

## Foreword

Horace Tapscott, virtuoso pianist, dedicated composer and conductor, brother extraordinary, speaks of the music of his Ark-estra as music contributive toward the kind of world we want to live in, be a valuable part of, and ensure for our children. It is contributive rather than competitive. It is protective of all that has made black music endlessly fresh and stimulating, welcoming surprise and influencing all within earshot on every continent. For today, it is an alternative music, a real thing, a togetherness and belief in ourselves.

The Ark-estra came together under Horace's leadership, initially in the 1960s, to explore musically the new explosion of black self-awareness and aspiration. Black and brown musicians joined him from many parts of the United States to participate in his work of exploration. They called themselves a Society for the Preservation of Black Music and they called themselves UGMAA. They began giving performances in community centers and parks, where they handed out percussion instruments in wood, hide, metal, and shell to everyone in the audience—adults and children—who wanted to join in, who had something to say and was willing to try to say it, and who held, perhaps for the first time, an instrument with which to begin.

UGMAA meant whatever it needed to mean. As the Underground Musicians Association, and later the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, it meant the underground stream of African mu-

sical origins, and it meant the dark earth underground where roots push deep and spread, and it meant the groundswell below that ultimately restructures the surface. It was an African word, too: *ugmaa*. Like *maana*, which means “meaning”; *mbona*, “why”; *njaa*, “hunger”; and *umba*, “to create.”

As a communicator, a chronicler of the times, and an actor, it is my customary way to view it all as drama, as a ceremonial procession toward the common goals that hold us together and sustain hope. Those who began the trek with us and who were felled by deprivation—dear, dear ones—we grapple them tightly to our souls and carry them gladly, to be rescued with us because remembered.

When Horace comes tipping, tapping, and finger-dancing forth on that keyboard, it isn't long before you realize that you're in the world of Tapscott, where he is master of the black and white keys to harmony and discord, where he shows us the way—in the fresh and complex unity of his Ark-estra—on our long trek together to the Ark.

The muted trumpet sings a lyrical remembrance of things rich and excellent in the high harmony of relationships. The flute and piano join in the unwonted key of peace that remembrance brings. The sounds of our black odyssey are strident, sudden, aggressive in their assault on the elements, wind and dust, dense thorny brush and pollutants, that would bar our way.

The giant awakens  
Sunders his bonds  
With the leverage  
Of brotherhood  
And moves toward home  
as Dem Folks.

William Marshall  
*Los Angeles, 1998*

## Preface

It's a warm summer night in southern California in the mid-1990s. In the courtyard of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, a standing-room-only crowd is riveted to the intense sounds coming from a jazz trio: pianist Horace Tapscott, bassist Roberto Miguel Miranda, and drummer Fritz Wise. As the last notes of "The Dark Tree" fade into the night, the audience erupts into vigorous and sustained applause. All are on their feet and many are yelling. Through the din, I hear two middle-aged suits behind me exclaim, "Who is he?!" "Where did he come from?!" No one around them seems to know.

Another Friday night, and Horace walks past KAOS and 5th Street Dick's in the Leimert Park district of South Central Los Angeles. As he turns the corner onto Degnan Boulevard and moves toward the World Stage, his presence in the village is marked by seemingly everyone he passes on the crowded street. Many say hello and some want to talk. He hasn't played a note yet.

For most of his adult life, Horace Tapscott has been one of the most creative and inspiring figures in contemporary music and his community. Yet, because of his choice to eschew the commercial mainstream of the jazz world and commit himself to the improvement of his community through music and grassroots social activism, he remains a lesser-known figure in this country, even in his own city, than his talent, accomplishments, influence, and international standing merit.

From his unique and powerful compositions, to the generations of artists who have come of age learning and working with him, to the members of the African American community of South Central Los Angeles who have benefited in so many ways from his presence and involvement, this is a life whose meaning and richness transcends a particular art form. His music was grown in neighborhood soil, and it is through his music and the projects that have formed around it that Horace has fought to transform the community. His uncompromising, lifelong commitment to a genuine and purposive music that springs from the communion of an individual soul with that of his or her community, makes him a true exemplar of a creative and contributive artist.

Before hearing a note of Horace's music, I'd heard stories of him from friends, more like whispered rumors of an underground genius in South Central Los Angeles, who, in the 1960s, defiantly turned his back on an exploitative, racist society and threw himself into the struggle to improve his community. When I picked up a copy of an early solo record, *Songs of the Unsung*, I was stunned by its originality and power. The music was so varied and the approach so clearly individual that it could not be easily labeled, a feeling reinforced not long after when I heard the assertive roar of his first album, *The Giant Is Awakened*, recorded in the late 1960s. It was clear to me that this was an artist of integrity and genius, truly beyond classification, who used and shaped many styles and techniques, from classical finesse to pounding percussiveness, to express and explore a larger vision of humanity.

Some years and many performances later, I had the opportunity to meet and interview Horace for the UCLA Oral History Program's Central Avenue Sounds project. From our first session, the quality of his engagement was the same as if he were on stage. With Horace, there are no boundaries between art and life, preparation and performance. Everything is lived in the present with commitment and intensity. In one not unusual twenty-four-hour period, he went from a gig in Leimert Park to a jam session with Don Cherry that lasted until 6:00 A.M., only to greet me in his bathrobe at 11:00 A.M. and then continue taping for the next three hours, before working on a composition for an upcoming festival,