
Book Review: *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest*

Hanif Abdurraqib. *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2019. 216 pp.

Childhood listening choices rarely stand up to adult scrutiny. My Milli Vanilli phase, for example, was regrettable—not because the music was bad, not even because it wasn't theirs, but due to the simple zeal of my fandom. Complete with bedroom posters and questionable clothing choices, that too-long moment in time was, at once, an effort at individuality and blending-in. As a Black working-class kid in the 1980s and 90s Midwest, I was in desperate need of something to believe in. The factories that employed my uncles and aunties were closing while prisons proliferated. State aid was rolled back as the cost of living increased. Add to this the cultural isolation of that geography. Much of our popular culture was imported from the coasts (and, later, the South) but even with that it was selective. I experienced a radio with little interest in New Edition or Anita Baker and before we claimed Common Sense, Kanye West, and Eminem. If you were in the know, you knew. If not, you had a constant stream of hair bands, teen pop, and, if lucky, those few that I'd still choose today, such as Prince or Hall and Oates.

Music writer and poet Hanif Abdurraqib is also from the Midwest—Columbus, Ohio, to be precise—and of the “era when we learned not to waste songs” (108). He may have had the occasion to listen as I listened had it not been for his incredible curiosity, which covered the gamut from the jazz of his home to the new popular forms that were as complicated, or at least as dangerous, as those horns and keys. Hip hop was a mainstay in his Walkman, a quickly aging technology that his class position would not allow him to abandon. Mixtapes and bootlegs helped him to curate not only a listening experience for himself but also for others, and in doing so he found space to be. “My crews and crews like mine were at home, watching sitcoms and cartoons, or dubbing tapes from the radio,” he writes. “This, too, was a feature of survival. We weren't cool, but people would come to us to find out what *was* cool” (36, emphasis in original).

Assisting him in the pursuit of cool was the Queens-based crew A Tribe Called Quest (ATCQ). Originally composed of emcee and primary producer Q-Tip (Kamaal Ibn Fareed), emcee Phife Dawg (Malik Izaak Taylor), DJ and producer Ali Shaheed Muhammed, and hypeman and emcee Jarobi White, ATCQ now appears in the sightlines of hip hop as if they've always been there. In *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest* Abdurraqib provides a plot for this possibility by bringing ATCQ with him

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wherever he goes; as he touches down in various times and places—in Ohio, Texas, and New York—we hear Tribe. This is the hoped-for genius of a cultural memoir: at its best, it tells many stories at once and all with an eye—or, in this case, ear—towards the struggle and growth and pleasure that readers themselves may not notice or may be unable to articulate. Abdurraqib accomplishes this through a provocative, if uneven, recording of how they became them and we became us. That he also sets a scene for the political world and stakes of ATCQ’s emergence is a crucial addition to the historiography of a genre that, he argues, gained its political life in the darkness and chaos of 1977, “when someone threw the first rock or brick into a glass door or window and walked inside a store to retrieve a mixer . . . when [hip hop] took food out of one person’s mouth to put food into another’s” (16).

From this tradition emerged the band of merry marauders, whose six albums provide a rough chronology and opportunity for meditation in *Go Ahead in the Rain* but do not define it. True to the subtitle, the narrative history of the group and their time is cut with love letters to individual members of the group (all except Jarobi). Chapter Four provides one of the more ornate and astute examples, which is dedicated to *The Low End Theory* (1991), “the type of political album that the world needed at the time: one that wrapped its politics in ideas of a type of freedom” (59–60). Two letters each to Q-Tip and Phife Dawg introduce us to Abdurraqib’s one-sided correspondence. Far from a case of unrequited love, he’s responding to their rhymes with some lyrics of his own. Here he begins a cross-chapter exchange about sports with Phife, especially his beloved New York Knicks. The intimacy with which Abdurraqib pursues Phife is revealed in the detailed knowledge that he drops, which feels less like a flex than a bond: “Phife, I love [former Knicks point guard John] Starks as I love you, perhaps because both of you strike me as people I would want by my side if something were to go down that I didn’t know if I could find my way out of” (54). Phife was a fighter and a comedian with skillful rhymes that provoked “in the name of something that might make a listener laugh for a while, and damn did we need to laugh, because the police beat a man right there in the street and we all watched it on television, Phife” (63). Here is the vibration that Abdurraqib mentions to Tip a few pages earlier—the low end “where the bass and the kick drum exist” (51). The kicks, the batons, the weapons—even those that are not visible are likely to cause injury: “I’ve been thinking a lot about invisible weapons and how they relate to the body itself. I have nothing on me, but in the wrong neighborhood, I have everything on me,” he writes to Tip (57).

The book’s haunting by Rodney King, Michael Brown, Ohio’s Tamir Rice, and others reveals that this story is fundamentally one of loss—loss of technologies, sounds, careers, friendships, people. The last of these is the principal burden, of course, and sends us directly to the five-foot assassin, Phife Dawg, who passed away of complications from diabetes in the months leading up to ATCQ’s 2016 reunion, *We Got It From Here . . . Thank You 4 Your Service*, and to whom *Go Ahead in the Rain* is dedicated. The book’s pronounced reflections on death are not linear nor are they tidy. In that way they mirror the issue under discussion. As the title reveals, this journey takes us through a storm and is therefore prone to detour. One of the more significant incidents appears in Chapter

Seven, which takes up the 1998 album *The Love Movement* and the near simultaneous October release of *The Source* magazine in which a cover image of Phife Dawg, Q-Tip, and Ali Shaheed Muhammed is captioned, “Exclusive Interview: BREAK UP! A Tribe Called Quest Disbands.” After a discussion of that magazine and its critical praise for ATCQ, Abdurraqib transitions into a brief review of the famed Black life magazine *Jet* and its coverage of death during the decades of the fight for civil rights. The infamous, iconic deaths of teenage victim of white vigilantism Emmitt Till (d. 1955) and soul powerhouse Otis Redding (d. 1967) were documented in its pages, and they become an opportunity for Abdurraqib, although toward what ends is unclear. His descriptions of each death are heavy, especially the details of the plane crash that killed Redding, and pulled me firmly away from 1998, ATCQ, and the verve and anticipation that Abdurraqib previously built through mourning. Here the grief was a full stop.

Most will come to this book with an understanding that something crucial in our world is gone and will leave with an even more pronounced sense that the gaps are exposing themselves with ever more rapidity. As Abdurraqib shrewdly observes, “It’s all low, all the time” (63). In an effort to think “about how we keep our ghosts close to us” (181), *Go Ahead in the Rain* offers glimpses of connection and intimacy across the many divisions and risks of our time. “The heroic and brilliant Tribe Called Quest . . . the greatest rap group of all time” is the triumphant, complex muse and their creations the “beloved ghost in our ears, no matter what uncertain hell awaits” (185). ■

Shana L. Redmond
University of California, Los Angeles
Email: shana.redmond@schoolofmusic.ucla.edu