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## **“Live From The East”: Pharoah Sanders in Brooklyn**

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Though for most jazz historians Brooklyn remains in the shadow of Manhattan, two previous articles in this journal have documented a robust tradition that can be traced back as far as performances by The Creole Band at Coney Island in 1915.<sup>1</sup> Though often paralleling musical developments across the East River, Brooklyn jazz has also been shaped by the unique dynamic of the borough’s ethnic and racial makeup, as well as the very special qualities of its many, often insular, neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup>

The historically black neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in central Brooklyn, or “Bed-Stuy” as it is more commonly referred to, has long been a center of jazz, with its “Golden Age” of the 1940s and 1950s seeing performances by first-tier jazz musicians, including Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and many others. Though the popular imagination may now see Bed-Stuy primarily as a backdrop for Spike Lee movies, it boasts a black presence that goes far back into the 19th century, with the establishment of communities of freedmen in places such as Weeksville—now part of neighboring Crown Heights. With the construction of the A train in the mid-1930s, which connected Bed-Stuy with Harlem, the neighborhood became a cultural mecca that rivaled Manhattan’s larger and more famous African American community.

On 31 December 1969, The East Cultural and Educational Center opened its doors at 10 Claver Place in southwest Bed-Stuy. The enterprise was deeply rooted in the black nationalist movements of the 1960s, and had been founded primarily by educators who had lived through the New York Board of Education crises earlier in the decade, particularly the struggles for community control of schools and curriculum, such as those in Brooklyn’s Ocean Hill-Brownsville districts. Over the next ten years this modest three-story building would host meetings, rallies, classes for both adults and youngsters, and, most important here, some of the greatest musicians of the period, beginning with vocalist Leon Thomas, who was featured on opening night.

Some forty years later, in March 2010, Pharoah Sanders, a perennial favorite of The East community (which had dubbed him “The Reverend”) returned to play in Brooklyn. Though the building at 10 Claver Place was now an apartment house, and no activity related to The East had taken place there for decades, the nearby Boys and Girls High School served as proxy that night for the original center. A brief film made by an independent Brooklyn television station sums up the significance of the event, while introducing some major players in the creation of The East, and lingering over the many fond memories of community members who had been fortunate to live in Bed-Stuy during central Brooklyn’s jazz heyday.



*Pharoah Sanders performs at the Portland Jazz Festival in 2010*

*Photo by Siobhan Bradshaw,  
courtesy of The Oregonian*

## “Live From The East”: Pharoah Sanders in Brooklyn (cont.)

### CLIP No. 1

<http://youtu.be/CXtQ0jfkRR4>

The late Jitu Weusi was the single most important force behind the creation of The East, and he offers important observations about it here. First, it was much more than “a club” as was claimed at the beginning of the clip. At a time when many in the neighborhood felt frustrated and powerless, it emerged as a galvanizing endeavor that would allow control over school curriculum (Uhuru Sasa, the school associated with The East, offered an Afro-centric program), control over businesses, as well as the nurturing of pride and self-respect in the pursuit of a community project. And this really *was* a community project; the building at 10 Claver Place, which had earlier been an artist studio, needed to be remodeled and rewired; a stage had to be built; a kitchen installed; a huge hole in the floor filled in, and so on. Members of the community volunteered time, coming by after full-time work days to help out. Even the iconic sign over the door was made by a metal worker who had a shop around the corner. And once in operation, The East truly served the neighborhood. On weekdays dinner was offered

project. Basir Mchawi, another pivotal figure, stressed this legacy at HISAM’s “Celebrating the East” conference on 5 April 2011: “The East was actually a center for social transformation and cultural reclamation ... You became somebody else. People who came to the East were capable of reinventing themselves.”

### CLIP No. 2

<http://youtu.be/C7SZh7dxCBg>

The intricate and often splintered philosophies of black cultural nationalism during this time were manifested in the controversial decision made by the leaders of The East to allow only black patrons and musicians. This resulted in at least one confrontation, in which drummer Elvin Jones refused to play when two white friends were turned away at the door.

Jazz was viewed by many involved in the black nationalist movement as a way not only to build community but to inspire. Faced with the “assumption” that black people had turned their back on jazz in the 1960s in favor of funk, rock, and other genres, Weusi made a point of bringing the artistry of musicians such as John Coltrane, Freddie Hubbard and others into his classrooms, and he was not surprised by the result.

### CLIP No. 3

<http://youtu.be/XPqd921Aa1Y>

Which brings us to Pharoah Sanders. Very early in its history, The East inaugurated a weekend series called The Black Experience in Sound, which over a period of five years showcased some of the great jazz artists of the time. These tended to be musicians especially drawn to the black nationalist project of The East, and who in many cases were willing to perform for far less than their usual fee just for the opportunity to play for a unique audience at a venue that did not serve alcohol, did not allow smoking, and admitted people of all ages. Of all the musicians who performed at The East, Sanders was the hands-down favorite, and his appearances were always special occasions. Some members of the venue literally rolled out the red carpet for Sanders, put plants by the door, and arrayed the interior with special Afro-centric décor. Much of this response had to do with Sanders’s own generosity of spirit, but his music of the time, steeped in African



*Sign over door at 10 Claver Place, Brooklyn  
Photo courtesy of Basir Mchawi*

for a nominal fee to all comers, food famously cooked up by Mama Lottie, who provided nourishing meals that became so well known locally that she and other women at The East started catering for other local schools and events in the neighborhood. The very experience of being involved with The East—which could mean something as simple as mopping the floors or washing dishes—was truly transformative because there was such a strong sense of working together with other African Americans on a positive community

## “Live From The East”: Pharoah Sanders in Brooklyn (cont.)

music and tradition, also gave a special voice to The East’s mission. At least at the outset, The East was non-sectarian, but “spirituality,” loosely-defined, was a central tenet of the Center’s take on black nationalism. As Central Brooklyn Jazz Consortium (CBJC) member Jo Anne Cheatham noted in the clip above, Brooklyn is a borough of churches, and perhaps a half dozen encircle the block where 10 Claver Place stands. One may also note how CBJC co-founder Ahmed Abdullah speaks of the “spiritual bond” Sanders has with Brooklyn, and how publications director Jeff King was struck by how “spiritual” his first experience of Sanders’s music became. Sanders himself claims that “spiritualism”—the “spirit of the people”—is always fundamental to his art. Certainly, the artist’s continually heightening improvisations over a reiterated alternation of scales could bring about a kind of ecstatic response in the audience not unlike a church service, and it is likely many at The East left a Sanders performance feeling they had “had church.”

Something close to Sander’s performances lives on in the album *Live at The East* (Impulse!, 1972), a record which, despite its name, was not recorded at The East but at a studio with several members of The East audience invited to the session. The entire first side of *Live at The East* (the album has never been issued on CD in the US) is taken up with a 22-minute performance of “Healing Song,” which can be broadly broken down into the following four sections:

1. Long introduction in free rhythm announces the presence of Sanders and his fellow musicians, in a manner that reminds one of the opening of Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme.” Sanders’s arresting sound, backed by vocalists, provokes applause from the audience and feels like a gathering of forces for a ceremony to follow.

### Example No. 1

<http://youtu.be/xPIFy2C1RZI>

2. After this opening the two of the greatest bassists in jazz—Stanley Clarke and Cecil McBee—lock into a groove that is also a dialogue, with one player repeating an ostinato and the other improvising around it. Gradually other percussion

instruments are added in. This groove continues for much of the piece.

### Example No. 2

<http://youtu.be/5JAeeaKrBOI>

3. Approximately a third of the way through the piece, after a lengthy solo by pianist Joseph Bonner, Sanders performs the catchy, optimistic melody of the piece.

### Example No. 3

<http://youtu.be/kEU8Tm3hZCU>

4. Over the span of several minutes the piece gradually develops intensity, with trumpeter Marvin Peterson first soloing and then joining Sanders in building to an ecstatic moment in which the audience joins in. Though Weusi told me that this recording captures less than a third of the true excitement of a Sanders performance at The East, cathartic moments like this help clarify why these evenings were so deeply treasured by The East’s audiences.

### Example No. 4

<http://youtu.be/Vqw3yBrT8uc>

In my conversations with former members of The East about the center and Pharoah Sanders’s performances there, the concept of “synergy” often arises. There was something about the combination of the historical moment, the location, the multi-generational character of the audiences, the commitment of the musicians, and, perhaps, the solidly black audience that gave these events an almost mythic quality. And although The East, after moving to other locations, ceased to exist in 1986, its legacy continues to be felt in Brooklyn. What was once a street fair to benefit the graduating class of Uhuru Sasa school is now the International African Arts Festival. The festival, which since 2001 has taken place in Fort Greene’s Commodore Barry Park, attracts thousands of visitors from around the world each July in a celebration of African and diasporic arts. Whatever the controversies and challenges—and there were many—The East demonstrated the profound difference that can be made by

## “Live From The East”: Pharoah Sanders in Brooklyn (cont.)

dedication, vision, and the desire to improve the lives of one’s neighbors.

Notes:



*Pharoah Sanders receiving SAM's highest award  
from SAM President Katherine Preston  
Photo by Michael Broyles*

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at The Society for American Music meeting in Sander’s home town of Litte Rock, AK in March 2013.

<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey Taylor, “Across the East River: Searching for Brooklyn’s Jazz History,” *American Music Review* Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 2009), 6; Robin D. G. Kelley, “Brooklyn’s Jazz Renaissance,” *American Music Review* Vol. 33, No. 2 (Spring 2004), 4.

<sup>2</sup> For my current work I acknowledge the work of Kwasi Konedu, whose book *A View from the East: Black Cultural Nationalism and Education in New York City* (Syracuse, 2009) ties together a series of interviews to construct a narrative of the institution and its legacy, and my colleague W.S. Tkweme, whose dissertation contains a very insightful chapter on The East. See “Vindicating Karma: Jazz and the Black Arts Movement” (U. Mass. Amherst, 2007).