important is because African American music oftentimes is seen as one of the freest expressions of African American culture. Unlike the novel, or film, or photography which required resources and funding to be able to mass produce, African American music has always been a place that has been available to Black people in the United States, even under the most dire conditions of slavery, and a place of experimentation and resistance."

Inspired by the 60th anniversary of "Blues People," Express Newark—Baraka's hometown—presents an exhibition by the same name, inviting visual artists Derrick Adams, Adama Delphine Fawundu, Adebunmi Gbadebo, Cesar Melgar, and Accra Shepp to reimagine pivotal works of theirs into five newly commissioned art installations exploring what it means to be a "Blues People" in the 21st century.

Each considers "Blues People" and Baraka pivotal to the ideas developed through their artwork.

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Shepp grew up around Baraka. His father, the avant-garde jazz musician Archie Shepp, was a good friend of Baraka's. Archie Shepp's music accompanies the exhibition.

"Each of these artists have a social practice embedded within their artistic practices," exhibition curator Alliyah Allen, Express Newark's associate curator and program coordinator, told Forbes.com. "They're all working in that spirit of art and activism, thinking about the communities that they work in, the people they're working with. (Baraka was) writing about the power of music, but also the power of people and community protest. (The exhibition) feels very within the spirit of Amiri Baraka."

In addition to being a successful author, historian, musicologist, sociologist, and music critic as evidenced by "Blues People"—which has never gone out of print—Baraka was a poet, playwright, novelist, professor, political activist, and pioneer of the Black Arts Movement.

The Black Arts Movement



"Blues People" installation photo at Express Newark. RACHEL VANNI

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Baraka was lauded during his life, but his praise was generally limited to literary, scholarly, and African American circles. And New Jersey, where he was Poet Laureate. Baraka didn't "break out" into popular culture the way James Baldwin or Toni Morrison did.

Perhaps he would have had he continued down the path as a notable experimental Beat poet in Greenwich Village in the 1950s alongside the likes of Allan Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara. The 1960s had other plans for him—and he for them.

"There was the death of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and a shift in the consciousness of a lot of African American activists and artists to Black Power," Tillet explains. "(Baraka) is a symbol in the artistic world of that shift between the civil rights movement to the Black Power movement."

Critics wanted Baraka as a Black man to "shut up and write," to use the parlance of today. He wasn't having it. Baraka was a radical and open minded, variously promoting Black Nationalism, Marxism, Islam, socialism. He placed himself at the forefront of the ideas which scare the rich and powerful in America to their marrow.

Particularly Black Power.

The Black Arts Movement he helped launch in Harlem in 1965 following Malcolm X's assassination can be viewed as the cultural division of the Black Power Movement.

With Baraka as its engine, the Black Arts Movement pushed a new aesthetic for Black art and Black people. New standards of beauty. Black is beautiful. Natural hair styles. Clothing inspired by Africa. New values. "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud."

African Americans no longer looking to white culture for validation.

Baraka was dangerous to the gatekeepers who bestow or withhold fame and fortune in America.

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Blues People



"Blues People" installation photo at Express Newark. IRINA MASON

What constitutes a 21st century Blues Person?

"It's someone who is aware, who is within community, who shows up and is using their community and what they have to survive, to live, and to express who they are and to carry our culture forward," Allen said.

Someone like the artists on view now through July 19, 2024, at Express Newark.

"(Accra Shepp's) work is looking at the Occupy Wall Street movement and the 99% of Americans who are vulnerable. He shows that though this diverse group of Americans of different ages, different ethnic backgrounds, racial backgrounds, religious background; then he adds the Black Lives Matter protesters in 2020," Tillet explains. "The breadth and beauty of everyday Americans is one version of the Blues People who are trying to speak truth to power."

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For Derrick Adams, it's the hold outs, the last people on a block refusing to be gentrified. In the "Blues People" exhibition, his social sculpture is surrounded by Cesar Melgar's photographs of Newark and the ways in which residents are being pressured out of their homes.

"Look at (Adama Delphine Fawundu), she has this diasporic lens, you're in Sierra Leone, and you're in Ghana, and they're keeping this Griot musical tradition of speaking truth to power alive," Tillet continued. "(Adebunmi Gbadebo), she's going back to the plantation that her family is from in South Carolina, True Blue Plantation, and she's literally having her ancestors images in her textiles and thinking about slavery, thinking about enslaved peoples as the original Blues People."

Newark Mayor Ras J. Baraka is Blues People. Amiri Baraka's son. Kellie Jones is too. The Hans Hofmann Professor of Modern Art at Columbia University is Amiri Baraka's first child.

Talk about a legacy.

In 1963, Amiri Baraka delivered "Blues People;" their influence, and his, continue profoundly shaping the nation today.

Admission to Express Newark (54 Halsey Street, 2nd floor), just off the Rutgers University Newark campus, is free.