

## *The Underrated Musical and Cultural Impact of Faruq Z. Bey*

Detroit is widely known as a city that revolutionized avant-garde jazz with an explosion of talent in the post-Coltrane era. The cultural impact of newly emerging artists and groups in the 60s and 70s is immeasurable, and amongst these names there is one that many people often overlook: Faruq Z. Bey. Bey was the originator of the group Griot Galaxy, and he was an immense cultural, political, and ideological influence for African Americans living in Detroit. Although Griot Galaxy never fully reached global fame due to unfortunate circumstances, the group infused philosophy, Islam, and Black nationalism to deliver a creative and effective message that inspired many people in Detroit during dire times. Bey unfortunately passed away at 70 years of age 9 years ago in Detroit, but his legacy is something that will forever be important in the history of Detroit jazz.

After the passing of jazz legend John Coltrane and the emergence of the Detroit rebellions of 1967, things seemed hopeless for citizens of the city. Topics like racism, police brutality, and political disenfranchisement were at the forefront. Bey's perspective on this was that "he does not waste his time with politics or even racism and that the only way to combat them is through poetry. Poetry will defeat politicians and their lies, according to Faruq, and similarly racism will fall since it has no genetic component but is a taught behavior" (Karamanoukian 1997). This shows his unwavering commitment to art and its utility in spreading a necessary message. This theme is prevalent throughout the work of Bey and makes him a significant figure that is important to know in Detroit history. Detroit was undoubtedly in a major transition phase at this period of time and music was used by the Black community to spread messages of unity to cope. According to Sadiq Bey, a musical peer of Faruq Bey, "It was post-riot Detroit. It was all wide open. We were brand-new people. Whatever we wanted to be, we could be. We were making jewelry, making art, performing. It was a renaissance. Everybody was a renaissance man" (Heron 2003). Bey played an enormous part in this extremely meaningful culture. Before starting Griot Galaxy, Faruq Bey would perform with a group called the "Bey Brothers" at venues that were major centers for black theater and progressive politics at the time. In fact, their brand revolved around how "They'd be around black nationalist things and events and institutions" (Heron 2003). Their unique style of offbeat jazz combined with poetry with deep scholarly and political influences created the sound for a period of resurgence in a post-rebellion Detroit. The group would draw young audiences in their 20s who would use the unique style of the Bey Brothers as a playlist for the new generation of revolutionaries.

After the success of the Bey Brothers, Bey came up with the idea of creating a group called the "Griot Galaxy" which would have the same free jazz influence with a slightly more structured approach. The group would go through phases with different amounts of members but the message always stayed the same: using "visual and musical cues" to create an experience that is "an act of worship" (Heron 2003). The main theme that Bey tried to incorporate into Griot Galaxy was the idea that language is logic. Bey goes as far as to say "for African-Americans 'Eubonics' (Ebonics) make perfect sense although it 'violates all the English rules.'" "Everybody says 'you just can't talk.' You just abusing our language, the pristine queen's language," Faruq says. "When they say 'he be goin' dere' ... that's a profound philosophical proposition to say 'he be' not 'he is going' because 'he be' is the axial term" (Karamanoukian 1997). Essentially the backbone of this message is that ebonics, which is a vernacular language of English used by African Americans, is in its own way a method to spread logic and awareness about racism and politics by speaking what many people considered "improper" language. Bey would incorporate this using poetry into Griot Galaxy's musical jazz acts. In addition, Bey mentions often how music is in its own way a language that is a different medium through which to spread logic. When composing, he

would utilize unique methods to incorporate parts of his culture and spirituality into sounds to provide a message to unite the black community of Detroit. One specific example is he was fascinated by how “Most African languages, for instance, use tone to convey meaning. Even in largely atonal English, the interval — or note-to-note leap — called a flatted fifth describes the rising tone of the typical question” (Herlon 2003). His intricate attention to detail and commitment to the black community by always having his roots with him made him a popular figure in Detroit whose music had a familial effect. The sound of Griot Galaxy is one that included offbeat patterns and rhythms and was influential in the avant-garde jazz music scene by combining experimental odd-meter excursions with the playful swing of traditional jazz. They were an impactful group musically and culturally which made them “A masterwork of the creative Detroit jazz underground” (Gavilovska 2017). Unfortunately, the group was never able to break out of Detroit other than a brief stint in Europe when Bey underwent a terrible motorcycle accident and even suffered through a coma. After some time of rehabilitation, he continued with music as a composer, joining different groups and engaging in newer projects along the same theme of his earlier work.

Faruq Z. Bey is undoubtedly an extremely impactful part of Detroit music and culture. His unique and progressive style of composing in addition to his methods of conveying a politically charged message regarding relevant topics like racism, spirituality, and philosophy make him a significant figure within Detroit history that often isn't recognized with the credit that he Deserves. Bey had a very meaningful career and lived his entire life in Detroit. He even goes as far as to say that people “ ignore the fact that the joint (Detroit) is full of people. Like I'm here, and I mean to be here” ((Karamanoukian 1997). This passion for Detroit resonated heavily with the jazz community. Bey left this world with a legacy of unique and futuristic music with an essential message and hopefully he will be recognized by more people for the importance of his work to Detroit.

## Bibliography

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