

## INTRODUCTION

I come to be a storyteller; I'm not a jazz musician, I'm really a storyteller through music and I've had some amazing and unique experiences. When it comes to considering these experiences together, my quest is always in the spirit of our ancestors. Whether it's when I hung out as an inexperienced, green piano player with the grandmaster drummer Max Roach, one of my Brooklyn homeboys, or the first time I played for the great Charlie "Yardbird" Parker; whether it was playing in a little Army band during the war trying to dodge bullets, or hanging out with Thelonious Monk and being part of his vast sphere of influence, or being mesmerized by Sufi masters—I'm constantly assembling all these forces to create my message, a message which comes directly through me, passed down from the ancestors and ultimately from the Creator.

In 2006 I passed a milestone of eighty years on the planet, so I've been on this path a long, long time. You know how life is: something that happened to you thirty, forty years ago you don't necessarily carry in your conscious mind; it's always there, buried in the deepest recesses of your mind, but influential nonetheless. Sometimes you can't properly value what transpired at a particular time until many years later; then what I like to think of as your cultural memory kicks in. But the constant theme of my life that came directly from my mom and pop and our neighborhood in Brooklyn . . . was to fight for black people, for the liberation of our minds and spirits. Black people are in a constant struggle on this planet; we are not completely respected for our enormous contributions, we are globally downtrodden and that must change.

In order to enact positive change we must remember the greatness of our ancestors, we must open up our creative minds, open that door that we've sealed as a result of being taken away from our Motherland and enslaved. Additionally, we must celebrate our own diversity as a people, because we are a very great people with unlimited spiritual resources.

I have always worked to be a part of that collective uplifting. I grew up

in a truly vibrant time in the twentieth century, when such peerless giants as Paul Robeson, Adam Clayton Powell, Sugar Ray Robinson, Langston Hughes, Joe Louis, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Jimmy Lunceford, Hazel Scott, and other great black masters walked the earth; all very powerful, proud black men and women.

My very existence dictates that even before the importance of music in my life comes pride as a black man; even if I didn't play music I'd still be fighting and striving for black people. Music has been a way for me to convey that struggle; I've been blessed, gifted by the Creator with the power of music. But before the music came tremendous pride, coupled with anger at what racism has done to my people. That foundation of dignity and strength comes from growing up in a segregated, racist society; growing up alongside people who were considered a "minority."

I was endowed with the belief that "I know that no man is better than me," so as a result I grew up spiritual but irate at our collective condition as a people. I use the music as a way to unite all people. I use the music as a vehicle to illustrate that we can develop and have developed a unique language and way of being that you cannot steal, because when we go back to our tradition you can't steal the spirituality of African people. Africa is so deep that no matter how many times I return there I never fail to be educated and further immersed.

I've followed this path naturally. I don't think it was a master plan in my head, but I think it stems from my father's insistence and teachings that I am an African born and living in America; therefore I must make a broader examination of myself. I have to recognize that my ancestors did not begin with my grandfather or my great-grandfather; my ancestors go all the way back to those remarkable people who built ancient civilizations. This music is my way of continuing the struggle of James Reese Europe, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Cheikh Anta Diop . . . all of our great men and women; my quest is to try and continue in their tradition, to use my music to enrich our people.

Growing up in Brooklyn, surrounded by revolutionary Panamanians, Jamaicans, and African Americans . . . we had our own institutions, like the black-owned Paragon Bank, inspired by the Marcus Garvey movement in Brooklyn . . . the list is endless. Out of that incredible Brooklyn environment come Max Roach, Randy Weston . . .

Our people were fighters and in the ensuing years we've acquired a soft underbelly that has made us extremely vulnerable. When people say to me,

“Man, what you’re doing is fantastic,” I say, “Man, you don’t know your history.” If you knew what our people were doing in the ’20s . . . Ellington and all those people wrote powerful music about black people. And that’s what I’m trying to do: write and play music celebrating the spirits of our ancestors, music about the historic greatness of our people, music to uplift us all: black, brown, beige, red, yellow, white . . . God is the real musician. I’m an instrument and the piano is another instrument. Africa taught me that.