



REVISED AND UPDATED

STEVEN L. ISOARDI

THE DARK TREE

**Jazz and the
Community Arts
in Los Angeles**

THE DARK TREE

[BUY](#)

THE DARK TREE

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JAZZ AND THE
COMMUNITY ARTS
IN LOS ANGELES

STEVEN L. ISOARDI

WITH ARTISTS OF The Pan
Afrikan Peoples Arkestra and
The Union of God's Musicians and
Artists Ascension

WITH AN Appendix by
Roberto Miranda

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Cover art: (*top, left*) Concert at South Park, late 1960s. (*top, right*) Azar Lawrence, alto sax, and Ray Straughter, tenor sax, at the Sun, early 1970s. Photos by Kamau Daáood. (*bottom*) The Arkestra at the Watts Towers Jazz Festival, 7 July 1979. Photo by Mark Weber.

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TO

the memory of
Horace Tapscott

the Brothers and Sisters of
The Underground Musicians Association
The Underground Musicians and Artists Association
The Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra
The Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension

and

UGMAAgers everywhere

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“The Dark Tree” has to do with the tree of life of a race of
people that was dark,
and everybody went past it and all its history.
The whole tree of a civilization was just passed over and left
in the dark,
but there it still stood.

—HORACE TAPSCOTT, *Songs of the Unsung*

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition of *The Dark Tree* appeared in 2006 and went out of print some ten years later. In the years since, it seems to have become a collector's item, fetching three-figure sums on the internet, much to my regret and to the chagrin of the younger sisters and brothers who have emerged recently in the community arts movement in African American Los Angeles and who have been drawn to this story, wish to know more, but don't have the means to acquire a copy. They have provided the motivation to bring this back in print and I hope it serves them well. With renewed vigor an impressive new generation is emerging, and I hope this effort again stimulates and inspires.

This is a lightly revised edition, which does not go beyond Horace Tapscott's passing in 1999. Since then, the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra (or "Ark") has continued on its mission through good times and bad, satisfying and challenging. Veteran Ark saxophonist Michael Session led the band until his son, drummer Mekala Session, took over the helm in 2017, supported by a strong cadre of veterans and an increasing number of novices recruited recently. Aside from the brief update in the Epilogue, it will fall to another historian in the future to chart the course of the Ark since 1999.

Not a great deal of additional information has surfaced since the first edition, but I have been able to track down and interview some important members who earlier eluded me and whose voices I am pleased to add to the text. It also affords me the opportunity to add a few stories, correct errors, and clarify a couple of points and events. Otherwise, the text remains the same as the first edition.

The book's origins trace to our final taping sessions for Horace Tapscott's autobiography, *Songs of the Unsung*.¹ Horace talked about additional research

that needed to be done in documenting the African American community's cultural life in Los Angeles. He had a way of pushing you to do more. Dance was a particular priority, as he remembered other influences during his formative years on Central Avenue. It was typical of him not to focus on his own involvements and contributions, but given my interests and passions I had to ask, "What about the Ark and UGMAA?" Horace smiled and said, "Yeah, well, that needs to be done, too." He later added emphatically, "Yeah, you can do it, man, because it should be told." Assured of his support, I planned to start researching as soon as Horace's book was completed. To collaborate on his autobiography was a special gift, and now the opportunity to work on an oral history of the Arkestra with Horace was more than I could have hoped. And so it turned out to be.

One Sunday evening in October, bassist David Bryant called with word that Horace had had a seizure hours earlier and been rushed to the hospital. A few days later, he was out of intensive care. As I walked into his hospital room, he looked up from a composition in progress and, nonchalantly, greeted me with "Steve, they give me six months to live." Horace had been diagnosed to be in the final stages of lung cancer. One week later he was home and with the time remaining continued his work, making plans with fellow musicians and supporters for the future of the Arkestra and its related organization, the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension (UGMAA). He also arranged my first interviews for the history. Horace would not live to see its completion, but he did set it in motion and I promised him that it would be finished and that it would preserve the story for future generations.

By the time of Horace's passing in February 1999, I had become a strong supporter of the movement. While working with Horace on his autobiography, he told me one day, "Now you're one of our wordsmiths," which I considered and consider a great honor and responsibility. Consequently, I felt a sense of immediacy to offer something inspirational that would assist everyone involved after such a great loss, to take some satisfaction in what they accomplished, and to continue the movement. By holding their work, their history, their words, effort and commitment over the previous forty years up to them, I hoped that this oral history would act as a mirror, reflecting the contributions and achievements of their lives back at them, and inspiring further efforts on their part and others in this post-Horace period.

The Dark Tree is not simply the history of a band, nor of a music school. It is not a story of young artists seeking their first exposure as musicians and then emerging into the professional realm spurred by sage elders, though

this occurred in some cases. It is a story of the struggle by many artists to rediscover and rebuild community, to forge an ethic of community involvement and to create an aesthetic derived from and part of that involvement.

Under Horace's guidance this movement spanned forty years of African American history in Los Angeles to the end of the twentieth century, but its roots reach back to an even earlier L.A. history and deep into the traditions of this country, ultimately extending in part to the cultural beliefs and practices of West African peoples. During those four decades some three hundred UGMAA artists offered hundreds of free performances and other services to thousands throughout their community. As instigators and key participants in the vibrant community arts movement in South Central Los Angeles, Horace and the Arkestra crafted and offered related arts and music—"African American classics" in Horace's words—as a vital part of the everyday life of their community. In so doing they also presented an expansive, inclusive, noncompetitive vision of the arts and the role of the artist that offered an alternative to that of the commercially oriented music world.

It is also a story largely unknown throughout the American mainstream, much of the jazz world, and even within parts of Horace's community. One of the earliest *Los Angeles Times* reviews of a Tapscott-led UGMAA ensemble, almost twenty years after the organization's founding, refers to Horace as "a somewhat invisible fixture on the L.A. jazz scene for some time now."² The theme of invisibility echoed for the remainder of Horace's life and followed his passing. After the graveside service for Horace in March 1999, his longtime friend and collaborator, the actor William Marshall, arrived late with his companion, writer Sylvia Jarrico. As they approached the freshly covered grave, they noticed the temporary I.D. tag for a "Harold Tapscott."³

The *Times*' observation of Horace's invisibility suggests more about the jazz scene than it does about Horace, the Arkestra, or the music. The failure to recognize such movements is more a comment on the inability of much of the jazz and mainstream media to see beyond commercial venues and into the areas that birthed this art form. Much of the African American audience is where it has always been, in their communities and not in higher-priced clubs, halls, and festivals far removed from those neighborhoods and their working-class populations. While most of jazz journalism, history, and commerce have focused primarily on these typical venues, they've become increasingly removed from African American communities and the music emerging there over the last sixty years, such as that of the Pan African Peoples Arkestra. Performances at parks, schools, social centers, and cultural festivals continue to attract substantial audiences.

With Horace at the helm the Arkestra performed in those spaces for almost forty years and during that time built a dedicated following. Horace's last public appearance was before hundreds, filling the streets of his community in September 1998 to see the Ark and other ensembles in the Leimert Park Jazz Festival. The annual Central Avenue Jazz Festival has taken place since 1996 on the streets of South Central Los Angeles to an ever-increasing audience. Spectators to the 2003 edition, who arrived on Saturday at noon for the opening panel discussion, found every seat taken as hundreds came early just to listen to the reminiscences of a few veteran musicians. Every year the community pulses to many such celebratory cultural gatherings. Horace and the members of UGMAA knew where their audience was and they reveled in four decades of honest and undiluted artistic communion.

Focused on their community, well under the radar of the mainstream media, the Arkestra was rarely documented in standard sources, making this in some ways a difficult book to research. Unlike my experience in researching the African American community along Central Avenue in the first half of the twentieth century, there was little coverage even in the local black press.⁴ At the time of Horace's passing the entire collection of writings on Horace and the Ark—newspaper reviews, magazine articles, and references in a few books—could be easily accommodated in one file folder. A small box would suffice for the community arts movement of South Central Los Angeles, perhaps the largest and deepest of the last half century that included, in addition to the Arkestra and UGMAA, institutions such as ARTWORKS 4, the Brockman Gallery, Compton Communicative Arts Academy, Crossroads Arts Academy, 5th Street Dick's Coffee Company, the Gathering, Inner City Cultural Center, Kabasa Drum and Arts Studio, KAOS Network, Mafundi Institute, Malcolm X Center, Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles, Project Blowed, St. Elmo Village, Studio Watts, Watts Happening Coffee House, Watts Towers Arts Center, Watts Writers Workshop, and the World Stage. Fortunately, this situation has improved in the last few years, more writings have appeared, but there is still much to be done.

Given the paucity of written documentation, history, and analyses, I found myself relying—exclusively in many cases—on oral histories to tell the story. Some one hundred brothers and sisters shared their thoughts with me to make this book possible, not one person refusing an interview request. Without their willingness, even eagerness to remember and the richness of their reminiscences, this history could not have been written, and it is through their voices that the story of the Ark and UGMAA unfolds. They are invaluable as sources of information for much of the history, but they are more. In

their language and phrasing, their ideas and hopes, and in their emotion is also contained much of the explanation of that history.

Consequently, rather than relying mainly on my summaries, I have elected, as much as possible, to present their words in the belief that the closer the reader can get to the individuals involved, the more clarity and insight will follow. Secondhand iterations, no matter how competent and empathetic, must always diminish; they are not the ground itself. The story of the Arkestra is one of hundreds of individuals gathering around, supporting, and living a vision of the arts in their community, each story unique and part of this larger picture. Many did not achieve renown outside of their areas and were just recognizable to their neighbors as part of the band—musicians, poets, dancers, visual artists, or archivists—as they went about their daily lives on the streets of South Central Los Angeles.

Those involved never doubted the validity and the historical importance of their movement. They worked to preserve it and we are richer for it, though there have been the usual quotient of disasters. For many years, Linda Hill, one of the originators of the movement, kept extensive, handwritten journals of concerts—including personnel and pieces performed—anecdotes, and random stories of the people and events in and around the Arkestra. Sadly, all of these were lost, consigned to the garbage bin in the 1980s by her estranged husband.

Fortunately, over the years Ark members assiduously preserved musical compositions and taped performances and rehearsals. The Horace Tapscott Archive, now in the care of UCLA's Performing Arts Special Collections, contains more than seven hundred tapes dating to 1960, and, in whole or part, sheet music for hundreds of compositions, most original. It is a valuable musicological documentation of a grassroots movement and a monument to the hundreds of artists who contributed their artistry to their community. Combined with my interviews and a few boxes of ephemera and paperwork in the Archive, this constitutes the sum of available source material on the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra.

Originally conceived as the history of a musical aggregation, this project has expanded considerably beyond its initial scope to include aspects of both West African and African American cultures in the United States, as well as the history of the community and the city of Los Angeles. As I learned from Horace and my many interviewees/teachers, the story of the Arkestra, its ethos and aesthetic, can only be fully understood when set against patterns of West African cultures and African American cultural history, which shaped their enterprise, and in the history of a community and its social and

arts movements, from the culturally expansive days of Central Avenue to the more recent devastations of parts of South Central Los Angeles.

More particularly, it quickly became apparent that the arts movement, especially after the Watts upheaval of 1965 and the subsequent cultural resurgence, was not only multifaceted but that many of the component parts were inextricably connected. The story of the Arkestra, though possessing its own trajectory and integrity, branched into many other areas and organizations. Consequently, other stories, groups, and individuals are also presented as part of the social and cultural fabric. Even so, given the treelike nature of this movement—in terms of the organizations, geographic spread, and sheer number of individuals involved—I have only explored those branches that bear directly on the history of the Arkestra. A more thorough consideration of this movement as a whole must await another book, if one volume could do it justice. Such is the scope and the depth of the commitment of the community artists of South Central Los Angeles.

Note on Documentation

Interviews conducted as part of my personal research for this book are not individually noted in the text. Readers are directed to the first section of the bibliography, titled “Interviews Conducted for This Book,” for a listing of those sources. All other material, including additional interviews, are documented in endnotes.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When performing within his South Central Los Angeles community, Horace Tapscott would occasionally forego introducing a particular composition by title and simply announce to the audience, “This is one more you wrote through us.” I offer this book as one written through me by dozens of artists and supporters of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra and UGMAA. Approximately one hundred members generously spent hours with me telling their story of this history. To them, my profound thanks. I stand in awe not only of their accomplishments but also of the fire that still burns, fueled by passions and values of the noblest kind.

Undoubtedly, I have missed many others and to them I can only offer my sincerest apologies. I have tried to discover and contact as many people as I’ve learned of, but I also realize the difficulty, if not impossibility, of trying to locate everyone involved in a movement of this magnitude over a forty-year period. I only hope that they see in this history an accurate reflection of what they experienced.

This project could not have been carried out without the support of Horace Tapscott and his family. Horace set the research in motion and since his passing the family has been an essential support in bringing this work to a conclusion. Cecilia Tapscott, Michael Dett Wilcots, Renée Tapscott Wilcots, and Raisha Wilcots not only embraced this project, providing guidance and support at every stage, but insisted, without reservation, that I tell the story as I found it. They also welcomed my partner Jeannette Lindsay and me into their family, an honor we shall always cherish.

The first time I saw Roberto Miranda he was on a bandstand with Horace. Witnessing the two of them in full cry was an experience I’ll never forget,

one that altered my understanding of and reinforced my awe for this music when it achieves such a level of consummate artistry. My lengthy interview with Roberto was key in understanding much of this history. His willingness to then write an analysis of the music of the Arkestra and Horace in an appendix was an added bonus. To you, my brother, a thousand thanks.

I am indebted to the corps of readers, who spent time on various drafts and who will recognize their handprints throughout this text. This project benefited enormously from their knowledge and willingness to assist in my journey through this history. For their time and effort, I thank Chris Abani, Fuasi Abdul-Khaliq, Adam Bush, Kamau Daáood, Larry Dilg, Ron Gottesman, Robin D. G. Kelley, Steven McCall, Mimi Melnick, Roberto Miranda, Cecilia Tapscott, Michael Dett Wilcots, Renée Tapscott Wilcots, and three anonymous readers. The research assistance of my former student Adam Bush was an important support. Mimi Melnick contributed the index to the first edition, a Herculean effort, while I modified it for this edition. Errors and omissions are solely mine.

I have also benefited from the willingness of a few vital community institutions and individuals to share their resources. Mark Greenfield and Muffet at the Watts Towers Arts Center, and Sarah Cooper, director of the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, for making their archives available to me and for providing generous assistance. Harold Hambrick, director of the Mafundi Institute, provided me with documentation on the early years of the Mafundi. Steve Buchanan, formerly a program host with radio station KCRW in Santa Monica, generously provided me with a copy of his interview with Arkestra member Adele Sebastian. George Lipsitz kindly supplied a copy of his revised paper on the Black Artists Group of St. Louis.

For permission to use photographs, I am grateful to the Tapscott family, particularly to Michael Dett Wilcots for making many of his available, and to Larry Clark, Kamau Daáood, Marla Gibbs, Patricia E. Hill, Tamar Lando, Otis O'Solomon, Mark Weber, Michele Welsing of the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, and Jared Zagha.

My fourteen-year association with the UCLA Oral History Program (now the Center for Oral History Research) from 1989 to 2003 yielded forty-seven life-history interviews documenting Los Angeles's African American community through its secular music history. Organized into two projects, "Central Avenue Sounds" and "Beyond Central," they have been an important aspect of my continuing education on this vibrant community and have been essential in writing this book. My thanks to former director, Dale Treleven, my mentor of many years, who first shaped these projects with me in 1989;

to former administrator Alva Moore Stevenson, an advisor, colleague, supporter, and friend since the day I first walked into the Program; to former director Teresa Barnett, and editor Alex Cline. My thanks to the Center for Oral History Research, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, for support throughout.

The Horace Tapscott Archive is now securely ensconced in the Performing Arts Special Collections at UCLA. Due to the original efforts of Music Librarians Gordon Theil, Stephen Davison, and Tim Edwards, the collection was preserved and made available to researchers. I am grateful to them for their awareness of the importance of this material, providing such an exceptional home for the Archive, and also for their readiness to pack their already overworked schedules with my requests for digital transfers of old reel-to-reel tapes.

The completion of the first edition of this book was invaluable assisted by a year's fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2003–4, which enabled me to take a one-year sabbatical leave from my teaching responsibilities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in *The Dark Tree* do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

It was a very pleasant surprise when Ken Wissoker of Duke University Press expressed immediate enthusiasm at the prospect of publishing a second edition of *The Dark Tree*. Ken had signed Horace Tapscott's autobiography, *Songs of the Unsung*, to Duke over twenty years ago and our work together was a completely satisfying experience. To collaborate again with him and the excellent staff at Duke couldn't have been more professional and satisfying. Thanks to Ken, Ryan Kendall, Kate Mullen, Jessica Ryan, and Courtney Leigh Richardson.

Finally, my soulmate, Jeannette Lindsay, has lived with this project since its inception and contributed to it in ways numerous and varied. She filmed my first dozen interviews, worked on the photographs, critically read every draft, immeasurably improving each, and even suggested the title. As I worked on the first edition of this book, she was steadfastly engaged in her documentary film project of the African American community arts scene. The feature-length *Leimert Park: the Story of a Village in South Central Los Angeles* was released on DVD in 2008 and is an invaluable visual preservation of a vital community movement. In preparing this revised edition she has been, again, an essential advisor and editor, despite being immersed in writing her L.A. mystery trilogy, partially set in Leimert Park. She has always been an inspiration—a *Jeannette, due cuori battendo all'unisono*.

NOTES

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

- 1 Horace Tapscott, *Songs of the Unsung: The Musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott*, ed. Steven Isoardi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
- 2 Don Snowden, "Horace Tapscott at the Lighthouse," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 November 1979, sec. II: 11.
- 3 William Marshall and Sylvia Jarrico, interview by Steven Isoardi, 8 April 1999.
- 4 Clora Bryant et al., eds., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

CHAPTER 1: ANCESTRAL ECHOES

EPIGRAPH: Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 23.

- 1 Tapscott, *Songs of the Unsung*, 79–81.
- 2 James R. Grossman, "A Chance to Make Good: 1900–1929," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, ed. Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 375.
- 3 Grossman, 375–77.
- 4 Tapscott, *Songs of the Unsung*, 4.
- 5 D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: an epic of old Mali*, trans. G.D. Pickett (Essex: Longman, 1965), 60.
- 6 See LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 27; Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 272–84; K. Maurice Jones, *Say It Loud! The Story of Rap Music* (Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press, 1994), 17–24; Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of

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