

Amiri Baraka: Twin Cities artists to pay tribute to master poet, playwright

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.



On Jan. 9, without much mention outside of certain artists and activist circles, poet and activist Amiri Baraka died at the age of 79.

Baraka was both celebrated and jeered for his biting works that told tales of struggle and triumph and challenged various authorities. The former poet laureate for the state of New Jersey, Baraka, born Everett LeRoi Jones, was a respected and renowned personality, revered as an unapologetic champion of the Black Power Movement. But when Baraka died in a Newark hospital, little was said about his life and impact on American culture in most media outlets. That did not sit well with a group of area artists who decided greater light needed to be shined upon the man they said did so much to uplift African-Americans.

"Spirit Reach: A Twin Cities Tribute to Imamu Amiri Baraka" takes place Saturday, April 12, at the Capri Theater, 2027 West Broadway, Minneapolis. The two-hour all ages event that begins at 2 p.m. and is free to the public will feature a collection of artists including Douglas Ewart, Toki Wright, Shá Cage, Emmanuel Ortiz, Leah Nelson, E.G. Bailey, Donald, Faye Washington, Kevin Washington, Bao Phi, Tish Jones, j. otis powell, Lisa Brimmer, Andrea Jenkins, Davu Seru, Chaun Webster, Truthmaze and Louis Alemayehu, all sharing works in tribute to Baraka.

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powell said Baraka was a friend to many in the Twin Cities and his legacy must be carried on.



"Imamu said human development is like a relay race. He passed the baton to me and I'm passing it to others and doing so in a context that others will understand the man and the movement," said powell, who said Baraka would visit the area two to three times per year. "He was such an important person and the media should have paid more attention to his passing."

An author and poet, Baraka is considered the best-known writer of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Arts Movement is largely understood as the cultural wing of the Black Power Movement. Baraka was always outspoken and came under fire as poet laureate of the state of New Jersey for his 9/11-themed Black revolutionary poem, "Somebody Blew up America."

powell said everyone should know Baraka's name.

"If you don't know who he was then you should know who he was and this event should be a great orientation," said powell. "He was beloved by this community."

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Shá Cage, one of the event's organizers and performers said Baraka helped to mold the minds of many area spoken word and jazz artists.

"For a number of us, Amiri Baraka's teachings and philosophies are so essential that he helped define who we are as people," said Cage. "He helped a lot of us understand the world."

Cage, like powell, said Baraka was truly a friend of the Twin Cities.

"When I first learned of him I was in college and I never thought I would get to know him like I did," said Cage. "He wasn't just some iconic figure that just passed through here."



The April 12 event will be preceded by a reception with food and beverages. Author, Alexis Pate and arts community leader, Arleta Little, will host the event that will feature spoken word, jazz, dance and a video tribute to Baraka with clips of the poet performing some of his works. The event is sponsored by the McKnight Foundation, *Insight News*, the Givens Foundation for African American Literature, Pangea World Theatre, KFAI Radio and University of Minnesota Libraries. For more information call (612) 822-0015.