

WAITING FOR THE REVOLUTION

From the volatile streets of Harlem in the late '60s, THE LAST POETS were among the earliest voices of radical black youth in America. With fans including Jimi Hendrix and Mick Jagger, they took Black Power into the charts and helped inspire hip hop. But at what price..?

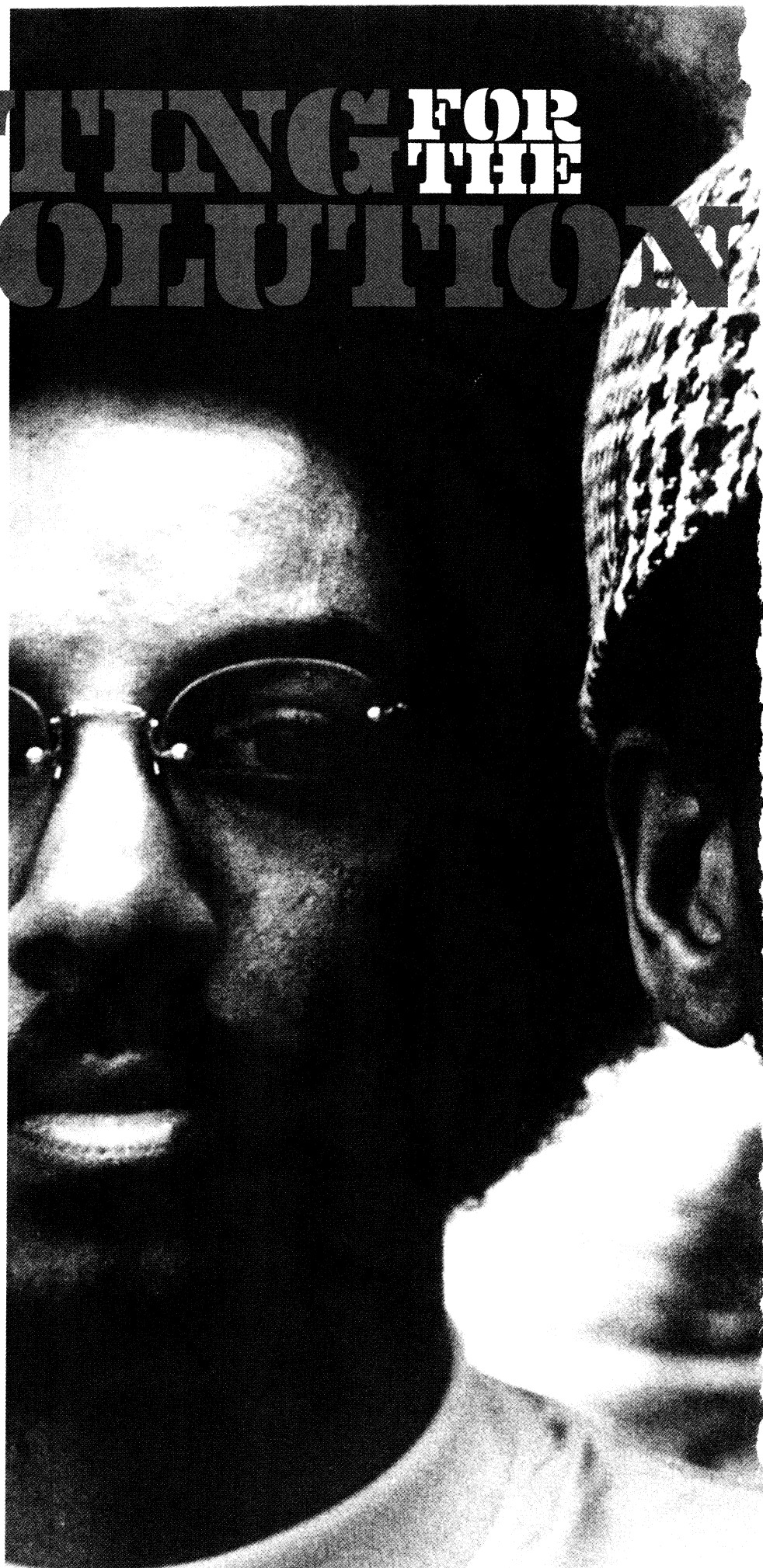
WORDS BY GRAEME THOMSON

AN HOUR INTO Nic Roeg and Donald Cammell's 1970 movie *Performance*, as James Fox's gangster lies in wait for Mick Jagger's reclusive rock star, an ominous drum tattoo rumbles into life on the soundtrack. Accompanying the urgent, relentless rhythm are two voices: one an insistent whisper, the other a rallying cry to America's increasingly volatile dispossessed: "*Night descends/As sun's light ends/And black comes back/To blend again*".

The song is "Wake Up, Niggers" by The Last Poets, and even in this very British film its mix of censure and insurrection seems to channel all the tension, anger and on-the-edge weirdness of the times. With the old certainties of race, sex and power in flux, for a short spell The Last Poets articulated the changes as potently as any artist.

Three radical poets backed by a conga player who moonlighted as a Yoruba priest, The Last Poets punched well above their weight. They recorded with Hendrix, were fêted by Miles Davis, and influenced everyone from Public Enemy to The Pop Group. They poeticised the militant message of Malcolm X and introduced it to the rhythmic cadences of Coltrane and Monk. In doing so, they are often regarded as the godfathers of rap.

"We undressed the word and presented it to the public nakedly, without any frills, and in that respect I can see where folks are coming from," founder member Abiodun Oyewole tells



Jalal Mansur Nuriddin, Abiodun Oyewole (centre)



You got to be ready:
Abiodun, Jalal,
Umar and conga
player Nilaja

architects of hip hop, and they said they had nothing else to listen to but The Last Poets back then. So we were inspiring young rappers from the beginning."

The Last Poets took their revolutionary message into the heart of American culture. Their debut album sold half a million copies within a month of its release in 1970 and brought Black Power into the pop charts. Little wonder they attracted the attention of the authorities. "We were on the Richard Nixon list, the FBI list," says Umar Bin Hassan, who joined in 1969. "I wasn't scared, I was young and I was a revolutionary. Everybody always had a gun at their girlfriend's house so we were ready in case anything went down."

And things did go down. Arguably, The Last Poets proved more dangerous to themselves than to the establishment. Their history is peppered with drugs, jail time, violent feuds and religious schisms. Thirty years before gangsta rap, they lived the life they wrote about.

FORMED BY OYEWOLE, David Nelson and Gylan Kain, three young black men living in Harlem, they came together in the aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination in April 1968. "The killing of Dr King inspired me," says Oyewole. "The Black Power movement was building and I had to become a part of it. David Nelson and I discussed the idea of a collective of poets giving an example to black people. Those were the basics that started The Last Poets."

They made their debut on Malcolm X Day—May 19, 1968—at an event in Harlem's Mount Morris Park. A group of drummers had played before them, and they asked one, conga player Nilaja Obabi, to stay on stage to provide rhythm. As they chanted "Are you ready, niggers, you got to be ready!", Oyewole recalls, "before we knew it, everyone in the park was doing it. We didn't have a name then but we were identified as a group immediately."

workshop that hosted poetry readings and discussion groups. The band was volatile, prone to factionalising over politics, policy and personalities. Nelson left, replaced by Felipe Luciano, a Puerto Rican who had already been in jail for a gang murder. He was joined by Alafia Pudim, an aspiring poet who "could rhyme before I could write". Shortly after, he converted to Islam, becoming Jalal Mansur Nuriddin.

In early 1969 there was a particularly violent incident: Luciano recalls chairs hurled and a member being attacked with a hammer. He and Kain were exiled and Oyewole and Nuriddin formed a new lineup with Umar Bin Hassan, a poet who had seen them perform in his hometown of Akron, Ohio, and had soon afterwards headed to East Wind with \$25 in his pocket. It was this trio, with Nilaja on drums, who forged forward.

**"WE WERE ON THE FBI
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UMAR BIN HASSAN**

Poetry had always been a feature of Harlem's black community. Claude McKay and Langston Hughes had chronicled local life since the '20s, but it was Amiri Baraka who most influenced The Last Poets. He left the West Village following the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X to create a black arts movement in Harlem, dismissing pacifism and demanding militant action. "Baraka's legacy is indelible," says Luciano. "He affected thousands."

These past poets had spoken with an individual voice. The Last Poets were a collective, and their vocal interplay was new. The polemical prose-poetry of Bin Hassan, the spiels and X-rated jailhouse rhymes of Nuriddin, the "voodoo" drums—it all made for a potent alchemy. "It all worked naturally," says Oyewole. "If someone had a new poem we figured out a background, and Nilaja was brilliant. It was a lot

THEY CAME TO the attention of producer Alan Douglas, whose label had released albums by Malcolm X and Lenny Bruce. "Jalal said, 'Come up to 137th street on Lenox Avenue and you can see us—but come alone,'" Douglas recalls. "They were going through the normal torture that young black guys from the street go through, and not trustful of anybody. I went to this schoolyard with a basketball court—no nets, of course—and I did wonder if getting out of the car was going to be suicide. As I got to the court, a crowd parted and there were these four guys, one with a conga. They told me to stand on the foul line, they stood under the basket, and they performed the entire first record." Douglas had access to a studio nearby, and offered to take them there. "They jumped in the car, and we were done in an hour. Cheapest record I ever made."

For a year nothing happened. Douglas wasn't sure what to do with it, and no distributor would touch it. "They were insulting everybody in America, the language was foul. Finally, somebody wanted my other stuff so bad they agreed to take the Poets."

The Last Poets was released in April 1970. From the opening "Run, Niggers", with its

ominous "tick tock", it sounds like the countdown to battle. But it also celebrates the language, rites and rhythms of black urban life. These radicals still have time for the explicit sex talk of "Black Thighs" and "Gashman", and aren't content to simply shout down their oppressors; the oppressed are implicated, too. "Niggers Are Scared Of Revolution" is critique as well as call to action, while "Wake Up, Niggers" doesn't just portray disenfranchised blacks as exiled creatures of the night, but also digs at the deluded "cool fools... rapping about how the Big Apple is outta sight/You ain't never had a bite/Who are you fooling?/You? Me?".

There was no attempt to sweeten the pill. The album arrived with no fanfare, no billboards, no reviews, yet it went through the roof. "Every beat block entertainer in the world pushed that record for us," says Douglas. "Word of mouth

By the time of its eventual release, the group had once again fractured. Bin Hassan and Nuriddin became Muslims, while Nilaja and Oyewole embraced Animism, converting to Yoruba, observing rituals and wearing traditional African dress. Oyewole travelled to Raleigh in North Carolina to undertake direct action "because being a poet wasn't revolutionary enough," says Bin Hassan. He was arrested for gun running and armed robbery, trapped in the woods wearing his African robes following an eight-hour man hunt. "Six of my guys ripped off some guns from two hardware stores," he says. "Two guys dropped their guns, went back to get them and got busted. I felt responsible. I couldn't get any money for their bail, so I figured we could kill two birds with one stone by robbing the Klan. We got caught and I got put in jail. I was in there when the album came out."

Oyewole served four years and wouldn't play with The Last Poets again until the '90s. In his absence, they continued as a trio. They were suddenly in demand. Nuriddin recorded the bawdy "Doriella Du Fontaine" with Jimi Hendrix and Buddy Miles. Mick Jagger personally asked permission to use "Wake Up, Niggers" on *Performance*. They performed at the Apollo and played with Isaac Hayes, Hugh Masekela and BB King. "We blew Bobby Womack off stage," says Nuriddin. "He complained about going on after us! We found ourselves stars, even though we were just two poets and a conga player."

The album's success coincided with the cresting wave of black militancy, crowning them as cultural figureheads. Bin Hassan recalls David Hilliard, secretary of the Black Panther party, later telling him: "You guys had no idea how important you were. You made black guys think, you made people want to join the Panthers and the Republic of New Afrika. Y'all were really dangerous!" It made them a target. Bin Hassan remembers random

Abiodun Oyewole and Umar Bin Hassan, 2006



phone calls, clicks on the line, and how "brothers you'd made prayer with or been in a shoot-out with against the police started snitching and setting us up".

THE LAST POETS album "said what it was supposed to say about the times," explains Douglas. "It was revolutionary stuff that black people had to hear." In many respects, anything that came afterwards could never have the same impact. With Oyewole still in jail the group made *This Is Madness* in 1971. Raw but more reliant on overdubs, it contains the peerless "White Man's Got A God Complex" but marks the beginning of the end of The Last Poets as any kind of unified concept.

Douglas dropped them after its release – "Quite quickly", he says, "it became repetitious" – while the addition of new poet Suliaman El-hadi brought conflict. "I wasn't getting on with Jalal and Suliaman, and I didn't like some of the things we were doing," says Bin Hassan. "I didn't like that we were smoking so much reefer, running sisters, doing all the things we were supposed not to be doing. I was getting into almost physical altercations with them so it was time to leave." He returned briefly on *At Last* (1974), before falling into addiction and destitution.

"I'd get a standing ovation in crack dens. Like, 'Oh, we know that voice, you're Umar from The Last Poets!' I'd be, like, 'Yeah, pass the pipe.'"

Nilaja also left, following a post-show freak-out in Chicago. "The spirits came down on him and he walked out in minus 15 degrees in his pants, shoes and hat," says Nuriddin, who continued working with El-hadi as The Last Poets throughout the '70s and '80s, making the music more jazz-orientated. They collaborated with Bristol band The Pop Group and acid-jazzers Galliano, but as hip hop went mainstream the past overshadowed their present: A Tribe Called Quest sampled two early tracks on *The Low End Theory* in 1991; Ice Cube called them the "first real hardcore rappers".

They attempted to capitalise by contriving a rapprochement for the 1993 film, *Poetic Justice*, starring Tupac and Janet Jackson. Bin Hassan was dragged from obscurity ("People thought I was dead. I'd been in some shoot-outs but I didn't die"), and Oyewole rejoined. Shortly afterwards they split again, and for a while there were two versions of The Last Poets touring. Even apart, they were combustible. I ask Nuriddin about the claim that he turned up at a Paris show in the '90s and stabbed Bin Hassan. He pauses. "Let's just say me and Umar had a fight and I won. We were always at each other's throats. He'd scare people so I had to show him my street credentials."

El-hadi died in 1995, Nilaja shortly after. Bin Hassan and Oyewole now carry The Last Poets' torch. Though they still perform and record, the group's lasting significance rests with the first record, on which, says Public Enemy's Chuck D, "they were able to put in words what people were feeling in a time of revolution. They had a profound influence on Public Enemy."

And what of the much-rapped revolution: did it ever happen? Bin Hassan is downbeat. "We were revolutionaries but we didn't have a true understanding of the concept," he says. "The mistake we made was that we were thinking about bringing the system down, but you need something to replace it. A lot of our children went through the same things, because in the end we didn't leave them nothing." Those who heard and heeded their call may beg to differ. **1**

A 2CD set featuring *The Last Poets* and *This Is Madness* will be released early 2012 by Charly

ESSENTIAL LAST POETS' ALBUMS

THE LAST POETS

1970, DOUGLAS RECORDS

★★★★

THE LAST POETS A seminal debut, The Last Poets' self-titled record is an

extraordinary 30-minute distillation of fury and frustration. Instantly hailed as a classic, it has since been a direct influence on everything from Gil Scott-Heron's *Small Talk At 125th*

THIS IS MADNESS

1971, DOUGLAS RECORDS

★★★★



The second Last Poets album hints at a growing ambition, with its

overdubs, sing-song chants and complex drum figures. Nilaja had been studying African ritual rhythms and, lord, it shows on the title track and dizzying "OD". Meanwhile, "White Man's Got

HUSTLER'S CONVENTION

1973, UNITED ARTISTS

★★★★



A Nuriddin solo album recorded as Lightnin' Rod, this is a masterpiece

of jailhouse blues and cinematic street rap. Featuring among its guests Buddy Miles, an unknown Kool & The Gang and Billy Preston, it deserves its

CHASTISEMENT

1973, BLUE THUMB

★★★★



From the loaded symbolism of the cartoon cover to

the 12 jazz-funk minutes of "Tribute To Obabi", this marks the beginning of The Last Poets' long voyage into Islam and "Jazzoetry". Though lacking the fire of the early records, it presents

HOLY TERROR

1993, INNER RHYTHMIC/RKODISC

★★★★



Featuring Melle Mel, Bootsy Collins and George Clinton,

Oyewole and Bin Hassan are reunited on record for the first time in 20 years. It's a lively thing, drawing on rap, jazz and funk textures while espousing familiar socio-political woes on songs like