

The Group Live liner notes

Change and Continuity

Although The Group was ended as a working band, the lives of all its members would continue to intertwine over the years.

For me 1987 ended with the recording of *The Solomonic Quintet* for Silkheart Records in December. It featured David S. Ware on woodwinds, guitarist Masujaa, bassist Fred Hopkins and the great drummer Charles Moffett. I would work this band, with varying personnel, for nine years (with the exception of Mr. Moffett, who was a constant). Marion, who had become a really brilliant visual artist, gave me a painting that I used for the cover.

1988 was the year I moved back to Brooklyn at 17 North Elliot Place. My relationship with dancer Mickey Davidson had ended and I was a bachelor for the first time in years. I had some different issues I had to deal with. There was trauma attached to ending that relationship which made me very comfortable in going back to the Sun Ra Arkestra, where I didn't have to organize anything. In fact, I didn't have to do anything but play my horn, sing those space songs, and follow orders. At that point in my life even with my fourth recording coming out, I was very comfortable being a part of the Sun Ra family again. I could hide out there in plain sight.

My work with the Sun Ra Arkestra from 1988 on was significant. After a point I understood that it wasn't just hiding out (if I ever was), because I had realized that I was back in the band to learn some profound lessons. I realized that Sun Ra was one of my major teachers—a mentor for life, in fact. I would officially start practicing the Buddhism of Nam myoho renge kyo in 1990 and that would allow me to see things much more clearly. This period of time with Sun Ra would be characterized by long conversations with the master and a more complete understanding of my relationship with him.

At some point in 1988, I was given an offer I couldn't refuse. The World Music Institute offered me a concert at the Merkin Concert Hall, near Lincoln Center, in June 1988 with both The Group and The Solomonic Quintet. If I wanted to hide, this was obviously not the time. It has to be said that even though there was not any activity happening in terms of The Group, Marion Brown and I had developed a very genuine relationship and friendship. I would go by his apartment and we would rehearse songs together long after the band's last concert. Of the earlier members of The Group, only Marion and Fred Hopkins were available. We did it with a quartet and asked the great Charli Persip to make it with us. The Solomonic Quintet had changed a little since our recording. Masujaa and Moffett remained, but the sax player was Carlos Ward. For this performance the great Reggie Workman played bass. It was an interesting juxtaposition because Fred Hopkins had played in both ensembles.

Separate Ways

In the 1990s, the founding members of The Group went their own ways. Billy and Sirone, at different times and for different reasons, moved to Berlin, Germany, where they

performed together on occasion. Sirone moved because his wife Veronika Nowag-Jones, an actor and a Buddhist, had a home there. Eventually Sirone would also practice the Buddhism of Nam myoho renge kyo. Andrew Cyrille became a founding member of another collective known as Trio 3 featuring Reggie Workman and Oliver Lake. That band is still together today.

In the early 90s Marion Brown moved to a nursing home because of a brain aneurism. He was first placed at a facility in Brooklyn on Avenue D, so I got to see him a couple of times. He was later moved to the Bronx and eventually down to West Hollywood, Florida. That location was not far from a Buddhist cultural center that his old friend saxophonist Benny Maupin frequented. Marion Brown became a Buddhist of Nam myoho renge kyo, too.

In 1991 I would meet my mate for life, Monique Ngozi Nri, while playing with Sun Ra at Ronnie Scott's club in London. In six months we would marry twice: once in New York, in a civil ceremony on April 17, 1992; and once in the UK, at Taplow Court, the Buddhist Center in Maidenhead, on September 27. Interestingly enough, by some strange quake of fate both of my parents would also leave the planet in 1992, within six months of each other. My mother passed in March while I was in Europe working with Sun Ra and my father left the planet in October. I eulogized him one day and the next day I was on a plane heading for the Leverkusener Jazz Festival where I would lead The Solomonic Sextet, this time featuring Douglass Ewart on woodwinds, Billy Bang on violin, Masujaa on guitar, Fred Hopkins on bass and Charles Moffett on drums. It was a great performance that we did on German TV.

Sistas' Place

Sun Ra left the planet in 1993, and in 1997 I began to write a memoir about my relationship with him, *Traveling the Spaceways: A Strange Celestial Road* (still awaiting a publisher). The great poet Amiri Baraka helped me to identify another great poet, Louis Reyes Rivera, who would help me to complete this assignment. Louis and I worked on this project for four years, from 1997 to 2001, at a café called Sistas' Place in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Our daughter Tara Abdullah Nri was born on September 12, 2001—the day after 9/11.

The people who ran Sistas' Place were community and political activists whom I had known about for many years before I came there to work with Louis. They were known by various names, some called them the New York 8, others knew them as the Harriet Tubman/Sojourner Truth Collective.

One of the by-products of working with Louis on the book was that he drafted me into his ensemble called the Jazzzoets. On the first and third Sundays of every month, we would perform at Sistas' Place. At the end of one of those Sundays, the leader of the Collective, Viola Plummer, asked me if I would be interested in being the music director for Sistas' Place. That was 1998. The Brooklyn I moved back to in 1988 was very different from the Brooklyn I had come to when MOBI was in existence. Without MOBI, Brooklyn

reverted back to the '50s. There were no progressive venues to perform at or organizations supporting progressive arts. I had been living in Brooklyn for 10 years and couldn't, for the life of me, find any music remotely progressive or interesting to me besides what we did with Jazzotry on those Sundays. I welcomed the idea of programming cutting-edge music in the Bedford Stuyvesant community. Sistas' Place would be the venue for a reunion of members of the Group in 2010.

In 1999 I did a performance in Washington, DC, with my band called Diaspora (Dispersions of the Sprit of Ra). I was now doing Sun Ra's music in my performances. At this concert I was re-introduced to Paxton K. Baker, who had produced The Group at Temple University 12 years before. Of course Paxton and I had other interactions because he was also a person who loved and appreciated Sun Ra. At this point in his life, Paxton was the senior vice president of BET On Jazz (later BET Jazz, a cable TV network specializing in jazz). When I told him about Sistas' Place, he offered to help us out financially in exchange for some publicity. The network needed to be able to get into the very large black community of Brooklyn and Sistas' Place happened to be located right in the midst of that community. Through Paxton and BET we were able to subsidize operations at Sistas' Place for many years.

1999 was also the year that the Central Brooklyn Jazz Consortium (CBJC) planned meetings to help, once again, place the spotlight on Brooklyn as an area of creative expression in the arts. The communal idea of sharing information for survival purposes was as vital in 1999 as it had been in previous decades. Coming some 14 years after MOBI, CBJC re-invented the wheel to a certain extent. The major difference was that in 1999 there were quite a few small venues operating in Brooklyn, most of them in the Bedford Stuyvesant community, that catered to jazz. I became the Sistas' Place representative and attempted to move the organization in the direction of more progressive music because that's certainly what we were doing at Sistas' Place.

Bang Comes Back

When Billy Bang returned to the States in 2000, I got to play with him, Frank Lowe, and William Parker and a drummer named Abby Rader, at the Knitting Factory. Throughout the time he was in Germany, I would call him just to check in, especially around his birthday. When he came back to the states he came with the serious intention of using his music to come to a better understanding of his Vietnam experience. It was a very courageous act. By bravely looking at the poison of war and turning it into the medicinal force of music, Billy did exactly what is expected of those who are Buddhist, although he never practiced the Buddhism of Nam myoho renge kyo. Billy was quite successful in doing *Vietnam: The Aftermath* in 2001 and *Vietnam: Reflections* in 2005. He also went back to Vietnam and worked on a documentary. This is going to be a substantial part of Billy Bang's legacy.

Billy would be a part of each band I created in the next few years. In 2001 I was offered a position at the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music, teaching the music and philosophy of Sun Ra. During 2004, I also managed to make a recording of Sun Ra's music, *Traveling the Spaceways*. It was originally conceived to be released at the same

time as the book but while I found a recording outlet, I had no publisher for the book. I used Billy on violin and some other musicians who had played with Sun Ra like Craig Harris, Radu, and Masujaa, and some who hadn't, like Miles Griffith, Louis Reyes Rivera, Salim Washington, Alex Harding, Cody Moffett, and Monique Ngozi Nri.

In 2002 I created a band I called Ebonic Tones in which Billy performed. The band also included Alex Harding on baritone saxophone, Alex Blake on bass, and Andrei Strobert on drums. If that instrumentation sounds familiar, it's because it was. Through my involvement with the CBJC, Ebonic Tones performed at the Up Over Jazz Café, a club run by a friend named Bob Myers. We also recorded an album for TUM Records called *Tara's Song*. Billy takes a beautiful solo on the title piece, which was written for my daughter who has been playing violin since she was five. I would imagine Billy Bang's playing had something to do with that.

Ebonic Tones played another, non-musical, role in Billy's life. In 2005 Ebonic Tones performed at the International African Arts Festival (IAAF) in Commodore Barry Park, across the street from where Monique and I were raising our family. One of Monique's longtime friends, Maria Arias, happened to be hanging out with us and after the performance Billy came by and met Maria in our kitchen. They stayed together for the next six years, which were very important years for the both of them. Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction.

The Group—Redone

The first of our founding members to leave the planet was Sirone, on October 21, 2009. (Fred Hopkins, who was not a founding member, but had played many gigs with The Group, left the planet earlier, on January 7, 1999, at the young age of 52.) Andrew, Billy, and I were supposed to play at Sirone's memorial at St. Peter's Church on February 25, 2010. On that night one of the worst blizzards in decades hit the New York area, which prevented both Andrew and Billy from showing up. I actually was able to make it with a trio of Reggie Nicholson and bass player Hilliard Greene (who was in Billy's last group). It took us nearly two hours to get home from 54th Street and Lexington Avenue to Fort Greene, Brooklyn—a trip that usually takes 20 minutes, tops. Out of the sadness of the memorial, however, a positive emerged: it got me thinking about The Group again.

At the memorial for Sirone, I talked about the band and played one of my compositions, "Eternal Spiraling Spirit," in his honor. The people seemed to be receptive. Shortly after the event, I started working on a 25th reunion concert with those of us who were still present. As the music director of Sistas' Place, I work on booking the season to come during the summer months of July and August. This season I wanted to include a slot for the 25th anniversary celebration of The Group with Andrew and Billy. I contacted Andrew and Billy and they were both cool to do something on December 4. We needed a bass player, but rather than replace Fred or Sirone, we agreed to go in a different direction and get Bob Stewart to play that incredible tuba he does. We also sought to add the piano playing of D. D. Jackson. The inclusion of those musicians had the ring of a unique sound and once again we were dealing with people we had played with or had some working relationship with, which was the original approach of the band.

Billy was in a particularly sensitive place. He had been diagnosed with lung cancer that was threatening to move throughout his entire body. From where he was at, he felt we should reach out to Marion Brown to see if we could get him to come up on December 4th. I thought it was an excellent idea, so I called the nursing home in West Hollywood, Florida, where Marion was living. Marion's son, Djinji, returned my call. He didn't think Marion would be able to make it because of his condition. However, Djinji, who loved The Group as a teenager and remembered it as one of his favorite bands he had heard his Pops in, would definitely try to make it.

On the morning of October 18, 2010, Djinji called me to say that Marion Brown had left the planet. In a very strange way, given the fact that we had built The Group around him, it was fitting that we should honor his memory if we were to come together for a reunion. Djinji also told me that there was going to be a memorial service for Marion on Sunday, November 28th, at the Buddhist Cultural Center on 15th Street in Manhattan, organized by saxophonist Benny Maupin and bassist Buster Williams, two very prominent and longtime Buddhists and friends of Marion. The event was very beautiful. Many people I had not seen in years, like Hettie Jones, Dorothy White, Jorge Sylvester, Dick Griffin, and Bill Saxton, were there. I met Marion's daughter, Anais St. John, whom he had often talked about. She has an amazing voice and did a wonderful song in tribute to her dad.

Djinji talked eloquently about his father, mentioning that because he didn't own a copy of Marion's memoir, *Recollections*, he had to get one off Ebay. Marion had published 1,000 copies of this book and very meticulously numbered each copy. Ironically, the one Djinji got was 18, the day Marion left the planet. Interestingly enough I brought my copy of *Recollections* to the service and when I looked in my copy I saw the number was 377. How uncanny is that? That was the number of the building on East 10 Street I was living in when I first saw Marion swagger down the street, horn case in hand, heading to Benny Maupin's.

Our concert on December 4 was not only going to be a celebration of our 25th anniversary, but also another memorial tribute to Marion Brown. We were going to rehearse on the day of the event but my conversation with Billy led me to believe that he might not have the strength to even make the concert, let alone a combined rehearsal and performance on the same day. After talking to Andrew about my concerns about Billy, we agreed that it might be a good idea to bring in another person for the front line. We had already added Bob Stewart and D. D. Jackson to the rhythm section, so to balance the band we decided on Bluiett. Three months before, my family had gone down to Washington, DC, to celebrate Bluiett's 70th year on the planet. It was a great celebration, too! I was cashing in the chips and asking him to help us out. Of course being the kind of person he is, Bluiett showed up and brought some music as well. We called this concert The Group-Redone, because it was.

The concert had been advertised from the beginning of our season at Sistas' Place, and just like its debut 25 years before, The Group's debut at Sistas' Place had created a buzz. On the day of the concert, there wasn't a vacant seat in the space and some people had to

be turned away.

And just like 25 years before, we got a *New York Times* preview and an *Amsterdam News* review written by Herb Boyd, who also reviewed the band in 1986! I was very fortunate to have remained in contact with Jerry Greenberg, who along with his son Sebastian, had published *Jazz Zooms*, a book of Desdemone Bardin's photographs. Desdemone, who had been introduced to the band by Andrew, had photographed The Group in rehearsal just before the concert heard on this recording, as well as on many other occasions during the two years of our existence. Jerry and Sebastian set up an archival table of photos and posters that helped us all to remember that period more clearly.

Another Loss

Billy, Andrew, and I were very excited about coming back together again, but Billy had serious life-threatening issues that he had to deal with. We had a concert coming up in March 2011, and Andrew was negotiating with Patricia Parker for a slot at the 16th Vision Festival in June. Would Billy be around to make these gigs? In February, he had a gig with his band in Finland. He felt that he was going to need to really rest for a while after that and deal with the necessary treatments for his illness. He wouldn't be able to play with us in March, but he was interested in doing the Vision Festival gig—after all, he had done that festival practically every year of its existence.

Since it was doubtful that Billy could make our March concert, I had to think of a possible substitute for him. On the Thanksgiving weekend of Marion's Buddhist memorial celebration, Monique, Tara, and I went to the Stone on Houston Street and Avenue C to see Charles Burnham leading a chamber jazz string quartet opposite Marshall Allen, Henry Grimes, and Scott Robinson. I knew Charles could play, but I really wanted to hear him as a leader. I was listening to see how he might fit in with the new sound we were working on for The Group. (Andrew didn't like the "Redone" part of it so we dropped it.) On the basis of what I heard, I later asked Charles to join us for the gig in March. Ironically, Charles Burnham had replaced Billy in the String Trio of New York, 25 years ago.

The Group's performance on March 5 was a fundraiser for two schools. One was PS 3, a Brooklyn, Bedford-Stuyvesant elementary school with a strong arts curriculum that needed support. I was the music teacher there and Tara was a student. The other school was strictly a music school called the Noel Pointer Foundation, where Tara had been taking violin lessons for the last two years. Monique was the president of the PTA at PS 3 and Vice President of the PA at the Noel Pointer Foundation, so we were very much involved in the success of this venture. The fundraiser, which we called Synergy for the Arts, was held at PS 3's auditorium at 50 Jefferson Avenue. The Group's personnel was Charles Burnham, Bob Stewart, D. D. Jackson, Andrew Cyrille, and myself. Our music really got to people and we were not playing for an audience that had necessarily come to hear us. The whole event was very successful for both organizations.

We were all very happy to have Charles in The Group, but we couldn't help wonder whether the performance at Sistas' Place was going to be Billy's last appearance with the

band. The question was answered very soon: Billy Bang left the planet on April 11, 2011.

In November 2010 Monique's father Cyril Onuora Nri, who was a chief in the Igbo culture and an engineer, left the planet from Lagos, Nigeria. Due to Christian regulations, he could not be buried until January 2011. Monique, Tara, and I made the journey to Lagos to celebrate his life. In keeping with Igbo culture, as a chief Mr. Nri had to be funeralized and memorialized for four days. There were many other revelations we were treated to during our two-week stay, but that one thing—that great people need more than one day to celebrate their lives after they leave the planet—was an important take-away for me.

Four months later, when Billy left the planet I totally understood the need to celebrate his life in as many situations as possible; he had given us so much during his stay on the planet. Fortunately his mate Maria Arias, who was there through one his most difficult periods, understood this intuitively and therefore allowed for a wake, a funeral, and a memorial to be held in Billy's honor. At Sistas' Place I turned my April performance of *Diaspora* into a memorial for Billy so he would be honored four times, just like an Igbo chief.

The wake for Billy was beautiful and the funeral the next day was a magnificent celebration of his life. Maria organized the proceedings with the grace worthy of Billy's stature as a great musician. She had asked me to organize the musicians for a recessional using the song "The Mold of Man" from *The Fire From Within*. The musicians we enlisted included all the trumpeters Billy had used in his most recent bands, including James Zollar, Ted Daniel, Roy Campbell, and me, along with trombonists Dick Griffin and Craig Harris, and saxophonists Bluiett and James Spaulding. Drummer Newman Taylor Baker, who was in Billy's last band along with pianist Andrew Bemkey and bassist Hillard Greene, had played throughout the program but I also asked him to play on the recessional.

We played out of the church onto 120th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem. We must have played for about 20 glorious minutes or more. It was truly an amazing sendoff for a special human being. Besides my band *Diaspora*'s memorial for Billy at Sistas' Place, Maria had also planned a memorial some time around what would have been Billy's 64th year on the planet at St. Peter's Church in Manhattan. That event was packed and some great musicians came out and generously gave of their time because we all knew that Billy lived a great life of contribution to humanity.

Another Beginning

In the weeks leading up to the Vision Festival, there had been much back and forth about whether The Group would close it, as originally planned, or whether we would open it. Ultimately, for me it didn't matter whether we were hitting on the opening day or closing the festival. It was important that we pay tribute to those members of the band—Billy Bang, Fred Hopkins, Marion Brown, and Sirone—who were no longer with us. It finally turned out that The Group closed the opening night and for the closing night Patricia and William Parker, who had been friends with Billy for years, organized one of the most

majestic tributes I had ever seen or been a part of. They put together a tremendously large ensemble to close the festival in Billy's honor. It was yet another truly magnificent presentation of love, honor, and respect and I felt very proud to have been a part of it.

Will Friedwald's *Wall Street Journal* review of The Group's concert let everyone know that even though we had changed personnel, the concept of the band that had started a quarter of a century before was still going strong.

Yet the prize of the evening, and quite possibly the most enjoyable set I've ever experienced at Vision, was The Group ... Offered as a tribute to two recently fallen heroes of the festival, Billy Bang and Marion Brown, The Group consisted of six longtime associates, including pianist D. D. Jackson, drummer Andrew Cyrille and violinist Charles Burnham filling Mr. Bang's shoes. Their upbeat, happy sound was a product of Mr. Abdullah's bright, jubilant trumpet lead (which carried the high end), Bob Stewart's bass role on tuba and Hamiet Bluiett's charging, aggressive baritone sax and clarinet. The Group, which made brilliant use of Caribbean rhythms (calypsos and sambas), played nothing but extreme joy.

Andrew and I had both worked diligently to make this band work. Andrew booked the Vision Festival and did an excellent job of taking care of the business in that capacity. I was the spokesperson and announced the compositions on stage. Everyone contributed equally to make a beautiful performance. The review begs the question: How can a band as great as The Group be buried for 25 years? We can also ask this question for the 21st Century: Is it a higher form of reality for an artist to work independently or *interdependently*?

Ahmed Abdullah
August 2012

Excerpts taken from *Traveling the Spaceways (A Strange Celestial Road)*.