

STEVEN L. ISOARDI

The Dark Tree

JAZZ AND THE COMMUNITY ARTS IN LOS ANGELES



INCLUDES CD



2 **Ballad for Samuel**

The Legacy of Central Avenue
and the 1950s Avant-Garde in Los Angeles

Hand me Down
my Silver Trumpet

Arna Bontemps

After visiting Los Angeles in 1913, W. E. B. DuBois wrote, “Nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed, nor the average efficiency and intelligence in the colored population so high.”¹ It was an opinion widely shared. Lured by an expanding economy and the prospect of jobs, the relatively low cost of real estate, a mild climate, and a seemingly less-overt racism, African Americans began moving to Los Angeles in large numbers after 1900. For the next forty years their numbers doubled every decade and by 1940 represented slightly more than 4 percent of the total population. Part of a general population growth in Southern California, they came primarily from the South and the Southwest. Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana were important departure points, and Creoles were a significant part of the populace, their many organizations occupying a prominent place in the area’s social life.

A distinct African American community was also an early twentieth-century creation, the result of a rising tide of racism, legally maintained until the late 1940s through racially restrictive housing covenants in property deeds. An oppressive political establishment, hostile Los Angeles Police Department, separatist social structure, and racist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, all contributed to the grotesquely unjust social order, which forced most African Americans to live along Central Avenue.

Arkestra bassist Roberto Miranda is fond of quoting pianist McCoy Tyner’s observation that “pressure creates diamonds.” The history of Cen-

tral Avenue would seem to bear that out. Because of segregation, the community was forced to discover its own resources and resolve, and despite the hardships and indignities, it responded with a vibrant social and cultural scene that would contribute substantially to shaping twentieth-century American culture, nurture hundreds of artists, and encompass many different arts and styles. In its final years it offered creative soil for musical explorers and explorations that would lay the groundwork for the avant-garde of the 1950s and inspire the community arts movement from the 1960s to the present in Los Angeles.

The Community Setting and Artistic Foundation

Extending southward from the downtown area, Central Avenue was the African American economic and social center in segregated L.A. As the population grew through the pre–World War II era, the community expanded along Central from First Street to Slauson Avenue, some four miles south—an area that came to be known as the Eastside. It then jumped some forty blocks of white housing, whose boundaries were militantly defended by the Ku Klux Klan and various ad hoc, racist gangs, to the Watts area, seven miles from downtown. By 1940, approximately 70 percent of the black population of Los Angeles was confined to the Central Avenue corridor and relied upon the Avenue to meet all of its social needs. One longtime resident reminisces, “If you wanted to meet any of the people you went to school with or had ever known, you could walk up and down Central Avenue and you would run into them.” Consequently, according to another, “You didn’t want to hit the Avenue with dirty shoes.”²

Supported by Los Angeles’s citywide electric-trolley system, the Avenue served the community’s shopping and business needs; grocery stores alternated with department stores, beauty parlors, cafes, funeral houses, insurance companies, banks, restaurants, and barber shops. Yet, despite the changing demographics, many of these businesses remained white owned. Fueling discontent was the practice of not hiring African Americans, a policy protested by the Urban League and Leon Washington, the founder and editor of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. Early in 1934, under the slogan “Don’t Spend Your Money Where You Can’t Work,” they organized demonstrations and protests along Central Avenue, forcing many stores to open their doors to equality in hiring.³ Nevertheless, a significant number of black enterprises flourished, such as the Dunbar (originally the Somerville) Hotel, Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, the *California Eagle* and *Los Angeles Sentinel* newspapers, theaters, clubs, restaurants, and dozens of small retail stores.⁴

As the sun set, the bustle of shoppers, clerks, and businessmen was replaced by the swagger of the night crowd. Dressed in the sharpest clothes and groomed to the nines after a session with the barber or hairdresser, the denizens of the Avenue hit the streets sartorially splendid and prepared to participate in the night-long social life. As reed player and lead alto with the Count Basie Orchestra, Jackie Kelso, remembers the scene, "Suddenly, there's an aura of mysterious wonderfulness. . . . There's a new, special magic that comes, a type of paintbrush that paints all of the flaws. New glamour comes to life. It's almost as if special spirits of joy and abundance bring special gifts at night that are not available in the sunshine."⁵ With a nonstop, vibrant club scene, the Avenue not only produced some of the major voices in jazz and rhythm and blues (R & B) but was the only integrated setting in Southern California during that period, as all races and classes gathered to enjoy the community's finest artists and entertainers.

As the center of a substantial black community, approximately one-third of which were homeowners, Central Avenue's music scene was not dependent upon or characterized by one particular style or by one particular generation of musicians. For the first fifty years of the twentieth century it was home to all African American styles and musicians, an omnipresent, essential part of the community, which, in turn, supported the art in myriad ways. To those visiting it offered performance venues, continuous jam sessions, and some of the finest hotel accommodations for African Americans in the country. For those making their homes in the Eastside and Watts, support for artists, both aspiring and established, could be found in the extensive public-school music programs, many talented private teachers, generations of musicians spanning the history of the music, Local 767 of the American Federation of Musicians, a plethora of local venues, social organizations, and public spaces, and even a few, small, black-owned record companies.

Formal classes in music were available at all levels of the public education system. At Jefferson ("Jeff") and Jordan High Schools, the curriculum included courses in music theory, music appreciation, harmony, counterpoint, orchestra, band, and choir. One of Jefferson's music teachers, Samuel R. Browne, sought to incorporate new trends in African American music, creating a big-band class. "I didn't bring jazz in; it was already there," Browne recalls. "I just met it head-on and I put my arms around it. I salvaged it and tried to make it respectable because it was here to stay. I personally had a classical background and was trained in European music. But jazz music, that's what they wanted."⁶ For aspiring musicians, sixth period each day at Jeff in Bungalow 11 was Jazz Band class, which included writing, arranging, and performing, as well as occasional visits by musicians

from the Avenue and renowned composers, including W. C. Handy and William Grant Still. "I invited into the classroom some famous black performers for them to hear and talk with. I brought in, for example, Jimmie Lunceford. He came over to Jefferson and took the school by storm. I had Lionel Hampton there, Nat King Cole, and others."⁷ Soon the band was offering regular evening concerts. According to Browne,

In 1951 . . . we charged as much as 75 cents for admission and the place was filled. At night! At Jefferson! In the auditorium! Those were the days of Horace Tapscott and Frank Morgan, and Gay Lacey, and those people. Dexter Gordon was there, yes. Dexter and Sonny Criss. And Cecil "Big Jay" McNeely. And Chico Hamilton, Jack Kelson, and Donald Cherry. They were all there. They were the guys I spent so much time with, you know, standing around talking and going to the Avenue, going to the sessions.⁸

Samuel Browne's hiring in 1936 broke new ground and represented the beginning of an integrated faculty in Los Angeles public secondary schools. African Americans had been hired at the elementary level but remained excluded from the high schools along the Central Avenue corridor, despite their mixed enrollments of African, Latin, Japanese, Chinese, and European Americans. The faculties were solidly white even though college-educated blacks lived in the community. None had been hired until Browne was contracted to teach music at Jefferson, his alma mater, a few blocks east of Central Avenue at Forty-first and Hooper. Years later Browne recalled in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* that upon his hiring he was "called into the office of an assistant district superintendent who cautioned him: 'Remember, Brownie, now that you've got the job, you're going to have to do the work of three white men.'"⁹ Browne remained at Jeff for more than two decades, created a model program in jazz education, and directly and positively influenced the lives of many musicians, in and out of the classroom, who subsequently became major contributors to the art and culture. Horace Tapscott, a former student, who remained a close friend and collaborator of Browne's until the older man's death in 1991, performed and recorded some of his mentor's compositions, "Blue Essence" and "Perfumes in the Night," as well as composing a piece in his honor, "Ballad for Samuel."

Browne's perception of his job and his contribution stretched beyond the confines of the Jefferson High School Music Department. As he writes in the liner notes to *Flight 17*, the first LP record of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, "Many celebrated musicians had their roots in our commu-

nity. . . . However, if we are to realize a full return from those to follow, those whose roots are now dormant, spreading, or undiscovered, we must provide opportunities for constant economic and musical growth through mutual effort and total involvement."¹⁰ An important element in his pedagogy was an involvement with students and their families. He not only routinely spent after-school hours with his students but was with them in the clubs on Central and at the various sessions. "The students were about the best friends I had. Most of the faculty didn't take too kindly to me, but those kids—I lived with them. I was on Central Ave. with them half the time, at my house half the time. We'd go to clubs together, go out on gigs together, eat together."¹¹ He also made a point of visiting the elementary and junior high schools to meet with and encourage the younger students. Horace remembers visits and mentoring from Browne and renowned composer William Grant Still, a friend of Browne's, at rehearsals of the Lafayette Junior High School band. It was also not unusual to have Mr. Browne turn up on your doorstep. According to Horace,

When he drove down the street, everybody would say, "Hello, Dr. Browne." He would come to certain musicians' houses to see that they were taking care of business, and was at my house and Frank Morgan's house all the time. He'd stop by all the cats' pads and he knew your family. They knew him. He knew that the family was important in inspiring the youngsters and he was making sure the foundation was being correctly set from the family on up. He was able to come in and to teach or to inspire, just come and talk with you. He made sure he kept an eye on you and he really dug you.

"I dig you, man."

That's what he'd tell you.

"You don't understand that yet. But I dig you."¹²

From its earliest years, the community was awash in private music instruction, from institutions such as William Wilkins's Piano Academy and John Gray's Conservatory of Music, to dozens of individual teachers.¹³ When the first New Orleans jazz musicians settled in the Los Angeles area before and immediately after World War I, they passed on some of their skills to local aspirants. According to former Watts resident and Harlem Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps, Jelly Roll Morton found it necessary to teach accompanying local musicians, such as Ben Albans Jr., the new music: "Jelly patiently taught the young cornetist, as well as the other musicians he had found in the community, the style of playing he required."¹⁴ Pianist Buster Wilson, whose family had moved to Los Angeles in 1904, when he was six, benefited directly from Morton, who "coached the young pianist."¹⁵

Along with his other accolades, Jelly may be credited as perhaps the first jazz teacher in Los Angeles. According to Morton scholar Phil Pastras, "It was evidently a role that Morton played with some relish."¹⁶

During the 1920s and 1930s, there was an array of private teachers for those students interested in jazz and showing promise as well as those professionals in need of "post-graduate" work. Willis Young, Lester and Lee's father, not only led the family band but also taught students in the community, as did Marshal Royal Sr. and Ernest Royal, the father and uncle of alto saxophonist Marshal and trumpeter Ernie. Trombonist William Woodman Sr., whose sons Coney, William Jr., and Britt formed an important pre-World War II band in Watts ("The Woodman Brothers Biggest Little Band in the World"), maintained a busy performance schedule, managed his sons' band, and offered instruction.

By the 1940s, Alma Hightower, Lloyd Reese, and Percy McDavid had started teaching the legions of musicians who would make their names, and Samuel Browne's, legendary in the community. Alma Hightower, the aunt of early Central Avenue drummer Alton Redd, and the great aunt of alto saxophonist and vocalist Vi Redd, taught privately for more than two decades. She also led a big band, the Melodic Dots, which rehearsed in Ross Snyder Park, a few blocks east of Central Avenue near Jefferson High School, had a few gigs, and also performed for the community in open lots along Central Avenue. Its membership included at various times alto saxophonists Anthony Ortega and Vi Redd, trumpeter Clora Bryant, and trombonists Melba Liston and Lester "Lately" Robertson, later to be one of the founding members of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra.¹⁷ Before the decade was out, reed and flute masters Buddy Collette and Bill Green had begun their teaching careers on the Avenue, which would last for the next fifty years, as well as organizing jam sessions for younger musicians at the Crystal Tea Room near Forty-eighth Street and Avalon Boulevard. With the help of a few like-minded artists, including bassist David Bryant, also to become a founding member of the Arkestra, they formed the Progressive Musicians Organization to oversee the sessions and encourage the art form among younger artists, who included saxophonists Walter Benton, Hadley Caliman, Sonny Criss, Eric Dolphy, Big Jay McNeely, Frank Morgan, and drummer Billy Higgins.¹⁸

Young musicians also benefited from the casual instruction and friendship of visiting artists, as well as local heroes. Forced into the confines of the Central Avenue area, African Americans of unique talents and abilities, who might otherwise have gone elsewhere, were a visible, everyday presence. Young people did not have distant heroes or role models, who might appear

for a gig or lecture only to disappear upon its conclusion, never to be seen again. Central's artists were accessible and could be approached daily on the streets, in the stores, or in the diners, eateries, and clubs, which allowed a great deal of contact and, therefore, a more direct influence on residents' lives and budding artistry. Not only were most members of the leading bands, such as Duke Ellington's, Count Basie's and Jimmie Lunceford's, accessible, but many would befriend the kids gathered around stage entrances, the hotels, and union building. Gerald Wilson and Snooky Young from Lunceford's trumpet section might be seen relaxing in the lounge at the Dunbar. At the 54th St. Drugstore, Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney could be approached as they consumed an afternoon meal of burgers. Louis Armstrong could be hailed as he crossed Seventeenth Street on his way to the musicians union at 1710 South Central Avenue.

To meet the needs of this expanding music scene, black Local 767 of the American Federation of Musicians was founded in 1920 and served as a meeting place, clearinghouse, and rehearsal space for African American musicians denied membership in white Local 47, housed a few miles northwest in Hollywood. A gathering place for generations of musicians, 767 also served as a social and cultural center and offered a range of activities from casual affairs to barbeques and parades that brought the varied membership and people in the community together. Clarinetist Joe Darensbourg, who moved to Los Angeles in the 1920s, recalls in his autobiography: "A nice thing about our local was the celebration we'd have every year. The bands would get on wagons or floats and parade down Central Avenue. All the good bands and musicians, they'd end up at the Musicians' Union and have a lot of drinks."¹⁹

Local 767 was also a favorite hangout for young, aspiring artists who wanted to be a part of the scene and meet their heroes. If the year was 1944, Gerald Wilson could be heard rehearsing his unique sounds and harmonic innovations with his new band in one of the upstairs rehearsal rooms. There was usually an open invitation to the Avenue's serious, young musicians to follow the music, ask questions, and get involved. Horace Tapscott was a regular at rehearsals: "I've been looking at Duke Ellington's writing since I was thirteen. When his band rehearsed at the union, I'd walk right through the sections and look at the music, ask a question if I wanted. And they let me sit-in during the rehearsals. It was cool."²⁰ Friendships developed, some becoming lifelong; wisdom was imparted. In this informal manner, the culture was passed along. Horace's memories are vivid: "Every black musician in the world would pass by there, slap you upside the head, and say something smart to you. . . . Me, Eric Dolphy, Don Cherry, Frank Morgan,

Hadley Caliman, Leroy ‘Sweet Pea’ Robinson, Clyde Dunn, and the other young guys were sitting there all the time, during all those years. . . . It was just rich, very rich.”²¹

Aspiring artists also had outlets for their passions, places where they were able to express their artistry and grow. Central and its environs offered block after block of clubs as well as public spaces in which musicians could shape their own voices interacting with spirited and involved audiences. Many of the artists recollect working regularly in the clubs by their mid-teens. Big bands, some led by Percy McDavid, spanning the generations and including some of the finest musicians on the Avenue, performed in parks on Sunday afternoons. Among the performers were future members of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. Their music was the community’s music, shared across generations and at the center of community life. It was neither marginalized nor underground. Playing the blues, jazz, or R & B was not an act of rebellion against staid cultural norms, as it was for young white musicians, nor was it an imported cultural form. It was part of the definition of a community and a people.²² And within those spaces, there was a spirit that fostered individual creativity and expression. Many attest to the generally open, casual atmosphere in most venues, which encouraged younger players to perform and find their own sound. According to Buddy Collette, “Central Avenue was a place where you could bring your own ideas to the stage, to the audience, whatever they sounded like. You were not being judged because you didn’t sound like this or that musician.”²³

A small, but not insignificant aspect of the music life of the community were the black-owned independent record companies. The earliest was the Sunshine Record Company formed by Johnny and Reb Spikes in 1921. Although the Spikes brothers produced only a few sides, among them were the first recordings of instrumentals (“Ory’s Creole Trombone” and “Society Blues”) by a black jazz band, Kid Ory’s Creole Orchestra.²⁴ In 1940, a recent graduate of Jefferson High School, Leroy Hurte, left behind a singing career with Victor recording artists “The Four Blackbirds,” took over a record store off Central Avenue, installed a basic recording studio in the back, and started Bronze Records. With Hurte’s successful first recordings of a gospel group called “The Five Soul Stirrers,” Bronze Records was established.²⁵ In the early 1940s, Leon and Otis René, two Creole brothers who had settled in Los Angeles in the 1920s and had achieved success as songwriters with such hits as “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South” and “When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano,” had embarked on the first of a number of independent recording ventures through the creation of two labels, Excelsior, owned by Otis, and Leon’s Exclusive. Beginning with the release of Joe

Liggins's "The Honeydrinker" on Exclusive in 1946, the brothers would be at the center of the R & B sound emerging from Los Angeles in the mid-1940s.²⁶

While none of these ventures enjoyed longevity, and certainly did not please all of their artists, they were important forerunners within the community. Bronze Records would last only seven years as a full-time business, but aspects of its history offer a powerful example both of the possibilities and of the limitations facing African American independents. In 1944, Leroy agreed to record a U.S. Army private, who had walked into the store, unannounced, with a song titled "I Wonder." Within weeks the recording was an underground sensation in black communities across the country, and Private Cecil Gant was soon to become the "G.I. Singsation." Leroy's limited production was unable to meet demand, and the larger, white-owned Gilt Edge Records persuaded Gant to rerecord the song with them. Leroy filed suit and went to court armed with proof of ownership from the U.S. Copyright Office. To his dismay, the judge simply dismissed his claim.²⁷

Within a year R & B emerged in Southern California and then nationally. Many African American artists were recorded, as independent labels mushroomed in Los Angeles, some black-owned, in part because of the possibilities shown by "I Wonder." For Leroy Hurte, justice was denied, but Bronze Records and then various other independent labels illustrated the importance of community-produced music from the streets and the cultural riches to be tapped there, a scenario that would be replicated decades later in the early days of rap in the 1970s and of gangsta rap in the Los Angeles of the 1980s.²⁸

These different aspects of Central Avenue's musical infrastructure, while more extensive than in most areas, were not unique to Los Angeles and most were replicated throughout segregated, black urban areas across the country. This was nurturing soil, which allowed the music to develop and creativity to flourish. For jazz and R & B, no other communities played that role; its social basis and dynamic were rooted within African American neighborhoods that saw it as their own and that offered a supportive cultural structure. Even those within the communities opposed to these secular sounds, who vilified them as "the devil's music," saw it as part of their communities and not something imported.

The New Sounds of Postwar Central Avenue

The exceptional depth and strength of its cultural infrastructure allowed Central Avenue to evolve as one of the major centers of African American

music. Coupled with the lack of a dominant Central Avenue style, it encouraged a large number and variety of voices to emerge from this community, continuously over fifty years and a few generations. Without the pressure of a definitive style, there was more appreciation of musical individuality, which flourished in an environment that also supported values outside the commercial realm. The result was a profusion of talented performers, many of whom would be at the center of new developments in music and within the community up to the century's end. In particular, in the post-World War II period a varied group of musicians would contribute to a strong tradition of jazz creativity and adventurousness in Los Angeles.

The postwar era brought new sounds from the community. Despite the declining fortunes of big bands, a few cutting-edge orchestras did emerge in Los Angeles through a combination of adroit leadership, original music, and some of the best talent the Avenue had to offer. Drummer Roy Porter formed his band in 1948 and tapped the local, emerging talent pool, including saxophonists Hadley Caliman, Eric Dolphy, Sweet Pea Robinson, Clifford Solomon, and trumpeter Art Farmer to play new, bebop-styled, big-band charts. Trumpeter Gerald Wilson, who had gained national prominence as a composer and arranger with the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, was still in his mid-twenties when he formed his band in October 1944. Within a year the Gerald Wilson Orchestra was nationally renowned and boasted such local talent as teenage trombonist and arranger Melba Liston and pianist Jimmy Bunn.²⁹ With charts such as "Yard Dog Mazurka" for the Lunceford band, Gerald had established himself as an innovative composer. By the mid-1940s, he was writing in six-part harmony and was the first to arrange and record a big-band version of Dizzy Gillespie's bop landmark "Groovin' High."³⁰ According to Eric Dolphy, a beneficiary of his tutelage on Central Avenue, "Gerald is a man who has been making modern sounds since the war years. He had a band in 1944 that would still be considered modern today. He would take me round to hear all the musicians and explain things to me. The thing is, he's very encouraging and helpful to all young musicians, no matter how well he may be doing himself. . . . I have recorded an arrangement he wrote eighteen years ago and it sounded so fresh."³¹

The mentoring Dolphy received was typical of Gerald's involvement as a community artist. He also encouraged a young Horace Tapscott to write and arrange, regularly drove him to rehearsals and performances, and even paid his initiation fee into Local 767.³² But Gerald was not unique in this regard. Horace recalls, "All the musicians would come pick you up, the young cats, take you to rehearsal, and bring you back home. Yeah, it was some-

thing, wasn't it, man? You'd come out of the house and there was a well-known, world-renowned trumpet player waiting to take you to a rehearsal. They were always looking out for you, and they were serious; they wanted you to learn."³³ Wilson also provided another important lesson for his Central Avenue acolytes in 1946, when he disbanded his big band midway through a cross-country tour: "I realized that I had hit the top too soon. I was not even near where I wanted to be as a musician. . . . I made up my mind that I was going to disband and return to Los Angeles and I did just that."³⁴ Back in Los Angeles, he threw himself into further study of music theory and Western classical music. "I started writing for a lot of people and studying, just studying and writing and playing. . . . I studied the classics, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian, d'Indy, Bartók, Manuel de Falla, Villa-Lobos. I'm looking for everything. . . . I wasn't studying them to be classical. I was studying them to broaden my knowledge so that I could broaden my jazz."³⁵ For Gerald, artistic, musical values were paramount over commercial considerations, a powerful object lesson in what was of value to those aspiring artists coming of age on the Avenue.

In the latter part of 1945, Los Angeles club owner Billy Berg contracted with Dizzy Gillespie in New York to bring a bebop band to his club in Hollywood. When Gillespie opened in December 1945, he had Charlie Parker with him, offering West Coast musicians their first opportunity to see these two originators of the new music. Bebop, however, was already familiar to many of the young musicians from Central who packed the club opening night. Most had heard the early recordings. Others had been listening to bop nightly on Central Avenue at the Downbeat Room, which featured the Howard McGhee–Teddy Edwards Quintet during the spring and summer of 1945. The fire quickly spread, as many of the next generation of musicians threw themselves into creating new sounds. One of the best groups, a band of high schoolers, featured artists who would become some of the most distinctive musicians during the 1950s: tenor saxophonist Cecil (not yet "Big Jay") McNeely, alto saxophonist Sonny Criss, and pianist Hampton Hawes. The following year Howard McGhee's Sextet recorded seven sides for Dial Records. Teddy Edwards's solo in "Up in Dodo's Room" represents the first recording of a bebop tenor saxophone solo, but the sides as a whole have a larger significance, according to Ted Gioia: "These recordings are given little attention these days, but Edwards's innovative playing, combined with McGhee's virtuosity and the rhythm section's savvy, makes them some of the finest performances of the early days of bop."³⁶ If not throughout Southern California, bebop was alive and thriving on Central Avenue when Diz and Bird arrived.³⁷

There were other artists, such as David Bryant, Don Cherry, Buddy Collette, Eric Dolphy, Billy Higgins, Charles Mingus, Lester Robertson, and Horace Tapscott, who admired the innovations of bop and to varying degrees absorbed its lessons, yet were also hearing other sounds. Mingus, in particular, showed a strong originality in his early bass work and compositions that were inspired, in part, by Duke Ellington and the big-band tradition and also by Duke's forward-looking approach. By the mid-1940s, Mingus was crafting original compositions such as "Story of Love" and "Weird Nightmare"/"Pipe Dream," which anticipate his work of the 1950s. Regarding "Story of Love," Ted Gioia writes, "This is Ellington as seen through a distorting mirror; the individual horn lines seem to be on uneasy terms with each other and the expected harmonic resolutions rarely appear."³⁸ One of Mingus's performance opportunities for his music was in a short-lived, cooperative band, The Stars of Swing, that he formed with reed and flute virtuoso Buddy Collette in the spring of 1946. It also included trombonist Britt Woodman, trumpeter John Anderson, tenor saxophonist Lucky Thompson (replaced by Teddy Edwards after their first performance), pianist Spaulding Givens (later known as Nadi Qamar), and drummer Oscar Bradley. Offering new music built on subtle dynamic shadings, melodic inventiveness, use of counterpoint, and a tight ensemble sound, the band's brief existence during a six-week stay at the Downbeat Room on Central Avenue attracted serious audiences that included Charlie Parker and a young Eric Dolphy.³⁹

A few years younger than Mingus, Eric Dolphy was studying with Lloyd Reese and Buddy Collette during this period as well as playing lead alto in Roy Porter's 17 Beboppers band. Although he was firmly grounded in the bop idiom, hints of Dolphy's adventurous nature were evident early on. Alto saxophonist Anthony Ortega played with Dolphy in Reese's rehearsal band and remembers Eric's "far-out" sounds, "bird calls" to some band members.⁴⁰ Legendary are the stories of Dolphy playing with birds and delving into microtonality in these transspecies collaborations.⁴¹ Tenor saxophonist Clifford Solomon, also a member of Porter's band, recalls, "He was lead player, and he was precise, and he was good as lead player. His soloing left a lot to be desired because he was sort of disjointed. He played the same way then as he did later on in years, but later on in years what he was doing was more accepted."⁴² According to Buddy Collette, "He loved the outside notes, being different, altering chords. . . . I'd give him a couple of melodies and he would alter everything. He loved it, using different notes, even with a lot of his flute stuff. He used to get some interesting density in a few things that would be far out. That's the kind of thing he liked. He wasn't just a one-three-five kind of person."⁴³

Collette, not generally known as an avant-garde musician but rather as an artist with a gift for melodic improvisation, maintained an interest in a wide range of musical innovations, from Schillinger's teachings to Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone system, and studied with challenging teachers, including George Trembley, one of Schoenberg's students. His 1956 debut album as a leader, *Man of Many Parts*, includes "Jungle Pipe," a twelve-tone composition. A few years later, at Trembley's request, he also composed a twelve-tone blues, based on notes taken from "Basin Street Blues."⁴⁴

As subsequent chapters will illustrate, one of those who best carried the communal and musical legacy of Central Avenue was Horace Tapscott, a contemporary student of Lloyd Reese with Dolphy. Horace was coming of age on Central along with Earl Anderza, Hadley Caliman, Don Cherry, Billy Higgins, Anthony Ortega, Lester Robertson, Guido Sinclair (formerly Sinclair Greenwell), and others who would subsequently live near the musical boundaries. According to Horace,

Eric was about four years older than me, but musically we were tight. Whenever we could, we hung out with Gerald Wilson's band when they were rehearsing. Eric also had his own group by this time with Lester Robertson and a few of the cats, and I had a band, also. Eric was looking outside even then, but he wasn't the only one. Before him there was a cat named George Newman, a saxophonist, who used to be with Don Cherry a lot. He was the first cat that Mr. Browne called, "This guy's out."⁴⁵

As these musicians evolved along their own musical paths during the 1950s and 1960s, they carried the lessons learned on the Avenue and have been virtually unanimous in crediting their teachers for their artistic integrity, growth, and, for some, commitment to their community. Two aspects of their pedagogy seem to have been especially important in supporting those with a more musically adventurous bent: an encouragement to master all the dimensions of music, while bearing in mind that it was open, continuously evolving, and a receptivity to individuality by encouraging students to find their own voice, in some cases, regardless of formal rules. Percy McDavid at Lafayette Junior High School and Samuel Browne at Jefferson High School not only instilled a strong sense of discipline and technical command, but also encouraged students to arrange and compose. Horace remembers playing his first composition, "The Golden Pearl," for McDavid while in junior high school with Browne and William Grant Still looking on. "On a certain night every week there was a rehearsal at the junior high school. I met the composer William Grant Still and Mr. Browne there. . . . Still . . . told me that he liked the line and the undercurrent, but he wanted the sound corrected. He was

there listening and was approachable."⁴⁶ In fact, Still would follow Horace's musical evolution, attending performances and offering advice and encouragement to the younger composer into the 1960s.⁴⁷

Lloyd Reese, whose father had come to Los Angeles from New Orleans, was renowned for the many students who passed through his studio and Sunday rehearsal band, including Dexter Gordon, Collette, Dolphy, Mingus, and Tapscott, as well as for his demanding musicianship. According to Buddy Collette,

All of his students had to play piano, which I thought was good, because then all the students had a pretty good foundation for whatever they wanted to do. You'd also be reading better; you'd be blowing all your tunes; you could transpose. He was covering everything. Most of us could write, most could conduct. You were getting all that other knowledge; he was not just grilling you on technique. . . . This guy was preparing you to be a giant. He was opening our minds to being very musical.⁴⁸

Reese not only insisted that his students be complete musicians, he fostered creativity by encouraging them to seek their own solutions to musical problems. For Horace Tapscott, it served as a clear demonstration that technique must ultimately be shaped by creative content: "Reese would give me something to work on for maybe two weeks, like getting some kinds of sounds. He wouldn't tell me how to work on this, but for me to find a way to do it. He knew there was more than one way to do something, more than one way to play, and he wanted me to find my way to get a sound, to find a way that physically suited me to make these sounds. That approach was so important and opened up a lot of creativity." He even gave Horace an early and unorthodox appreciation of tone clusters. "He really focused on how to make sounds and his ear was incredible. He had one of those terrible ears that would hear everything. One time, he told me to sit on the piano and put my hands, my ass, all over the keyboard. Then he called all the notes."⁴⁹

Students were also encouraged to explore the possibilities inherent in their instruments, even to go beyond the conventional range of an instrument. Earl Anderza was an emerging alto saxophonist, a student of Samuel Browne's, who also studied with Reese, and a contemporary of Horace's at Jefferson High School. Horace recalls, "Earl Anderza was bad. He was one of the cats when Frank Morgan and Ornette Coleman were in Los Angeles playing alto sax. But Earl was the outest, the one everyone said played that 'crazy sound.'"⁵⁰ Although Anderza's career was sidetracked in the 1950s by personal problems, in the notes to his first album as a leader in 1962, he states that Reese "taught us to play above the range of the horn."⁵¹

While Reese's students ranged across the stylistic spectrum, the number of seminal figures among them in the later Los Angeles avant-garde and community arts movement is impressive and, in part, attributable to his exploratory attitude. This is not to suggest that they emerged from Reese's studio as outside players in the 1940s, but rather that some of his students who became explorers of musical boundaries in the 1950s and 1960s found support during important, formative years of their lives. "There were just so many cats around here then," according to Horace, "and everybody was working on their own thing, bringing their own shot at the music. Everybody played different and there was always somebody trying to do something different. And most of them came from under the tutelage of Samuel Browne and Lloyd Reese."⁵²

The Avant-Garde of the 1950s

When Mingus left for New York in 1951, an influx of musicians, open to pushing artistic boundaries, would merge with like-minded local artists, some of whom would found the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, to create a varied and dynamic avant-garde musical scene in 1950s Los Angeles. As Mingus was departing, alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman and drummer Ed Blackwell arrived. In the next few years, pianists Carla Bley, Paul Bley, Andrew Hill, and Don Preston, tenor saxophonist Charles Brackeen, trumpeter/cornetist Bobby Bradford, and bassists Charlie Haden, Scott La Faro, and Gary Peacock would settle in the City of Angels for varying stretches. The end of de jure segregation in Los Angeles in the late 1940s and the emergence of integrated performance spaces across the greater L.A. area also served to bring together many of these black and white musicians pursuing the muse beyond the boundary of conventional musical practice.

Ornette Coleman's years in Los Angeles and his concurrent musical development has been the most studied aspect of the 1950s L.A. avant-garde.⁵³ Interviews with and reminiscences of many artists have left a picture of a young Coleman challenging society's lifestyle and musical conventions and forging a new direction in melodic improvisation. During his stay, according to Horace, "He had these long dreads that went down to his ass. One day he came by Jefferson. Mr. Browne looked out at him and said, 'Ah! Here come black Jesus!' Ornette had hooked up with Don Cherry, who was at Jeff rehearsing with us, and had come by to hear some music. But before Ornette, Don and George Newman had a great group [the Jazz Messiahs] with Billy Higgins and Bill Pickens, until George went out of his mind and out of music."⁵⁴ Coleman was ubiquitous at clubs and jam sessions throughout

Los Angeles County. From Watts to the San Fernando Valley northwest of L.A., from El Monte, a few miles east, to the west side, Coleman rarely missed a session. In the early 1950s, he had friends from Texas with whom to work, most notably Ed Blackwell and Bobby Bradford. After their departures in the mid-1950s, he hooked up with bassist Charlie Haden and some of the community's most promising young musicians, including Don Cherry and Billy Higgins.

There are many reminiscences of the opposition Coleman encountered on the bandstand, from being shunted into the early morning hours before he could play, to musicians refusing to play with him and rhythm sections walking out. "He'd go to the jam sessions by himself and get run off the stage," Bobby Bradford remembers. "You know, he'd try to go and sit in with Dexter [Gordon] when he was in town, and Curtis Counce and those guys would run him off the bandstand."⁵⁵ Charlie Haden first heard Coleman one Monday at the Haig club: "He starts playing, man, and it was so unbelievably great I could not believe it. Like the whole room lit up all of a sudden, like somebody turned on the lights. He was playing the blues they were playing, but he was playing his own way. And almost as fast as he asked to sit in, they asked him to please stop."⁵⁶ After being stopped by one bandleader, Coleman recalls, "I had no money left, so I walked all the way home again in the rain. That sort of thing happened a lot. Some musicians would promise me I could play, but they'd keep me waiting all night."⁵⁷

Undoubtedly, Coleman's new sound was a problem for many players and was partly, if not largely, responsible for the hostility he encountered. But his quiet self-confidence and sense of entitlement would have been off-putting to other musicians whatever his approach. As Bobby Bradford explains,

He was the kind of guy that was trying to make his mark, and he'd go to whoever it was at the club and say, "I want to play." You know, guys like myself . . . we'd see Dexter Gordon up there, we wouldn't get up there. Ornette would get right up there and say to him, "What do you want to play?" Not "Can I sit in?" Ornette would say, "Well, yeah, we're just two saxophone players up here."⁵⁸

Nevertheless, what seems more interesting than the opposition Coleman encountered is the number of musicians who were listening and recognized his vision and the years he remained in Los Angeles, rehearsing and still finding a few open venues and his first recording opportunities with Contemporary Records. Not long after he arrived, there were opportunities to play with Sonny Criss, Teddy Edwards, and Hampton Hawes, who appreci-

ated his playing, and he also earned the approval of other local artists, such as alto saxophonist Joe Maini, pianist Don Friedman, pianist/bassist Don Preston, and bassists Eugene Wright and Putter Smith.⁵⁹ "Eugene would always say to him, 'Come on, man. I hear you got something there,'" Bobby recalls. "I remember him saying to Ornette a couple of times, 'Now, don't forget me when you get up there.'"⁶⁰ Eric Dolphy was similarly inclined. In 1960, he told interviewer Martin Williams, "I heard about him and when I heard him play, he asked me if I liked his pieces and I said I thought they sounded good. When he said that if someone played a chord, he heard another chord on that one, I knew what he was talking about, because I had been thinking the same things."⁶¹ Future Frank Zappa collaborator and Mothers of Invention keyboardist Don Preston arrived in L.A. in 1957; he soon became friends with Paul and Carla Bley and the other members of Bley's band. While attending their performances at the Hillcrest Club, Don became acquainted with Coleman and also heard him and Don Cherry in late-night, weekend jam sessions at Georgia Lee's Caprice, a club just east of Los Angeles in the city of El Monte:

I was very excited by his music. . . . I thought he was a true innovator. . . . And, you know, all through my life that's been one of the most important aspects of music to me: innovation, carrying on change, you know, like going forward another step [further] than what has been done before and trying to be original. Or not trying to be original but just being original. . . . And he filled all those qualifications for me because he was. He was an exceptional player, and his sound was very unusual, and his ideas also were extremely unusual.⁶²

Bobby Bradford remembers their band playing gigs in one of the seediest parts of downtown L.A.: "We used to play at a little club down there called The Victory Grill, and another The Rose Room. Ornette, me, Eddie Blackwell, and a piano player named Floyd Howard. . . . We played Ornette's tunes and some jazz standards. We didn't get that much work but we were playing often enough to be playing some of Ornette's tunes."⁶³ The tenor saxophonist with the Jazz Messiahs, James Clay, recalls inviting Ornette to the bandstand at a club date: "He went out and played, and the next thing I knew he got them *goin'*, Jack! He played and blew their brains out."⁶⁴ According to Buddy Collette, "In the early fifties they had jam sessions every weekend at places like Normandie Hall, with Eric [Dolphy] and Ornette Coleman. Walter Benton and a bunch of the young players, who we met through that period, used to go there and jam every Friday or Saturday night. Eric and Ornette were just two players. We didn't know that they'd

get as good as they did and no one else knew.”⁶⁵ Buddy recognized that Coleman “had these sounds in his head that he wanted to explore. He was very talented and was trying to do quarter tones on his horn. A little later on, when his group got together with Don Cherry and a few people, the tunes were, at first, a little strange. Even the intonation was weird. But they began to make some of us believe that they knew where they were going.”⁶⁶

The story of the 1950s Los Angeles avant-garde involves more than the story of Ornette Coleman. There were other musicians, who were also stretching out and not necessarily in the same direction as Coleman. Dolphy led a boppish sextet at the Oasis on Western Avenue but had also organized a rehearsal band with trombonist Lester Robertson to stretch bop’s approach to harmony.⁶⁷ By early 1958, Dolphy was leading another ensemble at the Oasis, which included Lester Robertson and Billy Higgins, that had a distinctly adventurous sound, despite being primarily a house band.⁶⁸ Saxophonist Curtis Amy, who settled in Los Angeles in 1955, met Dolphy at the club and was in attendance at every opportunity to hear him play: “But he was out. He was playing out then.”⁶⁹

Lester Robertson, already a veteran of Gerald Wilson’s and Lionel Hampton’s big bands, would soon join with Horace Tapscott to form the Underground Musicians Association (UGMA), the original name of the Arkestra. In addition to Robertson, alto saxophonists Guido Sinclair and Jimmy Woods, bassists Al Hines and David Bryant—all among the founding members of UGMA—were also a part of the scene, as well as Bobby Hutcherson and Charles Lloyd. Not long after arriving in Los Angeles around 1956, Al Hines was studying with a Philharmonic bassist and gigging around town with similarly inclined players. “At a place in the [San Fernando] Valley I played with Don Cherry,” Al recalls, “but I played with Ornette at Shelly’s [Manne-Hole]. They used to have sessions there and we’d just go and play. Their style never changed that much; they just played like that. Their conception was there regardless of what their knowledge was.”

Paul Bley had been leading the band at the Hillcrest on Washington Boulevard for some time prior to Coleman joining and had added saxophonist Anthony Ortega, who studied with Lloyd Reese and came up in Watts in the 1940s. After a stint with Lionel Hampton’s band and a few years in New York, he returned to Los Angeles and by the later 1950s was already displaying the musical adventurousness that would result in his 1966 album, *New Dance*, awarded the Prix de la Redécouverte in Paris in 1992 for best album reissue on Hat Art Records. When Anthony returned to Los Angeles in 1958, Paul Bley asked him to join his band. He remembers that “the further out, the more Paul liked it. . . . It all seemed to gel well

because he played such extensions and everything. And then I was getting off into some things."⁷⁰

Profoundly influenced by Asian musics and soon to achieve renown in the Western classical world as the initiating force in "minimalism," La Monte Young was a high school student in Los Angeles in the early 1950s and studying saxophone at the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music with Central Avenue veteran Bill Green, a master of technique, who inculcated in his students the value of long tones. He then attended L.A. City College and immersed himself in the local avant-garde jazz scene. He won the second alto chair in the school dance band over Eric Dolphy (the first chair going to Lanny Morgan) but played second clarinet in the orchestra next to Dolphy's first. Outside of school he had his own jazz quartet, which included Don Cherry and Billy Higgins. He also frequented jam sessions and performed with Dolphy and Coleman as well as with the Willy Powell Big Blues Band. A favorite spot was the Big Top on Hollywood Boulevard, "one of the most creative session spots in the whole L.A. area. As soon as they saw me walk through the door, they knew I was going to play for a long time. Other guys would go on the stand and take a couple of choruses, but I would never stop. I was just playing and playing. And somehow, something began to flow through me. Improvisation helped me understand this process."⁷¹ He privately recorded with Billy Higgins during this time and also met saxophonist George Newman, whom he thought "just incredible. He could play all of these Charlie Parker solos right off the record and he was a sensation." For Young, whose music was already exhibiting polytonality and fragmented beats, "It was really exciting growing up in L.A. because there was so much going on in music, and so many young talents."⁷²

When Horace Tapscott returned to Los Angeles in 1957, following a four-year hitch in the U.S. Air Force, he found the scene vital as well: "There were a lot of the out cats in town. Ornette Coleman was giggin' with his band at the Hillcrest Club on Washington Boulevard. All the out cats came by there. The It Club and the Black Orchid also opened nearby. The It Club had John T. McClain running it and all kinds of shit went on there. McClain had a house behind the club for Phineas Newborn, so he could keep him in tow. It was out. And all the cats played there."⁷³ Across the street from the It Club was the Metro Theater, originally a movie house that had been turned into a black playhouse. After the other clubs closed at 2 a.m., devotees could walk across the street and enjoy jam sessions in the three-hundred-seat Metro until the sun came up. According to Cecil Rhodes, one of the theater organizers, "We started having jazz on Saturday night and we used to pack people in. And this was money we could use to put on plays, because at that time

there was not really a black theater going on in Los Angeles." Doug Westin's Troubadour club featured a group led by Horace Tapscott and attracted many similarly inclined musicians. By the early 1960s, according to Horace,

All the people that [FBI Director] J. Edgar Hoover was against in those days, white and black, would all come through that club. All the so-called discards from society would always be there, the creative people, like Ava Gardner and Lenny Bruce. That's why I enjoyed that gig, because it attracted creative people and I got to play exactly what I wanted to play. I had control of the music, and we fed them the new music. And all kinds of people came down and played with us, including Bill Pickens, Bobby Hutcherson, Albert Stinson, Roy Ayers, Walter Benton, Rafmad Jamal, Elmo Hope, Guido Sinclair, Charles Lloyd, Jimmy Woods, and King Pleasure.⁷⁴

The year Horace returned to Los Angeles, saxophonist Paul Horn arrived as well. He remembers, especially, the open quality of the scene:

When I moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1957, I quickly realized the East Coast was extremely conservative. California was wide open—an experimental, innovative and exceptionally creative environment. People felt free to try new ideas, anything at all. If it was new and interesting, they went for it. This kind of atmosphere produces its share of kooks, weirdos, and psychotics, but it also produces brilliant concepts in science, art, business, education, and spiritual matters.⁷⁵

As vital as the jazz scene was, this activity remained below the radar of most artists and the national media. If California was considered at all, "West Coast Cool" defined the range of their inquiries. According to Horace,

All these out cats were here, a lot of them from Central Avenue days, but nobody followed anyone in particular. Everyone had an individual approach with a lot of people doing different things, but all of it helping the music to grow. It was happening out here, even if all people ever heard about the West Coast was tiptoe-through-the-tulips music. Cannonball Adderley once said in an interview, "Wait a minute, man, have you been out on the West Coast? Have you been to the bush? You've got to go to the bush. Not downtown. They've got a lot of cats out there playing." That was a time when the music was popping out here, and nobody was paying any attention to it.⁷⁶

In his masterful history of jazz on the West Coast during this period, Ted Gioia writes, "The truth was that no other place in the jazz world was as open to experimentation, to challenges to the conventional wisdom in improvised music, as was California during the late 1940s and the 1950s."⁷⁷ From pi-

anoleless quartets to various bop and hard bop stylings, from the Brubeck quartet's cool sound and the Chico Hamilton Quintet's swinging chamber jazz to Ornette Coleman, and big-band writing as diverse as Roy Porter's bop band, Gerald Wilson's harmonically rich and Latin-influenced charts, Shorty Rogers's and Stan Kenton's drawing upon the Western classical tradition, and the, at times, atonal, serial-inspired music of Bob Graettinger, California offered a broad palette of sounds without any one gaining hegemony. Gioia concludes, "Indeed, if one thing should stand out in this account of music in California during the postwar years, it is the enormous diversity of the music, the ceaseless, churning search for the different and new. It is this characteristic that unites a Stan Kenton and an Ornette Coleman, a Charles Mingus and a Jimmy Giuffre, a Shelly Manne and an Eric Dolphy."⁷⁸

Explanations for this range of creativity are many but tend to focus primarily on the area's climate, its dispersed urban settings and lack of dominating centers, particularly in Los Angeles, and the absence of a weighty critical establishment. However, other influences have shaped the music—jazz, Western classical, and pop—emanating from the West Coast, perhaps none more significant than the area's distance from the East Coast and Europe and proximity to non-Western sounds as part of the Pacific Basin. More than any other part of the United States, it has been awash in a wide range of cultural influences, from African and Asian to Latin and Native American, which have given some of the Coast's arts their diversity and distinct regional flavors. Perhaps more accurately than in the jazz world, in the early twentieth century, Western classicists applied the term "West Coast Sound" to the unique music that drew from these varied cultural influences and started emerging during and shortly after World War I in California. Composers Henry Cowell and Harry Partch, followed by Lou Harrison and John Cage, would carve out alternative music and inspire succeeding generations (including La Monte Young) in a movement Cowell referred to in 1940 as "Drums along the Pacific."⁷⁹

Harry Partch drew from Asian, African, and Native American sources as well as ancient Greek musical and dramatic practice, which led him to reject not tonality but the European system of equal tempered scales. Creating scales based on "just intonation," he also devised some two dozen instruments to perform his music. For the most part a mixture of string and percussion, they were sculptural works of art in their own right. His masterpiece, *Delusion of the Fury*, is structured in two parts, one drawing on a common theme in Japanese Noh plays and the other an Ethiopian folktale.⁸⁰

Among Henry Cowell's early influences as a child in San Francisco were the sounds of the various ethnic groups then populating the city. Living in

Chinatown, he was exposed to Asian instruments, music, and drama. In some of his earliest works from 1913 to 1920, he was already creating music outside the boundaries of much of the Western framework. Heavily percussive early piano works, including "Adventures in Harmony," "Dynamic Motion," "The Banshee," and "The Tides of Manaunaun," feature widespread use of riffs, percussive effects, simultaneous multiple meters, pounding piano clusters, and plucking the piano strings. Cowell's interest in and incorporation of Asian instruments and forms of musical organization into his music continued throughout his life and lent his music "an extraordinary breadth of style," according to biographer Michael Hicks. "A thoroughly abstract, dissonant piece may follow a simple diatonic one. The same piano piece may harbor modernist noise in one hand and a modal folk tune in the other. Or an ensemble piece built with traditional harmonic materials may exhibit radically new formal concepts."⁸¹ In some ways it is also an apt description of aspects of the music of two subsequent West Coast jazz pianists and composers—Horace Tapscott and Jon Jang, whose artistries would be similarly expansive.

Cowell was attuned to the music of Africa and African American composers, such as William Grant Still. In his edited 1933 collection of essays, *American Composers on American Music*, he featured a piece by Still on African American composers, which reflected Still's turn toward folk material and away from the influence of his earlier work with Edgard Varèse in New York.⁸² Cowell also published Still's composition *Dismal Swamp* in his *New Music Quarterly*, a journal devoted to new music.⁸³

Cowell's intersection with William Grant Still and through him perhaps Samuel Browne, whose musical training was also in the Western classical tradition, is intriguing, as is that of La Monte Young with the jazz avant-garde in Los Angeles. Yet, these rather tenuous links are more revealing when seen as parts of a larger picture of diversity and cross-influences in the California arts scene, of the emergence of new sounds, approaches, techniques, and content that drew from a wide range of the world's cultures. As Cowell wrote in 1963, two years before his death, "I present myself to you as a person who realized from his own experience that the music of Japan, as well as that of China and other oriental countries, is part of American music."⁸⁴ Within Los Angeles's African American community the jazz and R & B stylings that emerged grew from the common stock of national black music but at the same time exhibited regional flavors that reflected the black experience in this culturally diverse part of the country. This would be even more in evidence in the music of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, which at times would offer a Latin and Native American tinge.

By the early 1960s, many of the musicians who had contributed to the dynamic and varied 1950s jazz scene had departed, most leaving for the East Coast, the most celebrated being the Ornette Coleman Quartet's arrival at the Five Spot in New York in 1959. This eastward migration and the unrelenting decline of Central Avenue left the African American community of South Central Los Angeles artistically poorer and without the supportive, communal atmosphere of Central Avenue's best days. On April 1, 1953, Local 767 of the American Federation of Musicians ceased to exist, as the membership of the former black local traveled to Hollywood to merge with Local 47. Though former members continued to gather at the old house on Central Avenue for a few more years, many would never be heard from again, and a community center was lost.

To some of those artists remaining in Los Angeles, the challenge now was to rekindle that atmosphere by reinvigorating the arts in the changed conditions of the community in the early 1960s. Among those involved in creating new sounds, Horace Tapscott soon gathered together many of them to form an alternative music collective that blended avant-garde approaches with traditional African American sounds, but he also forged a community movement with an aesthetic and ethos deeply rooted in the communal values of Central Avenue, in the expansiveness and variety of West Coast sounds, and in the rich cultural heritage of West and West Central Africa.