



'Blessed Are Those Who Struggle'

The Last Poets are a group which has had minimal exposure and yet was always had maximum effect on its listeners over a period of time. That effect could be described as impact — once heard, never forgotten. Jak Kilby profiles them and interviews one of their members, Sulaiman El Hadi.

The Last Poets was formed around 1968, originating from a writer's workshop in Harlem. They took their name from a poem by the South African poet Willy Okanski which stated that this age was the last time poets would offer dialogue before guns took over completely. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Poets gave their performances predominantly in the streets of New York, attracting large crowds each time. They were of the streets, speaking on the streets, the language of the streets, to street people. The messages of their poems were reflections of the times; born out of Black Nationalism, the dreams and hopes of revolution, and the Nation of Islam in the late 1960s. Later their conversion to Sunni Islam resulted in a more directly Islamic influence in their work and this is still bound up with the struggle of the people.

That the Black Latin peoples in America were oppressed in an understatement which still applies today. As Jalal Nuriddin has said, in an interview with Charles de Ledesma in *The Wire*: "The American dream said each individual could make it, but this did not apply to Black people. We'd believed we could accomplish something by working through the system, but,

in the streets the people were angry because they felt they had been lied to and short-changed". The Last Poets describe their form of expression as spoagraphics, that is, spoken pictures: of black self-delusion, the exploitation of the poor of all races, and state attempts, in both the East and the West, to smother and repress voices of opposition and liberation.

Their early performances drew the attention of the small, but quality, independent record label, Douglas. They began releasing records in 1970, producing six albums by 1977. They were then unable to find a recording commitment giving both creative freedom and financial return. This situation continued until 1984 when they began working with Celluloid Records. This led to a new album last year, 'Oh My People', and a policy of re-releasing their previous records already collectors' items. 'The Last Poets' from 1970, and 'This Is Madness' from 1971 have both been re-issued and have proved to be as fresh and as relevant now as they originally were. Their words leap out at you. It is impossible to ignore such tracks as 'Wake Up Niggers', 'When the Revolution Comes', 'White Man's Got A God Complex', or 'Time (is running out)'. 'Mean Machine' in particular (which was also

released as a single) aptly marries a description of life today, and technological madness, with the message concerning the end of time described in the Book of Revelations.

The Poets use a framework of lead voice with a rhythmic rap accompaniment, plus conga drums and lately bass guitar. They have recently had a selection of their work published (by the Pluto Press), *Vibes From The Scribes*, and have just visited Britain, giving performances in London and Liverpool. They also took the opportunity to work on a new album using the recording facilities of the excellent Brent Black Music Co-op in West London. This work includes a truly epic poem on the history of Africa, charting the European colonial conquest; how the European nations agreed to carve up the African continent, and the resulting opposition of the people of Africa against this — including Shaka Zulu and Muhammed Ahmed Al Mahdi. This continues right through the struggle for freedom and independence up to the present day, all contained in one poem! It is set to a laid-back Afro-Caribbean beat and rhythmic chant of 'Black, back, back, back to Africa'... yet another strong and essential work to be anticipated.

Blessed are those who struggle
Oppression is worse than the grave
Better to die for a noble cause
than to live and die a slave

Blessed are those who courted death
Who offered their lives to give
Who dared to rebel, rather than serve
to die so that we might live



Could you give us some background as to what has been happening with the Muslims in the US?

The Islamic movement is growing. The so-called Black Muslim Movement, after the death of Elijah Mohammed, went through a dramatic change and many members converted to Sunni Islam. I say so-called Black Muslim Movement because they were black and they were telling people that Islam was the religion of the black man, and that the majority of the people of Africa were Muslims. Yet their doctrine was a far cry from Islam. They were mistakenly called Black Muslims by the media. In fact, they were Black Nationalists.

Is Islam mainly spreading amongst the Black population in the US?

Oh definitely Blacks, but Puerto Ricans and other poor oppressed people in America are also accepting Islam.

Do you feel that it gives you dignity?

Definitely, because it gives you direction. You see in America people are born into a society that is moving so fast that it leaves you without spiritual direction. It is such a highly sophisticated, materialistic society in which the whole concept of religion is second place. Because of the separation of Church and the state, religion has been more or less a taboo subject to talk about in schools and places like that. Take for example, the signs they have in barber shops: 'No religious or political discussions in here'. The emphasis is on money, money, money; so consequently people are less interested in the spiritual world — except in the poor communities where they

do not have anything. In their despair these people turn to Islam. You know Islam does help to give dignity because it takes the dope fiends and turns them into Muslims. It takes the alcoholics and turns them into Muslims. It takes the thugs and turns them into Muslims. And once these people are associated with Islam they turn right around.

How do Mosques operate in the US?

In most of the large cities the Mosques stay open 24 hours a day. Brothers do what they call desk duty, making sure the Mosque is open for prayers, answering the phone, taking down messages, and logging all the phone calls that come in. There is also an active *da'wa* programme in most of the Mosques where people go out to give *da'wa* to non-Muslims because the job of spreading Islam requires that you go out to people who are not Muslims and tell them about Islam rather than to people who are Muslims.

Do all the Muslims come in large numbers to the Mosques?

There are some Muslims who feel that they don't have to do what Allah has commanded since they live in Western societies. They say "Oh these are modern times and prayers are things of the past" and that kind of stuff, but the fact of the matter is that Allah has commanded us to pray in the past, in the present, and in the future. In America, Muslims take things very literally and it has been said that we're fanatics in our belief in Islam. People who come from other places shed their cultures to embrace American technological 'wonders'. We in turn are putting on Islamic clothes and garbs

because we want to identify ourselves as Muslims.

What sort of problems have American Muslims encountered?

In the past many of our problems had come from our Muslim brothers from Muslim countries. They came and brought racism with them — Islamic racism — where they have actually referred to us as 'you people' and made racist slurs at us. No everybody, just some of them. They told us: "You people are not real Muslims" even though we pray five times a day. And we go to the Mosques at *fajr* time, at dawn. But when we go to say our dawn prayers we very seldom see many of them come: We see them at Friday prayers but we don't see them in the Mosque during the week except the very, very few who come to *fajr* and *isha* (night) prayers. But Allah's messenger, the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and the Blessings of Allah be upon him), has said that prayers distinguish believers from non-believers. "But for your prayers Allah would not care for you". He also said that the best prayers is the *fajr* prayer. The Prophet further said that you can tell hypocrites by the prayers because surely *fajr* and *isha* prayers (the dawn and night prayers) are the two hardest prayers on the hypocrites. Allah has commanded man when to pray. He did not say, "If you happen to go to a place where there are not that many Muslims don't pray". He didn't say nothing like that. He said just the opposite.

I have met some Muslims who have said it's OK to drink some wine or beer and that the Qur'an only forbids strong alcohol...



That is just an excuse for them to indulge in what they want to do. The Qur'an says: "Be not pliant for surely they wish you to be pliant so they can be pliant". It tells you that you are not supposed to be half-stepping, you're supposed to be whole stepping. The problem with Muslims is that they have been half-stepping for Allah, but they've been whole-stepping for Satan, because Allah in the Qur'an specifically forbids the drinking of alcohol. This is *haram*. It's not even what is called a *makruh*, an undesirable. No, this is *haram*, forbidden. Just like fornication - forbidden.

And those who commit those types of sins would be punished in Muslim states?

Definitely, these things are specifically forbidden by the Creator. In America we do not have an Islamic state, as of yet. The only Islamic state that I know of is Iran. There are others who claim to be Muslim countries but not Muslim states. There is a difference between the two. A Muslim country is a country with a majority who are Muslims; a Muslim state is a Muslim country that is governed according to the precepts of the Islamic law, the *Sharia*, based on the Qur'an, what Allah has said, and the traditions of the Prophet (Peace and the Blessings of Allah be upon him). The traditions are what the Prophet said and did himself as an example for us.

How do you go about with your da'wa work?

The instructions of the Prophet when he sent his early companions (may Allah be satisfied with them), to give *da'wa* to people, to call them to Islam, were these: "First tell the people that there is no God but Allah, teach them that. After they have accepted that, teach them that Muhammad is His messenger. After they have accepted that, teach them to pray. After they have begun to do that, then tell them about *zakat* (alms). After you have established that, tell them that fasting during the month of Ramadhan is enjoined on them. After they have established that then tell them that Allah requires them to make the pilgrimage to his house, the Kaaba, in Makkah, if they are able to do so". Allah has told us we are supposed to establish Islam on the people in stages, if necessary. But our job is to spread Islam because Islam is for all men and all women, and all *djinns*, male and female too. And He has said specifically: "I have not created the men and the *djinns* except that they should worship

me". That is the purpose of all of us on this planet. So Allah has given us a way to follow. Muslims come to the West, do all sorts of things and try and justify that. But they must remember what Allah, *Subhana Wa Ta'ala* said: "Surely, anyone who imitates a people is one of them. Take the Jews and Christians as your friends, they are friends to one another, and anyone who does that is one of them". So when people try to justify what they do and water down Islam, they really are just putting a nail on their own coffin.

The Creator is the ultimate cause of all things. For Allah *Subhana Wa Ta'ala* has created everything. He is the Creator; He is the ultimate cause of all



this effect that we "come into contact with. It is a matter of Muslims being sincere. It's like a man came to me and found out that I was a Haji. He said, "Oh, you went on hajj!" I said, "Yes, I went on the hajj, alhamdulillah!" He said, "Oh yes, my father went to the hajj three times". I replied, "Oh Allahu Akbar! Good for him, but have you been to hajj, brother?" He said, "No, brother, I have not made hajj but my father has". So I said, "Well, answer me this question. When your father eats, does it make you go to the bathroom brother?" "No, of course not!", he said. What I was basically trying to say to him was that each individual Muslim has an obligation to go to Makkah on the hajj. Your father's hajj ain't nothing to you, Allah is going to judge him on his hajj, it's just like the case of Noah and his son.

Is there much real opposition to Islam in America?

Sure, colossal. But the opposition, you understand, only makes it more interesting. At first they tried all kinds of things to stop Islam but now they have begun to develop a respect for the Muslims. Anywhere you could go in America you might see Muslims. Even in the southern states you see Muslims walking around with turbans on. These are black Americans who have accepted Islam, they were born black but they are Muslims first. Take Iman Al Amin. In the past, he was known to the world as a black American revolutionary. His name then was H Rap Brown and they made a big thing out of him saying "Burn, baby, burn" during the 1960s but he converted to Islam a few years back. They still have him come into colleges to speak to black audiences and of course he has to give them an Islamic point of view now because he sees things in another way.

I was in the US five years ago at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis. I could not believe the kind of things going on, like bumper stickers on cars with slogans like 'Nuke Iran', without any consideration of anything else that was happening in that situation...

Much of that type of thing was being orchestrated by the Zionists. First of all they started saying the Iranians were killing Jews, that the Iranian Revolution was being unfair, expelling Jews, killing Jews, holding a Jewish newspaperman for so long, and that kind of stuff.

The Jews are in a very strong position politically in the US. They control the press, they put a lot of finance into campaigns of politicians, and they effectively control New York City. The Mayor there is Jewish; the City Controller, who controls all the money, is Jewish; two or three of the District Attorneys are Jewish; the Medical Examiner is Jewish; two of the Borough Presidents are Jewish and they control the political scene in New York. In fact, I just read in today's *Herald Tribune* that Arab-Americans are in danger from extremist Jewish organisations that have been suspected of assassinating Arabs in New York, and in other parts of the US, as well as anybody else who takes an anti-Zionist stand.

When the Iranian Revolution came about, the Jews undertook a campaign to vilify Imam Khomeini in cartoons; they even made Halloween masks of the Imam's face to play games on Halloween, to make him look like a monster. The American reading public is gullible enough though, to the

that if the newspapers say "Reagan is a King", at first you would laugh at it, but the next day you know they will all be saying "Yeah, King Reagan". They are so pumped up to believe whatever the newspapers say, whatever the television says, as the truth; and they don't question it, they just blindly follow. A lot of people in the US had other views which never got aired. So the editors act as 'guardians of the faith'; the faith sometimes is the status quo, sometimes imperialism, sometimes Christianity, sometimes it's all three mixed together...

In the US they try to blow away the Christian thing. That's why you had this hard Black backlash from the grass-roots Christians. The born-again,

than paid, so they look at the whole work ethic as a punishment. On the other hand, the white population benefited from the misery of the Blacks and consequently after the abolition of slavery they took the same attitudes that they had. The same attitude of superiority still exists especially among the poor and middle-class Whites more than among the rich Whites. This is so because the former view the Black people as being in competition for their jobs. Consequently we had some major riots in the US over the years. Black people were attacked in the streets, like in the great riots in St Louis and in Chicago. The riots took on violent forms. They burnt a Black orphanage in Cooper Square in New York. The little girls who ran out of

the building were stoned to death. Whites did that. Those girls they didn't burn to death, they beat to death. All this was an expression of their anger because they thought they were going to lose jobs as a result of the migration of Black people from the south to the north-east. These attitudes still exist today. As a matter of fact, there is an organisation called SPONG (Society for the Prevention of Niggers Getting anything) which was formed by Whites, especially from the Italian community after the civil rights movement started going in the 1960s. This organisation is still functioning with a dues paying membership! Along with the Klu Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council and the Nazi Party of America, and all of the many many other societies to oppress the Africans in the US. And Islam is viewed as a threat because it has been attracting large numbers of Black people and other oppressed minorities. Islam has the mechanism for organisation, for political action. It has its own political system.

People who are not Muslims in Africa, I think, have some understanding of Islam but when it comes to Europeans it is as if you're waving a red flag. This is my experience; the closer I get towards Islam, people try to do all kinds of things to take me away from it, to confuse me. I've realised that they're really afraid of Islam...

Not only that but Satan is also inspiring them, because Allah says in the Qur'an: "All ye who believe take not Satan as a friend for surely Satan is an avowed enemy to you..." He also says: "Oh children of Adam, did I not command you not to take Satan as a friend, for surely Satan is an open enemy to you, an avowed enemy". So Satan, the forces of evil are always there fighting the forces of good. That is why Muslims like to quote the Prophet Muhammad (may the Peace of Allah be upon him) who said: "The greatest fight is the jihad of the nafs (self) for surely it is the jihad al akbar". The great fight is the fight of the self, to fight with yourself. And that is true — the greatest fight you'll ever have will be the fight with yourself — keeping yourself in check. However, that does not exclude you, in the path of Allah, defending Islam against physical attacks from outside forces. That which you believe in, you are supposed to defend. You have to. Put it like this: blessed are those who struggle, oppression is worse than the grave; better to die for a noble cause than to live and die a slave. ●



they're like grass-root people, even though there is a high degree of conservatism among them because of the regions they come from, primarily from the southern and the western regions where the mentality of the people has always been prejudiced and biased as a result of their legacy of slavery. Let's take the attitude towards work among the Black people. Their attitude towards work has not been the same as that of the white people. Although the black people can and do work hard, but when they do have jobs, their expectation from their jobs is not the same because their work ethic is not the same.

From the African perspective, work was associated with pain. In other words, when Blacks went out to the fields in the morning, they had to go and there was no reward for them because at the end of the day they didn't get paid for their labour. As a matter of fact, they were cursed rather



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when the thirteen devils gathered
to unleash their bag of tricks
Then sigel means the images
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like the colours on Old Glory
the flag that they unfurled
Now red was the colour of the Indian man
White was the Jinns who stole the land
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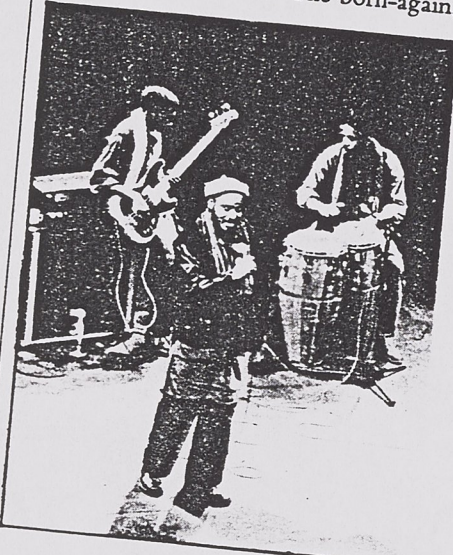
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