

Black artist group

FOR PEACE AND LIBERTY

in paris, dec 1972

Face A

Part 1	3'35
Part 2	7'03
Part 3	7'06

Face B

Part 4	4'57
Part 5	4'45
Part 6	8'32

JOSEPH BOWIE: trombone, conga, voice, miscellaneous instruments

BAIKIDA E.J. CARROLL: trumpet, flugelhorn, bass, log drum, cow bells, voice, miscellaneous instruments

CHARLES "BOBO" SHAW: drums, woodblocks, gong, stylophone, voice, miscellaneous instruments
"Under The Sun"

FLOYD LEFLORE: trumpet, voice, miscellaneous instruments

OLIVER LAKE: saxophones, marimbas, mud drums, voice, miscellaneous instruments

Recorded Live at Studio 104, Maison de la Radio (O.R.T.F.), Paris, 3 Dec. 1972

Produced for Broadcast at O.R.T.F. by André Francis / Jazz sur Scène

Music Produced by The Black Artist Group

Composed by The Black Artist Group and Published by Talkin' Stick Music (Sesac)

INA Digitization in High Resolution, Restoration and Mastering: Ian Debeerst

Documentation (INA) : Félix Courty, Annie Lauzzana

Supervision (INA): Christiane Lemire

Remastered for Vinyl by David Hachour at Colorsound Studio, Paris

Supervised by Oliver Lake with Baikida Carroll and Joseph Bowie

Texts by Oliver Lake, Baikida Carroll, Joseph Bowie, Shirley Bradley Price LeFlore, Lyah B. LeFlore-Ituen and Myah Maedell Shaw-Singh

Liner Notes by Benjamin Looker

Photos Courtesy of Philippe Gras: Booklet p. 5, 6, 13, 14 & 18 - Oliver Lake: Front & Back LP Cover,

Booklet p. 9 - Baikida Carroll: Booklet Front Cover & p. 17 - Myah Maedell Shaw-Singh: Booklet p.15

Jazz Magazine Concert Review Jan. 1973, Courtesy of Jazz Magazine, France - Thanks to Fred Goaty

From the Mississippi to the

By Benjamin Looker

This album's release is a significant musical event. Its contents are sure to enthrall the growing communities of fans, artists, and scholars who appreciate the verve and complexities of the 1960s and 1970s jazz avant-garde and creative music scenes. It provides a fresh window into the era's musical collective movement, and it documents the early aesthetic paths of several artists who would later accumulate worldwide recognition.

Adding to this release's importance is the fact that its contents have gone virtually unheard for a full half century, stretching from the concert recording's broadcast on French state radio in 1972 until its rediscovery in 2023. While the tape gathered dust, however, the collective organization that gave birth to this quintet—St. Louis's Black Artist Group, or BAG—has become absolutely legendary as both a creative force in postwar American arts and a model for socially conscious artists.

Because of the collective's posthumous reputation, several generations of music listeners have mourned the fact that BAG and its many subgroups were so inconsistently and haphazardly recorded during BAG's 1968–1972 lifespan. Getting a broad sense of the collective's musical character at the height of its creative flowering has required an act of imagination—a piecing together of impressions drawn from fugitive small-batch LPs of the time (only one of them released using the BAG name) and from the much later recorded output of the organization's prolific individual alumni.

Now, in a wholly unanticipated gift to the music world, the current release of *For Peace and Liberty* brings the BAG “sound” (or at least one distinctive version of it) into focus in powerful and heretofore inaccessible ways. This right here is the BAG record we've always wished had existed—and today it finally does.

Midwest institution building

The Paris quintet performance documented on this album came less than two months after the much larger BAG organization had dissolved, back in the ensemble's U.S. Midwest hometown of St. Louis, Missouri. Yet BAG's accomplishments during its four years of existence were legion, and they inform many of the musical practices audible on the current LP.

To step back a few years in time: the BAG collective had emerged from mid-1960s collaborations among young Black dramatists, actors, and musicians in St. Louis, who found themselves frustrated by the lack of opportunities and venues for risk-taking work. This problem, unsurprisingly, proved even more acute for local Black creators in a city where white-supremacist practices and assumptions held sway across a broad range of arts, educational, and commercial-entertainment institutions.

At the same time, St. Louis had become a significant center for the 1960s Black freedom struggle and its ideologically diverse activist manifestations. Moved by a similar spirit, several BAG founders took inspiration from the tenets of the era's burgeoning Black Arts

movement, which urged African American artists to envision new modes of solidarity, to reject Eurocentric canons of artistic merit, and to apply their talents toward Black social and political liberation in America. In summer 1968, a successful multi-media collaboration on Jean Genet's confrontational stage work *Les Nègres* provided the catalyst, and BAG was formally launched immediately thereafter.

Over the next four years, the collective—reaching fifty participants at its height—undertook an astonishingly packed schedule of cross-disciplinary performances, music concerts, dance presentations, scripted and improvisational drama, agit-prop street theater, poetry readings, youth classes, and visual arts displays. Though dozens of Black Arts-inspired collectives sprang up across North America, BAG was almost certainly the most thoroughly interdisciplinary of them all. Any given performance could meld contributions from three, four, or even five artistic specialties, producing unpredictable conversations and interplay.

For the first three decades after BAG's 1972 demise, it was remembered by critics virtually exclusively as a musical collective—a misimpression and an unjust slight to the vitality of its other artistic components. Yet it was indeed the music wing that eventually earned BAG a reputation stretching beyond its home region.

On the organizational side, BAG's musicians launched collaborative strategies and counter-institutions meant to bypass a club scene and music industry that struck members as economically exploitive and creatively constraining. In terms of aesthetics, they partook in, and helped to shape, new sounds emerging from the free jazz and experimental music scenes of the era. Instrumentalists utilized the full menu of extended techniques; deployed elaborate collections of rattles, whistles, percussive objects, and other “little instruments”; tested out fresh ways of structuring rhythmic time; peppered numbers with startling vocalizations (groans, howls, shouted phrases); and reanimated older traditions of collective improvisation where no single performer solely held the floor.

With participants' interest in exploring silence, space, texture, and subtle colorations, BAG concerts departed from the cacophonous energy-music blowouts sometimes heard in East Coast free-jazz circles. And by integrating references to an expansive range of Black musical genres—gospel to R&B, ragtime to funk, Delta blues to urban boogie-woogie—members situated their experiments within a historical continuum of Black American and African-diasporic creativity.

Despite the success and *élan* of BAG's initial years, the climate in St. Louis after 1970 had become increasingly indifferent or even antagonistic toward members' artistic vision. Concert audiences dwindled sharply from their earlier height. Two separate efforts by BAG members to build independent record labels faltered.

More broadly, local social-movement cultures, always fragile in BAG's conservative home city, began to fracture as the 1960s receded. And the philanthropic foundations that had backed BAG's educational

program refused to renew their funding, blaming the political edge of the group's theater and poetry plus some members' highly visible involvement in social protest activities.

By 1972, the group's shrinking local listenership and emptied bank account led several of the musicians to ponder potential opportunities elsewhere. Saxophonist Oliver Lake took the lead, circulating queries among European jazz writers and promoters. In mid-October 1972, the quintet heard here—Lake along with trumpeters Baikida Carroll and Floyd LeFlore, percussionist Charles “Bobo” Shaw, and trombonist Joseph Bowie (then only 19 years old)—departed for Paris. Traveling on the *S.S. France* from New York to Normandy's port city of Le Havre, Lake, Shaw, and Carroll brought along two touring vans plus boxloads of instruments, with Bowie and LeFlore joining the others by plane several weeks later.

As they reassembled in France, the group hoped to find near the banks of the Seine the support that had increasingly eluded them in their Mississippi River hometown.

La scène Parisienne

Of the many places the five émigrés could have chosen, the City of Light possessed a particular allure and sense of possibility. Paris, of course, had a long history of embracing African American artists, especially dissident figures whose work or politics elicited particular hostility back in the States. And from the days of Montmartre's vibrant interwar music scene forward, the city had boasted an extensive jazz fan base and a knowledgeable cadre of jazz writers and promoters.

Finally, by the late 1960s, a large segment of that listenership was developing a strong taste for the free, experimental, and avant-garde musical innovations then percolating in American arts hubs like New York and Chicago. Several ensembles from Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM)—a sibling collective to BAG, and an early inspiration for BAG's establishment—had temporarily relocated to Paris a few years earlier.

Encountering AACM outgrowths such as the Creative Construction Company and The Art Ensemble of Chicago (the latter featuring Joseph Bowie's older brother, trumpeter Lester Bowie) had primed Parisian concertgoers for BAG members' spirited eclecticism and their distinctive approach to rhythmic time. While the Creative Construction Company had struggled to establish itself, the Art Ensemble's members unexpectedly found themselves transformed into quasi-celebrities; digging their music, meanwhile, became a badge of honor especially among young, anti-establishment French art-scene habitués as well as the city's burgeoning community of expat performing artists.

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Seine: BAG's Paris Sounds

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Their subsequent projects are too numerous to catalog here. A few examples might range from Oliver Lake's work (alongside two other BAG alumni) with the groundbreaking World Saxophone Quartet to Joseph Bowie's hard-driving punk- and funk-flavored band Defunkt, Balkida Carroll's award-studded resume as a film and concert-music composer, and Charles "Bobo" Shaw's 1970s role knitting together underground arts communities in Manhattan's East Village and elsewhere. All of them have recorded multiple times as leaders. *For Peace and Liberty*, then, holds a noteworthy spot in the BAG multi-media corpus: it is both the near-to-final landmark generated by the larger BAG organization and an intimation of the varied and field-shaping artistic careers that would follow.

In 1975, the year after his return to the United States, Lake would describe BAG's members to *Down Beat* magazine as "voluntary specimens in an experiment to present culture as both an exclusive creation of the people and a source of creation, as an instrument of socio-economic liberation." BAG's legacy of social struggle and self-determination, of cooperative creativity and cross-artistic solidarity, is one reason why *For Peace and Liberty* matters as a historical artifact. But the best case for the album's importance is made by the music it contains. What's on these grooves offers one of the best encapsulations of BAG's collaborative musical dynamism ever put to tape—an outing that will reward listeners of the twenty-first century just as much as it did Studio 104's spellbound audience in 1972.

Benjamin Looker is a faculty member in the American Studies Department at St. Louis University. He is the author of the 2004 book "Point from Which Creation Begins": The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis.

Liner-note essay to BAG, *For Peace and Liberty*, recorded in December 1972, first released (LP & CD) by the Wewantsounds label, London, in September 2024.

© Benjamin Looker, 2024

“From the Mississippi to the Seine: BAG’s Paris Sounds”

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Their subsequent projects are too numerous to catalog here. A few examples might range from Oliver Lake's work (alongside two other BAG alumni) with the groundbreaking World Saxophone Quartet to Joseph Bowie's hard-driving punk- and funk-flavored band Defunkt, Baikida Carroll's award-studded resume as a film and concert-music composer, and

Charles “Bobo” Shaw’s 1970s role knitting together underground arts communities in Manhattan’s East Village and elsewhere. All of them have recorded multiple times as leaders. *For Peace and Liberty*, then, holds a noteworthy spot in the BAG multi-media corpus: it is both the near-to-final landmark generated by the larger BAG organization and an intimation of the varied and field-shaping artistic careers that would follow.

In 1975, the year after his return to the United States, Lake would describe BAG’s members to *Down Beat* magazine as “voluntary specimens in an experiment to present culture as both an exclusive creation of the people and a source of creation, as an instrument of socio-economic liberation.” BAG’s legacy of social struggle and self-determination, of cooperative creativity and cross-artistic solidarity, is one reason why *For Peace and Liberty* matters as a historical artifact. But the best case for the album’s importance is made by the music it contains. What’s on these grooves offers one of the best encapsulations of BAG’s collaborative musical dynamism ever put to tape—an outing that will reward listeners of the twenty-first century just as much as it did Studio 104’s spellbound audience in 1972.

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