

photo: Juan Estevez



MUSIC MAN

an interview with Archie Shepp (RUP '59)

One might wonder how a Goddard theater major arrives at the forefront of a musical era as a tenor saxophonist. Archie Shepp (yes, a published playwright but most notably a musician), has been called out as a key player in the “avant-garde” and “free” jazz music genres.

He has also been described as “perhaps the most articulate and disturbing member of the free generation.” In 1995, the New England Foundation for the Arts presented Archie with its Achievement in Music award.

Archie has worked with distinguished artists such as John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor and the New York Contemporary Five (with Don Cherry and John Tchicai). He began his professional musical career in the early 1960s and continues to play, offering shows in the United States and Europe. I interviewed Archie to find out more about his path in life.

LUISA EHRICH: How did you start playing sax?

ARCHIE SHEPP: I was born in the year 1937 in the town of Fort Lauderdale. My father played the banjo. I was fascinated by both the instrument and the music. When I was still quite young my dad taught me the first few bars of James Price Johnson’s “The Charleston” (the song and the dance were quite popular during the ’20s and ’30s).

Blacks could neither use the beach nor any public facilities that were designated “whites only.” There were no hospitals in the immediate region that accepted blacks and only one African American doctor. Schools were, of course, segregated. Thus, one can only imagine the powerful psychological and emotional relief my parents must have felt when they acquired enough money to leave Florida. A large number of Southern blacks migrated north during the war in search of a better future. My father was able to find a job at the Philadelphia naval yard, Sun Ship, and my mother, through her own hard work and initiative, finished the Apex Beauty School and became a hair dresser. They purchased an old upright piano, and at about the age of 10, I began to take piano lessons. At 12, I started the clarinet, and at the age of 15, my Grand Mama Rose helped me to purchase my first saxophone.

BY LUISA EHRICH

EHRICH: How did you start playing jazz?

SHEPP: I don’t use the term “jazz.” I prefer to call my music African American music, or black art music, or black classical music. As far as “jazz” is concerned, I think the word has evolved into a marketing concept. For example, it could be a perfume, or cigarettes or the name on a box of tissues with which to wipe one’s nose. Moreover, the term is ambiguous. As a noun it tells us nothing about the music itself nor its creation, the way we might expect from a term like “baroque,” or “neo-renaissance.” Some people are even embarrassed when black art is described in terms other than those with which they feel intellectually comfortable (a limited space indeed). In fact there are as many definitions of black musical expression as there are “experts” to assign it a meaning.

Critics have bestowed a series of misnomers and misconceptions on black music and its performers—one of these is the term “jazz,” which was originally spelled “jass” back in the ’20s. Some scholars think this word derives from the French verb “jaser” (to chatter or talk nonsense). Today we are saddled with a host of existential-sounding one liners that purport to tell us what black music is or has become, from “funk” to “hip-hop.” In the ’60s the critics identified me as one of the kings of “free jazz.” How am I “freer” than Earl Hines or Louis Armstrong? They lived in a different epoch, and the challenges they faced were different. It’s a recurring theme, the process of naming the black man’s music, then claiming it.

EHRICH: So how did “jazz” come into being?

SHEPP: In the book, *They All Played Ragtime*, the authors tell us that the United States Marine Band sold a number of its band and woodwind inventory to various pawn shops around the nation shortly after the end of the Spanish-American War. Prior to this time blacks had been limited to playing on home-made instruments, such as harmonica,

washtub bass, Jew's (juice) harp, kazoo, etc. Perhaps the instrument that enjoyed the most prevalence among early black songsters was the ubiquitous banjo, which according to Thomas Jefferson was transported from Africa by enslaved blacks from West Africa. The violin was perhaps the favored European instrument.

After the end of slavery in 1863, blacks began to purchase pianos, and these eventually became a symbol of affluence and mobility. As early as the nineteenth century, a handful of blacks had already distinguished themselves as exceptionally gifted artists, most notably the trumpeter and band leader Frank Butler, the gifted pianist Blind Tom Bethune and a noted opera singer known as The Black Patti. The guitar came along at the end of the nineteenth century and corresponded with the emergence of blues. By the dawn of the twentieth century a few black songsmiths had begun to convert their spirituals, blues and work songs from vocal to instrumental performance. It is this transition which marks the beginnings of what is popularly termed "jazz" music today.

EHRICH: Would you say you strive to educate your audience through your music? What are your social goals?

SHEPP: Musicians have always been concerned with social and political phenomena. This was true of Beethoven, Chopin, Stravinsky, Max Roach, Mingus, Ellington—*why not me?*

I majored in theater while I was at Goddard. At the time I was a student, there were very few opportunities to study music formally. However, theater vied as much for my time and interest as music during that period. In fact, I majored in theater and stagecraft under Professor Joseph Rosenberg. Joe was a playwright himself who had graduated from the University of Iowa. Under his tutelage, I began to believe that I could write plays, too. I had dreams of combining stage images and themes of serious dramatic value with music and dance performance.

However the real world of the professional theater (type-casting, racial profiling) bore little resemblance to the color-blind atmosphere I had known at Goddard's Haybarn Theatre. When I came to live in New York in 1959, there weren't many roles for African American actors. In fact, work for Negro actors was so scarce that a simple ad posted

in *Variety* or *Billboard* announcing the availability of a role for one "male black actor" might draw as many as a hundred applicants, some of them even women. It was these circumstances which motivated me to write plays that would not only provide roles for my own people but substantial roles that would tell their story. In 1964, my first play was produced off-Broadway under the title, *Junebug Graduates Tonight* (we received a Rockefeller grant for \$75,000).

EHRICH: Where is your career focus now?

SHEPP: Where it's always been. I continue to write essays, plays and prose. My most urgent desire these days is to write a film script. I have some ideas that would combine music, dance and social commentary with the celluloid medium. Of course, this is not easy. The creative world is tightly closed and very incestuous. This is all compounded by the fact that the majority of white people in this country

(and they are the majority) aren't seriously preoccupied by the opinions of their black constituents, neither their tortured history nor their anguished future.

If, for example, we look at a film like *Amistad*—the technical brilliance of its construction, the high level of performances, the pertinence of the subject matter—it is arguably as relevant as a film like *Gone With The Wind*, and much better than *ET*. The same might be said of *The Color Purple* (several of the cast should have at least been considered for Oscars, including Danny Glover, Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg), yet I'm certain that such an opinion rests entirely with me, and that's the "rub"—the quandary that besets the black bard, as James Weldon Johnson so eloquently put it:

*"That God should make
a poet black
And bid him sing."* ■



photo: Monette Berthomier

Archie Shepp performing in Vesoul, France in 2002.

Archie Shepp's interview has been abridged for publication, due to space limitations. Download the entire interview at: www.goddard.edu/images/photos/ArchieSheppInterview.pdf.

Luisa Ehrich, the former editor of Clockworks, is working on a master's degree in documentary video at Emerson College in Boston.