



APRIL 15 - 21, 2005

The Long Road Home

Kamau Daáood on jazz, open-mike nights and the poetry of Leimert Park

by ERIN AUBRY KAPLAN

Poet Kamau Daáood is the founder, presiding elder statesman, friend and mentor to the close-knit arts scene in Leimert Park — and he has always more than looked the part of godfather. Tall and imposing, Daáood is known around the block for his rakish caps and sage's beard; he has a serious bent and a sonorous bass voice infused with the rhythms of jazz in all its permutations — syncopated, straight-ahead, bebop — that almost all local poets, and more than a few fans, recognize as his trademark.

But talk to Daáood awhile, and what emerges is not an icon but something quite the opposite. Given questions, he often clasps his hands and lowers his head, as if listening for a muse, and searches for the right words. His big voice is generally soft. He seems abashed talking about himself and more abashed by the idea that he might be an icon at all. He's as bewildered as the rest of us by the state of the world but retains a sense of wonder about it — the mark of a poet, but also the mark of Daáood as a very young man in the 1960s, when, at 18, he was the most junior member of the Watts Writers Workshop and a performance poet in Horace Tapscott's seminal, music-as-revolution Pan-Afrikan Peoples Arkestra.



Kamau Daáood, the godfather of Leimert Park

(Photo by Kevin Scanlon)

Now 55, Daáood is finally beginning to acknowledge the possibility of his own place in local letters with his debut book of poetry, *The Language of Saxophones*, a 30-plus-year retrospective published by City Lights. Though he's recorded a solo CD and read nationally and internationally, Daáood had never seen fit to collect his material in a book. Until now.

"I never liked the idea of poetry sitting on a shelf somewhere, lost in all those book spines," says Daáood on a recent morning at Fifth Street Dick's Coffeehouse on Degnan Boulevard in Leimert. This is the recently reborn Fifth Street Dick's; the original was around the corner on 43rd, but closed after its owner, Richard Fulton, died back in 2000. Fulton was a fierce jazz advocate who closely followed Daáood's example of administering to the people through the arts. "I was always apprehensive about putting an oral tradition on the page," he continues. "The voice gives life and embodiment to words. And for me, poetry was always about community. But now I find myself at a certain station in life. I've raised five kids, I have four grandkids. I want to make sure I get the work done."

Saxophones offers a good sample of the work that has made Daáood such a respected figure among black poets, and among all poets who take their role as bards and teachers straight, no irony. Early poems establish a voice as one that is at once fiery and philosophical, scattershot but continually looking for order and reason in a landscape usually devoid of it; thanks to his

time in the Watts Workshop and the Arkestra, Daáood's poetic identity is also decidedly Afrocentric. That doesn't mean he is without humor or a sweeping sense of the absurd. Consider these opening lines from "Dance of the Nigganese," written in the '70s (though they sound awfully prescient now):

*hey pookie,
here the atmosphere
like glitter clouds, loudspeakers around our heads
raining psychic pins and needles
mental puppet strings, electronic witchcraft
skyscrapers build on the foundation of maggots . . .
we are wrestling with bomb droppers
mind mutilators, planetary hoodlums, thugs with computers
drunk off melanin, paper lynchings, corporate cockroaches
military maniacs, industrial idolaters*

Later poems tell smaller stories, with Daáood paring the all-encompassing community down to its bare elements of family or personal heroes. There are "The Men," a heartfelt message to the poet's two sons; "Djali II," a tribute to fellow poet and early inspiration Bob Kaufman; and "Papa, the Lean Griot," a paean to jazz great Tapscott, the man who, along with drummer Billy Higgins, schooled Daáood in the importance of black artists giving their work to other black people as a way of sustaining and growing culture, community and history. A lofty idea, but in "Griot" Daáood makes it simple and vivid:

*i walk these sacred streets
remembering kola nuts and cowrie shells
and how well our uncles wore our trousers
i am horace tapscott
and i am not for sale*

Though Tapscott inducted Daáood into the ranks of griot/healer in the '60s ("I was drafted into the Army," he jokes), it was Higgins who proposed making a real job of it some 20 years later, when he and Daáood co-founded the World Stage in 1989 on Degnan Boulevard. The Stage was a tiny storefront that the two transformed into a performance space; it quickly grew into an institution for jazz and poetry performances and workshops, each week hosting big names and small, headliners and up-and-comers like vocalist Dwight Trible and bassist Nedra Wheeler. The addition of the Stage was crucial for Leimert, which at the time was trying to enlarge its reputation as the L.A. center for black arts; Daáood and Higgins helped seal the deal.

Of course, all has not been empowerment and light. Daáood has lived an artist's life, which means he continually teeters between broke at worst and okay at best. He is also troubled by what he sees as the growing spiritual impoverishment of black people that is exacerbated by money, either the lack of it or its power to eclipse deeper issues of community and history. "So much of this glitter and neon is put here to divert us," Daáood says, gesturing outside to the city and, I suspect, to the world at large. "It *works*. And people want to say, 'Let's not look to the past for anything. Let's let go of our slave past.' It's crazy. Money represents energy, and it

depends on whose hands it's in. But there's so much in the world that needs to be done, so many people being devastated by AIDS, for one thing . . ." He trails off, and shrugs. "We have so much potential to heal, but there's so much we're not doing."

To ease his own money crunch and support his poetry habit, Daáood has worked a variety of jobs over the years — in the L.A. Cultural Affairs Department and as an AIDS outreach worker, drug counselor, and owner of the late, lamented Final Vinyl, a vintage-record store that was on 43rd, next door to the old Fifth Street Dick's. Though sanguine about fiscal realities, Daáood can't help but fantasize. "If I was wealthy, I'd build this community," he says. "It really wouldn't take that much. It seems that those with vision don't have resources, and those with resources don't have vision." He laughs, or sighs; it's hard to tell. "It's an old problem. But look at the World Stage — it does so much with so little. Our budget is something like \$60,000 a year."

Daáood admits he's had to pull back from his myriad duties at the Stage, though he remains on the board. He appears just the tiniest bit guilty about it. "Hey, I'm a junior senior citizen now," he says with a wry smile. "Like I said, I really want to focus on the work. When Horace passed, he had put down a memoir, thank God. If he had died without doing it, the story would have gone with him, especially stories of Los Angeles. How schools and politics and art came together. How many people can tell that story?"

Reviewing his own work up to this point, Daáood claims to have no favorite poems, or great epiphanies, though he does say the process as a whole has been instructive. "I started out very Afrocentric, but then my ideas opened up," he says. "As a young artist I was preachy. You think that what you see in the world, you're the only one who sees it. But as you age, the vanity of youth falls away. Your beliefs change, sometimes violently."

Of the poetry scene he's helped nurture in Leimert, Daáood is somewhat ambivalent. He's proud of it, but thinks the whole tradition has gotten more self-centered and less altruistic than when he started out. "My poetry is more aligned with African tradition, and African tradition has an artist who has a role in the community — a *djali* — who has a purpose," he explains. "It's not to get rich and make records, but to heal situations for some greater purpose. *Djalis* are kind of like secular priests. When people run to open mikes these days, it's mostly about ego — getting 15 minutes, and maybe 15 million. I saw it as a jam session, swapping ideas, getting inspiration from other people. The mass philosophy and mass consciousness we hold nowadays has been" — he searches for words — "dulled and dampened."

Not that Daáood is despairing about what goes on nowadays; life is but a cycle, a grand opportunity to seek out one of the many places, as he says in a poem, that lie between the roaches and the stars. "I'm always searching for those bits of light," he says. "There are lot of young people doing great work. I know their reality isn't great. But there's always something beyond that."

THE LANGUAGE OF SAXOPHONES | By KAMAU DAÁOOD | City Lights | 120 pages | \$10.95 | paperback