

**On *The Cricket*:
An Interview with Amiri Baraka**

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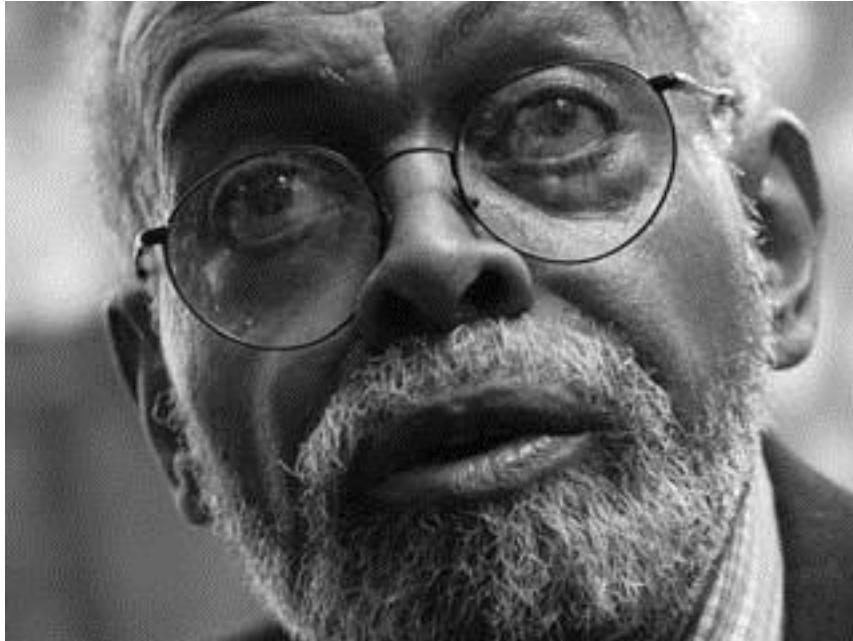


photo by Chris Funkhouser

The Cricket was a mimeographed music magazine edited by LeRoi Jones, Larry Neal, and A.B. Spellman in 1968 and 1969. Subtitled “Black Music in Evolution,” The Cricket promoted music as a cultural nucleus, vitally representing and upholding accelerated standards for progressive art by insisting on a flow between various creative forms. It was an atypical music magazine, incorporating an abundance of poetry, short plays, and blends of forms, in addition to essays and reviews. Musician-authors published in The Cricket include Sun Ra, Milford Graves, Mtume, and Albert Ayler. The Cricket helped to promote innovative projections of art in sync with a revolutionary movement, making advances by trumpeting poetic articulations and shifting cultural formulations. Christopher Funkhouser conducted the following interview at Amiri Baraka’s home in Newark, NJ, on June 21, 2000, while preparing an essay titled “LeRoi Jones, Larry Neal, and The Cricket: Jazz and Poets’ Black Fire” for the 2000 National Poetry Foundation conference on the 1960s; the essay was published in African American Review (Vol. 37, Nos. 2-3, 2003).

Funkhouser: I've collected every issue of *The Cricket*...

Baraka: Four?

Funkhouser: I've got four of them. I was turned on to it a few years ago by Ben Friedlander, who knew I liked Sun Ra. He found the first issue at a used bookstore in Buffalo, then gave it to me...

Baraka: That's something!

Funkhouser: I always liked it and, thinking of writing something on the Sixties, I wanted to put something of my interest into a mix with "the time." So I decided to take a good look at the magazines, read them, read them again, and talk about it.

Baraka: That is a wild magazine. It is the deepest pit of Nationalism, right there. What's interesting, though, is that with Albert Ayler's piece, and Milford Graves' piece, there are some pretty wild things in there.

Funkhouser: Another reason I am compelled to write about it is because the project is just so unaddressed. It's very obscure; nobody really knows about it. I figured it deserved some attention for various reasons, beyond the fact of its Nationalism. Any time you have a magazine devoted to arts put together by artists for whom the focus is not their primary form, you have a chance for something unusual to happen. What's most powerful here is the fact that there's a real strong belief system stated out loud in an arts magazine. That's inspirational. Today you get all these magazines—a million of them—and I can't find a belief in there.

Baraka: They don't really believe in the function of the music. No, I understand they think of it as something, either commerce or entertainment...

Funkhouser: Most people won't take chances. They're more willing to just try to please everybody, rather than say, "No, this is what we stand for."

Baraka: This is surely a post-commitment era, or maybe a pre-commitment era. We're between bips right now, because I believe it's turning around. But you're certainly right, that most of the things you find are just trendy, and then a lot of this stuff, I don't understand why they want to even do that!

Funkhouser: Vanity, or appearance over substance? Jockeying for "position" to some degree—"My magazine looks best, you should give something to me."

Baraka: I just want to know why, like you said, there's no real theory in there. There's nobody trying to say something. You know all this stuff, even the early magazines and shit that I put out—the reason the magazine came out is because it needed to come out to do this, whatever that was. Now, you just get grab-

bags. Literary magazines are the worst kind, where they're just interested in literature without making a statement as to why, or what.

Funkhouser: There's almost no polemic. One of the only times I've seen it was in a magazine that came out called *apex of the M*, a few years ago. They put up a pretty strong polemic having to do with language; it was anti-Language Poetry, and as soon as it came out, and they had an editorial that was very opinionated, it was just assailed.

Baraka: See, that's, I think, what these people don't know. I guess it's because they've come up in the post-assailant period maybe. If you open your mouth, you're going to get jumped. If you don't have that hip in your mind, it might shock you. All you have to do is say "yes" and somebody's going to say "no," you know that. If you mumble, then you might get through. I think this might be the mumbling era. Certainly, it's mumbly. Like you said [in conversation before the interview], Bob Marley you could understand very clearly. All the Motown people when they sang you could understand them right straight up. But today it's [*speaks a garbled scat*], whether it's reggae, or rap, or rhythm and blues. It's the era of no show. Be effusive about *whatever*.

Funkhouser: I came up with a few questions. First, with *The Cricket*, how many copies of each issue were printed?

Baraka: About five hundred. They were run off at our joint up on High Street, with Spirit House. We had a little electronic mimeograph machine, with an electronic stencil: the old Gestetner, that's what that was. By that time we had an office up the street on High Street, right on the corner next to St. Benedict's, and we lived right up the street, on Sterling Street. So, some of the typing was there, some of the running was there, it was between the two places.

Funkhouser: Is there any particular reason you can remember as to why you stopped working on *The Cricket*, or why it stopped coming out?

Baraka: I think that we had gotten so deeply involved in political action, particularly around the whole National development of construct, that it became less and less possible, since I was editing it in the main. And I think that's a problem, because the problem was that those organizations that had a clear understanding of the role of culture in the revolution actually diminished to a certain extent this kind of cultural arm. Though we never did totally because we always had a theater group. We always did cultural works. The theater group traveled around, we had a singing group that traveled around that my wife put together, the Malik Singers, who became the Anti-Imperialist Singers when we became Marxists. From JIHAD we became the People's War publication. We started changing our stuff. It was essentially because we had gotten so deep into National politics. If you look at the date of the last issue, it's probably 1970, or '69 I think. In '70 we had the election of Kenneth Gibson, the contracts and

meetings of the African Races Support Committee by '72, we did the Gary Convention, African liberation marches. So we had gotten so deeply immersed in the political aspect of it that really the kind of edifying things like that [*The Crickel*] were let slip. I think that's an incorrect position. It's an incorrect position. We had an African Free School, but we couldn't go further than that because we didn't have the personnel to go past the eighth grade. So we left that to concentrate on public education and the school systems. And these were correct decisions to a certain extent, but to let go the culture work to the extent which we did was an error. I think not as much as maybe people think we did, because like I said we still had those groups. We still published books. The cultural aspect of any kind of political thrust is very important. I don't think people realize how important it is, but it is very important. Because even if you win power with a gun, you can never sustain it if you don't have a culture, a continued kind of orientation in terms of ideas: "Why did we fight? Who are the friends? Who are the enemies?"

Funkhouser: So you mean beyond the political. Multiple foundations?

Baraka: That sort of context *to* the political. You see, otherwise people don't know what it is.

Funkhouser: It makes the political "real" in a different way...

Baraka: That's what Mao was doing in China. If you get power, you can't then say, "Oh, we got power, it's over." Because otherwise whatever kind of dominant philosophical tendency begins to animate the people, that's where they're going to go. Pretty soon, they're gonna come in with a gun and shoot you. It's the same thing with the Civil Rights Movement. The fact that some of this recidivist, backward shit has gotten in is because there weren't sufficient cultural entities from that period that continued to fire that same shot. Now you've got to re-start it, actually. But, you know, hindsight is perfect.

Funkhouser: When it was coming out, do you remember any critical notices, or response and effect of the magazine itself.

Baraka: I think it was a little too closed for that. We were circulated. Where? We had a bookstore. When we traveled around with our theater group, and gave speeches places, we had it. There was some response from critics in the same circle, or a little larger version of that circle. Some of these guys you see writing in magazines like *The Grackle*, all those different magazines had responses, and maybe in *Black World*. But there wasn't that much. We got good responses from musicians and people who followed the music more than anyone. You've got magazines now like *Signal to Noise*. But there are not too many magazines that are going to want to cover the cutting edge in a real way. Most of the mainstream magazines are just commerce to me. Whether it's *Jazz Times*—I've

been doing a couple reviews for them—the rest of them, *Jazziz*, I don't know where these people come from. *DOWNBEAT* of course...

It's such, like you say, a catch-all in a sense. It has no head to it, it's just *whatever*. They have good articles in there sometimes. I'm doing more stuff now for *The Crisis*, the NAACP's magazine, which has been rejuvenated. In fact, they have an article of mine on Sarah Vaughan in this issue, which is very well done in terms of editorial work, photos and everything.

CF: Is it in print, or online?

Baraka: It's in print—I'll give you a copy. That's the thing—you must have, particularly any people that are in some kind of adversarial position with the larger society, you've got to have your own publications. You cannot rely on someone else to do that. That's something that people know partially. They're beginning to learn, but the problem is that they still want to be the other at the same time. Then you've got all these fake things coming out, magazines that are supposed to be this but are actually that. You've got a magazine put out by *Playboy*, you've got a magazine put out by *Hustler*, that are supposed to be black magazines. That's the life of it: if you don't do it yourself, something else is going to slip into that gap, and it won't be.

Funkhouser: It's not going to materialize on its own...

Baraka: That's right. I was just looking at this review yesterday, in the [Newark] *Star-Ledger*, about someone called Six something. They're from California. It's supposed to be some California white rap, rap and heavy metal mixed together. And the people [reviewers], their code word is that these are "cerebral" rappers, you dig. But then they say, "We couldn't hear any of the words." So I wanted to know what struck you as cerebral about that if you couldn't hear the words? Somebody's now got this thing where they have these big glitzy groups where they've got a rapper who's saying practically nothing, you've got a guy scratching for the suburbs but it's a wholly different thing. That's cool that everybody's going to take what's out there, but the point is that until the people who are producing have their own networks and things where you can get something that's practically what you intend. I'm not talking about "pure," cause that's fake, but it is at least what you intend.

Funkhouser: It's got integrity.

Baraka: Right. That's what's difficult. If you come out with A, there will be a thousand A's on the street tomorrow. None of them will really be A, they'll be A-minus and A-minus-minus. You have to have a publication. I'm still trying to get this magazine *RAZOR* out and I hope this summer I will be finally able to bring it out. It's a magazine that'll cover a lot about music and literature and politics in a kind of mix. You see, the mix is not there now. Stuff is one-sided. Either it's

going to be just all poetry, or it's going to be all whatever, or it's going to be all politics. But to me, like your mind, you have to have it all. You're eating it all. Then people say they don't want to do this because it's political. Hey, to me, that's the point. Because a lot of people think that when you say politics you exclude a whole area of aesthetic thoughtfulness, which is not true. And then when you read some of these guys that I really admire, you can see that a great deal was done to disguise the fact that they had some deeply profound aesthetic theories, makes it seem like they were shooting from the hip all of the time.

Funkhouser: They made it fluid.

Baraka: But you have to go back there and re-read it. I've been spreading this article around that Paul Robeson wrote on the pentatonic scale, which is mind-blowing. It's a mind-blower. He found the origins of pentatonic, which are worldwide. You can go to Russia and hear "Deep River," which is called "The Volga Boatman" in Russia. In Georgia it's called "Deeeeeeeep River" [*animated singing*], same scale, same music, same thing. At the end of the fifteenth century, a strange thing happens. As capitalism rises, the harpsichord then changed into piano and gets to be black and white notes. It's true. In the harpsichord, they actually had a switch, so you could go from the old pentatonic to the new diatonic, a tempered scale that apparently the rising capitalist mind and ear of Europe dug. That piano that Cecil [Taylor] plays, that Bosendorfer, that huge thing, it has the black notes down with the white notes, to suggest not only that there are two pentatonics—one in the white keys, one in the black keys—that's why blues was the obvious music for the slaves because [*singing an ascending scale*] "ding, ding, ding, ding" it's right there. They even showed them, "This is the way you play blues, see them black notes, just play those notes." I thought that was incredible that Robeson was studying this shit, and says, yes, that capitalism when it becomes stabilized in Europe, the piano emerges and the first thing they do is segregate the notes. That's incredible. You say, my God. You have to think that, though, it would be everywhere, people's ideas, whatever they touch, are going to be mashed by that. It's a fantastic idea, but when you tell that to people, they look at you and say, "Yeah. The piano is segregated? What are you talking about?"

Funkhouser: I know Cecil, Sun Ra and Milford Graves are listed as advisors to *The Cricket*. I was wondering what they did for the magazine.

Baraka: They were friends of mine, and they were giving us materials. Cecil less, I think, I don't know if he gave us anything. But Sun Ra and I got very close through the Black Arts Repertory Theater in '65. He used to come up there everyday and talk to anybody for hours and hours. Then every Wednesday night we had a concert. That's where he developed what he called the Space Organ. The Space Organ was that kind of Pythagorean instrument: dark colors, deep sound, light colors, light sound. We'd be up in the dark there [*chants a few notes*], listening to him. That was really a precursor to the light show thing that

they put out. Milford, too, would be up there a lot. Milford and Don Pullen, because they were just coming to New York at the time and put out their own record. We would travel around Harlem and they played in the streets there. That's what I always knew—that these critics' idea that somehow the people could never dig this music because it was too abstract or obscure was bullshit. All they have to do is hear it, don't worry about it.

Funkhouser: People loved it, I'm sure.

Baraka: They did. They were dancing. You see people dancing to Sun Ra, man, that's a wild experience, because they do the dances that music makes them think. Which is not that other dance, not "the dancers," who don't mean shit! *[Laughter.]*

Funkhouser: Puts your body in a different kind of motion, a mind-body connection.

Baraka: That's right. What they hear makes them feel different.

Funkhouser: It's not just thumping or pulsating, mindless disco.

Baraka: Right. So when they begin to imitate that [Sun Ra], man, it's a weird thing. We did that over here in Newark, just a few blocks from NJIT. Where we lived on Stirling Street we used to have this big vacant lot at the end of Howard, a big abandoned vacant lot. We brought the band in there one night and, man, that was the same thing. With those weird costumes and stuff and the sun going down. The people loved it. They thought it was some kind of wild release.

Funkhouser: The police probably didn't like it too much.

Baraka: No, they didn't like it. They wanted to know what those people was doing up there at night with all this weird music.

Funkhouser: Last time I was at Ras's Verse-4-Verse [a poetry reading series in Newark co-hosted by Baraka's son Ras], the police showed up.

Baraka: To do what?

Funkhouser: A noise complaint, or whatever, something.

Baraka: Noise? Poetry reading noise?

Funkhouser: Well, you know they have a house band that's playing the whole time.

Baraka: Oh yeah.

Funkhouser: It's bound to happen. How come in your *Autobiography* there's almost nothing about JIHAD and there is nothing about *The Cricket*?

Baraka: I probably just wasn't thinking about it. Do you mean the last version? I don't know. I don't even remember that, but it's probably true.

Funkhouser: It was at the time of the Newark rebellion that the magazine was coming out, so there were a lot of other activities going on...

Baraka: I think we're just now getting around to summing a lot of that up. We just brought *A Black Mass* out, we're bringing *Black and Beautiful* back out, and *Nation Time*. We're going to bring all that stuff back out because for a minute we were alienated from a lot of that stuff because it was such a Nationalistic kind of thing. But the way I came to think about that is that you can't cover your tracks. It's better to show how you got to where you are, not claim that you were there all the time.

You can look at what's his name—[W.H.] Auden—who in the 30s is supposed to be some kind of neo-Marxist, and then you check him out in the 50s and he's become something totally different. It's like, wait a minute, how did you get there?

Funkhouser: The other day I heard this radio show that you did on WAMU, on the Internet, and you were talking about authors showing their process of change.

Baraka: Yeah, right, I was in Maryland to do some promo for my book of fiction that just came out. They were asking me about that. People always ask me about that, but, hey, I want to know the other way around: How come you haven't changed? You mean, you think you could think the same things forever? That's wild. I don't know how you do that. But I think people change and sometimes people don't know that they have, not themselves and other people, since they're not constantly mouthing it.

Funkhouser: It doesn't seem like you were trying to cover your tracks. That's not how I was thinking of it. I was more surprised in doing the research that it wasn't there. A couple of weeks ago I asked Nate Mackey if he remembered *The Cricket*. He said he did, so I asked him if there was any reason he could think of why Amiri wouldn't want it to be known. He said, "No, probably just a blink of an eye for Amiri. He basically moved on."

Baraka: That's it. That's what it was, nothing else. But, see, there's a problem with that because, again, when you experience a political upsurge, a cultural upsurge, you have to maintain those cultural institutions, you cannot abandon them. You cannot abandon them because there is a lot of information in those that certain people will not get anywhere else.

Funkhouser: Totally. The spirit of it too. The content of that magazine, even outside of its Nationalist context, to me, as a musician, as someone who is interested in that vein of music, it transcends that political dispute. It's really powerful creative expression, which is what we all need.

Baraka: You see, the political left still doesn't understand that, I don't believe, they still don't understand the value. They don't understand. When they see the thing with Springsteen, for instance—with the "41 Shots"—they don't understand that? They don't understand the power of that? How many little fucking lectures would you have to give over in some little college—and here's this guy: BOOM! Suddenly, not only is that thing back out but then you see the class struggle still going on. I did a poem like that on Giuliani and put it on the Internet, "A Modest Proposal for Giuliani's Disposal." I put it on this list thing. Thousands of people must have seen it because I started getting all these reactions. The point is, to me that's a very valuable thing. Because that's a weapon that you have, that you can use: CHOOM! It's like Lu Hsun say, daggers and javelins. That's what you got to use. You use your dagger for close work and the javelins for enemies who are trying to get up the street. You ever read him, Lu Hsun, the Chinese writer? He was a great writer. *Diary of a Madman*?

Funkhouser: Yeah.

Baraka: He's a great writer. Not known too well, because, well, he was too far to the left. He wasn't a Marxist, but he was the strongest anti-imperialist figure in that period, just as Mao came in, even co-existing with them. He had to write under conditions of extreme censorship. But still it's funny reading that, because you can see, you can learn the skill of signifying, how to signify, how to infer.

Funkhouser: That's what the Expressionists did. The Futurists were allowed to be more direct, though they had Stalin looking over their shoulder, they could only go so far. People had to protect their lives, had to veil a certain amount of what they were saying.

Baraka: Even the Russians. You know, with Lenin there was a whole book on imperial criticism, where he has to call the religious people "fideists," like faith-ists, rather than say priests, and things like that. You look at it and go, "What the fuck is a fideist?" Then you have to look it up in the commentary. So with the Futurists, the other problem they had also, you remember, is that they had ones that were far right in Italy and Germany, they carried on like that. Who was that, Marinetti and those people? You see, the most dangerous thing to me is a skilled artist who's on the wrong side. You see them everyday. I mean the movies, shit like that, books and everything. Somebody who really is telling you that there are masses of people who need to die, all that kind of shit. My God. Because they can really get to people's minds. They have people believing abnormal shit.

Funkhouser: What's A.B. Spellman doing now?

Baraka: He's still works for the National Endowment for the Arts. I don't know if they've folded some of that in—he was in charge of a sector called Expansions Artists or Small Art Groups. We're planning on trying to make some grant proposals to them. Plus the guy who heads up the N.E.H. now is an old friend of mine, a really good guy, Bill Ferris. We taught together at Yale and he's a real bright dude. He was the head of the Southern Culture Center at the University of Mississippi. He used to do all these—gee, that would be great to get some of those films—he did short films on southern culture, particularly on Mississippi, and things like that. When we team-taught a course up at Yale, man, some of the films that he had were amazing. Show you how the slaves actually could play the broom. They played the broom, you know, which is really they played the cymbals. In other words, they'd get a new broom and when the people leave they'd get on the floor, man, “shoo shoo shuumshuum shoo shoo shuum” *[makes whisking sound]*. They had developed that. And he had some flicks of that cool thing. And then that thing about Tony Williams and Africa, I told you about that, right?

Tony Williams, he lectured—he goes to Africa with him, they set up on the shore and he starts playing the drum set *[makes wild percussive sounds]*. Then a few minutes later, from across the brush *[more percussive sounds with hands]*, somebody answers him, says, “We hear you, we hear you all”—because they think it's a bunch of people, 'cause that's an industrial instrument—“but we do not understand what you're saying.” The thing is that the Middle Passage has separated the African from speech-music connection. I don't think people understand the real damage that was done when they separated their speech from their music. Because to be able to say, “Hey, come here” *[percussion with hands]*, and just to be playing *[wild percussion sounds]*, which is abstract expressionism, it does something to you apparently. We'll see.

Funkhouser: Do you think the same thing is true in the Caribbean, with Caribbean music's relation with Africa?

Baraka: I think so, yeah. Because they took the—that's where the steel drum comes from. They took drums away from them so they start playing barrels as drums. Down in places like Martinique and those little islands they actually play barrels. They cut barrels in half and it's the same thing. When the word got out that the drum was a dangerous kind of communicator they took 'em. So they had to find ways to do that, whether it was tap dancing, hambone or play like Cecil Taylor, “dat dat dat dat da doom,” it's the same thing. We saw him up at—did you see that concert—were you up there at Columbia? Max Roach and Cecil, that was heavy. Who else was up there—someone else was up there—another big group of saxophones—three groups. It was elaborate. Columbia had it done elaborately with a reception, the foods, all that kind of stuff. They had a VIP section, which was about a half mile away from the stage. Well, it was cool,

because the people close to the stage were sitting on the ground and it was cold out there. It was a nice thing, though, very nice. Since it was free, there were thousands of people. You could see almost everybody you knew around the music. All the musicians, man, it was a nice thing. Cecil was wearing some see-through pants!

Funkhouser: That doesn't surprise me.

Baraka: No, it doesn't surprise me at all, but I said, "My God, this is incredible." He's deep in that—that's what they were—Ali Baba pants. I mean the *movie* Ali Baba.

Funkhouser: Comfortable, though.

Baraka: Yeah.

Funkhouser: People were really pissed off about his reading at the Poetry Project. I was tripping, though, thought it was tremendous.

Baraka: What were they saying?

Funkhouser: They were offended that he went on and on.

Baraka: Many, many, many years!

Funkhouser: And it seemed like when he became aware that people were irritated, he took off and went further!

Baraka: Yeah, well, with his senses, what he's doing with what he's doing, it doesn't have the same kind of parameters that, say, poets have. He's not thinking about it in the same way. He's just thinking about what he thinks to say. I don't think that a lot of people even know that Cecil writes.

Funkhouser: It's in his reputation but he basically refuses to publish his work, so it's mystique. There's a lot of mystique to it...

Baraka: I saw a thing of his published in the program for this festival in Germany called the Uncool Festival. He's got two or three pages. It's one of those European music festivals he was invited to come to at some time. You know, he's trying to feel his way into thinking what it means to him, what does he really want it to say. At the reading I thought he was going to play, then on the phone he said, "I'm not playing, I'm just *reading*." I said, "Shit, I should play." That would have been interesting! *[Laughs.]* But, no, we have never done anything together, to tell you the truth. Strange as it might seem, 'cause I've always wanted to do something with Max *[Roach]* and Cecil. Who knows, it might

happen. I've got a tape of Archie [Shepp] and Max and myself that I wish somebody would let out, but I don't know what will happen with that.

Funkhouser: Isn't there a recording of you and Pharoah Sanders somewhere that's never been released?

Baraka: Yeah. There's a lot of JIHAD stuff that's never been put out. We're getting ready to release some of that now.

Funkhouser: Is *Sunny's Time Now* re-released?

Baraka: Yeah, by the Japanese—we're suing them, actually. It's a Japanese release. Sunny came in one day—the joker was driving a cab, he came in his cab hat—and asked for the masters, said he was going to sell it to this Japanese company and I would get fifty percent. Well, I knew better than that. So the last time I saw him, he barely talked to me, he so fuckin' guilty. It's pathetic, man. So the next time I see him I have to tell him about his self, "Hey, you, man, you the crook, not me. I don't know why you want to sulk. I'm not sulking, 'cause I never expected you'd give me that money in the first fucking place. Nor did I give you the real master!" *[Burst of laughter and clapping.]*

Funkhouser: That stuff is being protected somewhere, right? You have it safe?

Baraka: Yeah. It's not here anymore. This friend of mine, a partner, is starting to bring it all out. We've come out with Don Ayler's record, which was never released. And this thing called *Black and Beautiful*, a doo-wop record with the Nation Time.

Funkhouser: *Black Renaissance*, isn't that an Ayler record I saw a reference to somewhere?

Baraka: Yeah, the Ayler record, that's what we're coming out with. It's both Albert and Don together.

Funkhouser: You have a record with Rap Brown and Sun Ra?

Baraka: Yeah.

Funkhouser: That never was released either, so all this stuff is unavailable?

Baraka: I've got a record with Albert Ayler and Sun Ra, too. But all of those are tapes.

[Brief interruption; a visitor comes to the house looking for Amina.]

Funkhouser: Did *Black Fire* come out before *The Cricket* started?

Baraka: Yeah, it came out just before. And there was a *JIHAD Afro Arts Anthology*, too. That came out before *Black Fire*. It came out in '66.

Funkhouser: Did it help in getting Morrow to put *Black Fire* out?

Baraka: No. We were doing a festival in these projects, down at Douglas House, with Stokely Carmichael, Carol Cruz and others, and that was something that we used to accompany that. We were trying to do the Renaissance thing, and that was a grass roots kind of thing. We were really bringing some consciousness to people in a way that they hadn't seen it come quite that way before...

Funkhouser: Or since, pretty much.

Baraka: That's true, there was the Arts with a deep political base to it. At the time it was an outside-in-the-street thing, that's a very effective kind of thing.

Funkhouser: To bring people together that way...

Baraka: Yeah, because people don't expect stuff in the street to be of any substance. Either it's going to be somebody talking about God and them or something else they don't have to really think about.

Funkhouser: In that Komozi Woodard book it talks about a Cricket archive in Bronxville. What's that?

Baraka: It's him. Komozi was the editor of our newspaper, *Unity and Struggle*, and he teaches up at Sarah Lawrence.

Funkhouser: Do you know what's in that archive?

Baraka: I have no idea. I don't know what environment they have it in. I would think if he's calling it an archive, it must be public, must be in a library or something. I'm not sure.

Funkhouser: Who's Mtume?

Baraka: Mtume the music star. He makes rhythm and blues records. They had a hit a couple of years ago. He's the son of Jimmy Heath of the Heath Brothers, you know, Tootie, Jimmy, and Percy. Mtume is the son and he was in our organization at one time. As a matter of fact, we did a record called *Nation Time*; he plays the drums. He has a very unique, personal way of playing the hand drum. He makes a lot of sounds on it that don't have to do with hitting it—as well as changing the surface with his hands and with water and his fingers, which I haven't heard too much of, actually. He makes it whistle, actually. Mtume was a good friend and was in the organization after he had come from the Karenga

organization, US. Several of those folks came east when that turned weird out there. He lives in South Orange [NJ] now. He's got a radio program on KISS every Sunday. It's either Saturday or Sunday, I think it's Sunday.

Funkhouser: Do you know if anyone's using the JIHAD films for anything? Are some of them available? I know Rutgers has one.

Baraka: I'm still looking for one called *Black Spring*.

Funkhouser: That's the one from San Francisco, about your trip out to the West Coast, with Huey Newton? That may be the one Rutgers has in their database, maybe in their Camden or New Brunswick library?

Baraka: I didn't know they had it, but I guess they could. What happened to it? When the Panthers first got put together, we were doing what we called the Black Communications Project up and down the West Coast. All those Panthers were in my theater group. This was before they became Panthers; a couple of months later they were all Panthers. The first minister of communication was an actor named Ed Bullins. Marvin X, all those people were out there. Sonia Sanchez was out there, we were all out there, and we filmed this travelling up and down the coast doing four or five plays, and also the Black Panther benefit, when Stokely and Rap came to the West Coast. That's very historic. That's the first Black Studies program. It's a very historically important film. It shows the split between organizations. I have to get another copy of that film, because the place we had it stored suddenly moved and I don't know where they are. I've been trying to find the movie and some other things. I'm trying to find it now, but there are copies of it. The guy who made it is still on the West Coast, he's a faculty person at San Francisco State. He's got copies. You know how that stuff is. I never understood that when I was young, that stuff could actually get away from you. But it can, man. It's incredible the way at one point it's consuming and so present, then the next thing you look up and it's not there! There are people who don't even know about the existence of certain things. Certain things you thought were, "everybody knows this," and you find out nobody knows it.

Funkhouser: That's like *The Cricket*.

Baraka: That's true. Nobody knows about *The Cricket*. They've got some different places but not very much. You'd be surprised. You know what I just got hold of? A version of Sun Ra's complete poetry.

Funkhouser: *The Immeasurable Equation*?

Baraka: Yeah. Now, where the hell—I know a lot of people must not have that.

Funkhouser: No. It's totally obscure. It's put together by these guys who I've met, out west, the Hinds brothers. They do a little Sun Ra publication.

Baraka: Oh really? I didn't know that. There's a bunch. I got a lot of stuff from back in the day, between *Black Fire* and *The Crickets*, and then he gave me some deep—man, one I gave him back for some dumb reason. I don't know. Oh, why did I give it back? Because he asked for it, that's why I gave it back. It was a manuscript that he had that was sort of astral philosophical and I couldn't—but you know I was influenced a lot by him. Sun Ra and I used to talk inexhaustibly up in Harlem.

Funkhouser: Lucky you!

Baraka: But it was I think some kind of mutual thing because I was headlong into the whole Black thing, coming out of the Village—BOOM—and Ra was telling me stuff about his own philosophies, particularly the question of language and sound...

Funkhouser: Of "music as words..."

Baraka: Yeah, a very, very important thing. Very important. I think a lot of people still haven't gotten to Sun Ra in terms of the seriousness of it, the essence of it. They see a lot of superficial flair and this and that, but to look beneath that and to see what really is being said is needed. And, interestingly enough, it's his music that informed me. There's only two or three people that I can listen to every day and he's one of them. That's the test, for me, you know what I mean? I can get up any day and turn on Sun Ra. As weird as it might sound to somebody else, still, because it's still new—there's no grooves like that.

Funkhouser: It's a different thing every time...

Baraka: Exactly. It hasn't fallen into a readymade, like we used to say. You've got to *listen* to that. You've got to listen to it. It's not background for anything, except itself. *[Laughs.]*

Funkhouser: Just a few more questions about JIHAD. The book *We Own the Night*, did that ever come out?

Baraka: *We Own the Night* is a play by Jimmy Garrett. It's a poem of mine and it was taken—the police used it as their slogan. You know, the killer police that killed Diallo, they used that slogan, "We Own the Night."

Funkhouser: It was produced in print or just on stage?

Baraka: Both. "We Own the Night" is done in—that's not in *Black Fire*? No, couldn't be in *Black Fire*, 'cause it wasn't there. My words, "We own the night" are, first, in a book of mine. *Black Magic*, I think.

Funkhouser: Who's Jimmy Garrett?

Baraka: Jimmy Garrett was the president of the black student union at San Francisco State when we were out there making that movie.

Funkhouser: You produced the play?

Baraka: I produced it. I produced the play in San Francisco. It was part of the Black Communication Project, “We Own the Night.”

Funkhouser: So how was Garrett involved with it?

Baraka: Well, he was there. I directed the play, he wrote the play. He used my title as the title of the play. That’s the last line of the poem. The title of the poem is “STATE/MEANT.”¹ They took it from that.

Funkhouser: *Insurrection, War Heroes* and *Junkies*, those are your plays? Your group performed them?

Baraka: Yeah. We performed them at the Spirit House.

Funkhouser: And what was *Home on the Range*?

Baraka: A play we performed. It’s in print.

Funkhouser: It’s yours?

Baraka: Yeah.

Funkhouser: I ask because in the later *Crickets*, you have a catalog which says, “Soon to be published” or “just out”, and no details.

Baraka: *Home on the Range* was in one of those collections. That was a play where we used all made-up language. A guy comes and robs this family and they’re all talking a language he doesn’t understand, [*scats*] “Ba beedle popa a beedle dop.”

Funkhouser: You do that in *Rock Group*, too.

Baraka: We did *Rock Group* a couple of times. That’s a funny play but a lot of people might not dig it [*scats in the made-up language*]—but that’s the language of *Home on the Range*, right there. We used to do that, man, we used to be funny, actually, then we got serious. This guy named Yusef Iman used to do it. He’d be wiggling and kicking, it was too much.

¹ “STATE/MEANT” is the concluding essay in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1966). It ends with these verses: “We are unfair, and unfair. / We are black magicians, black art / s we make in black labs of he heart. // The fair are / fair, and death / ly white. // The day will not save them / and we own / the night.”

Funkhouser: Where was the Cellar?

Baraka: The Cellar? My wife and some other people opened a Jazz Arts Society in Newark and they had a loft on Shipman Street, which is just a block away from NJIT. Then they moved to the Cellar. They had a split in the organization and one guy, Art Williams, moved down, in the same building, to the Cellar and started operating. They had some nice things in there, actually. I saw Sun Ra in there. In fact, that's where Amina and I finally got together, as would-be lovers, in the Cellar, at a Sun Ra concert. Can you believe that? That's cosmic. That would be it, though. Jesus Christ, when I think of that, fuckin' Sun Ra in the Cellar, that's deep.

Funkhouser: Thinking about *The Cricket* now, in that one piece you wrote on Larry Neal [in *Eulogies*], you said you wished you still had it. In other words, reflecting on the things that you were talking about earlier, taking matters into your own hands and so on still has to be done.

Baraka: That's the point, because otherwise you're going to be frustrated. Because you have to do it. There's some stuff that people will understand later, what you're talking about, or they might understand it then but they might not have the same kind of compulsion to produce it.