

AC-BAW Center for the Arts still serving Mt. Vernon after 35 years

Story by Joe Parisi

After 35 years and, despite struggling through these tough economic tough times, the AC-BAW Center for the Arts continues to provide an essential service for the Mount Vernon community and beyond. The Association of Community-Based Artists of Westchester (AC-BAW) was founded way back in 1976, by a small, local group of artists.

In 1980, AC-BAW rented an abandoned furniture store on Fourth Avenue. The organization then entered into a joint program with the City of Mount Vernon as well as local banks and the Gannett Foundation, to develop innovative education and arts programs, in their acquired commercial space.



A partial view of an exhibit currently on display at AC-BAW

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AC-BAW's first arts program was for the most underdeveloped communities of the county, beginning with a summer program called, "Westchester Artists In the Streets." Its newly acquired facility was actually renovated by high school dropouts, and was later honored as the Arts Critics' Choice Gallery of the Year.

Since the facility was founded, it has brought world-class exhibitions, concerts and lectures to downtown Mount Vernon. In fact, many locals view this gallery as the cultural heart and hope of Mount Vernon's downtown area.

AC-BAW's overall mission has not changed after all these years, and it is: To improve, promote and strengthen the state of the visual arts in the developing communities of Westchester County. In addition, the organization's leaders seek to provide economic opportunity for professional artists through its exhibition and teaching programs. They also continue to demonstrate the fact that art and artists play an integral role in community revitalization and development.

In fact, AC-BAW and the its founders have "grown old together." But, the facility and its founders are all intact, as a closely knit group that still runs a legendary arts center.

The following is a list of the AC-BAW's Officers, its Board of Directors and others, who help run the center on a volunteer basis:

- President and Co-founder, Saleem Sullivan
- Vice-President and Co-founder, Billy Thomas
- Secretary, Williams Saunders
- Treasurer and Co-founder, Larry H. Spruill, PhD.
- Board Member and Co-founder, Donald Robertson
- Webmaster, Graphic Designer, Video

Editor & Photo Archivist, James Fair
• Photographer, Ted Jenkins

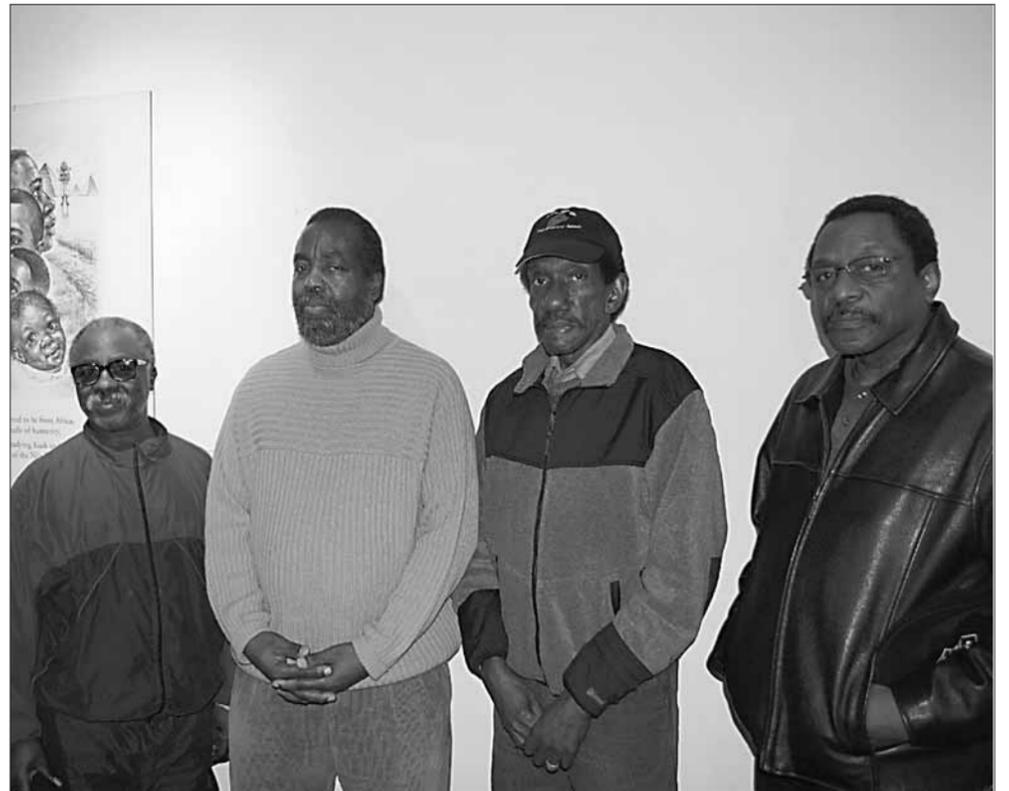
"We are dealing with many challenges, like everybody else," said the center's President, Saleem Sullivan. "But, fortunately, we have been able to overcome many of them and we are still here. During our earlier years, Mount Vernonites realized that they did not have to travel to Manhattan to enjoy an arts venue and, instead, they frequented our center. We need to have more of that today," Sullivan added.

The AC-BAW's management team says that it seeks more government and community involvement in these economically turbulent times. Sullivan pointed out that this is an essential way to establish a new era of growth and cultural service to the developing communities of Westchester, especially in artistic Mount Vernon.

The center's Vice President, Billy Thomas, added: "We look forward to working with artists, the city (of Mount Vernon), our schools, community groups and arts patrons, in order to keep AC-BAW Center for the Arts solvent."

AC-BAW is more than just a showcase gallery, according to its founders. It is a resource for cultural enrichment and a place where the entire community can play a part in, and add to, a cultural Mount Vernon. In addition to quality exhibitions, the center also offers several programs, such as workshops, seminars, films and concerts.

Furthermore, AC-BAW is available to organizations and responsible individuals, as a rental venue, for functions like receptions, meetings, private parties, concerts, bazaars and more. It is located at 128 South Fourth Avenue, and offers the community free dinners every third Saturday of the Month, where the doors open to guests at 2 pm. This program is spon-



(l to r) Billy Thomas, Saleem Sullivan, James Fair and Ted Jenkins

sored by the concerned sisters of Masjid Yusuf Shah and is open to all denominations.

Recently, the AC-BAW started a video series on Mount Vernon Public Access Television (Channel 18), called "AC-BAW Center for the Arts Presents." This program includes the show, "Focus on Issues of Concern," hosted by John Nashid. You can check your television listings for air times.

AC-BAW is the only facility of its kind in Westchester County and needs your support. They are easily accessible by car, bus, train and the subway.

You may contact the AC-BAW Center by mail, e-mail or phone at:

128 South 4th Avenue
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Sisters of Masjid Yusuf pictured behind the food counter at AC-BAW

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"Blood Beats in Four Square Miles" showcases work of local poets in Mt. Vernon

The historical book launch of "Blood Beats in Four Square Miles" took place on Sunday, October 17, before a packed house at the AC-BAW Center for the Arts, in Mount Vernon. This event featured the very first anthology to feature the work of Mount Vernon poets.

The book's author, James "JaFa" Fair is well known locally, and he did a masterful job in bringing together Mount Vernon poets in an unprecedented way, by showcasing their work in one historic collection.

"I have spent five decades living and learning in Mount Vernon," wrote L. Hawthorne Spruill in the anthology's Forward. "It is an inspirational place for writers. I am not alone. There are many ready to take words from their journals and diaries and share them with others. Now there is "Blood Beats in Four Square Miles," to showcase the exceptional writers in our city. This is a new beginning."

In his book, Fair wrote, "I firmly believe and understand that the voice of poetry has an important role to play in defining who we are, what our dreams and struggles are, where we are going as individuals, as a community, as a city and as citizens of the world."

James "JaFa" Fair received his Bachelors of Fine Arts (Cum Laude) in Theatre from Howard University's College of Fine Arts. His regional, off-Broadway credits include productions in New York, Washington, DC, Seattle, Washington and South Carolina. In addition to his theatre work, JaFa is an accomplished writer and poet, website designer, computer graphic artist, photographer and videographer. Currently, he is the editor of "JaFa's Poet's Corner" in the Mount Vernon Inquirer's monthly publication.

Nearly 50 people attended the historic book signing, including some local poets featured in the book.

"I realize that I'm missing out on the Giants game today, but what is happening here is historic and I need to be here as a lover of poetry," said one local writer.

During the book launching ceremony, Fair talked about several individuals who have

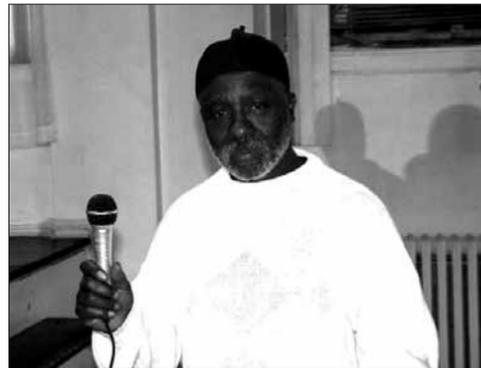
supported him, since he first moved to Mount Vernon, along with others who he thanked for assisting with his book. Saleem El-Hamin Sullivan and Billy Thomas, from the AC-BAW Center, were among Fair's "honorable mentions." Both attended the ceremony and praised Fair, during their own speeches, and noted that Fair has had to overcome many health and personal problems, but managed



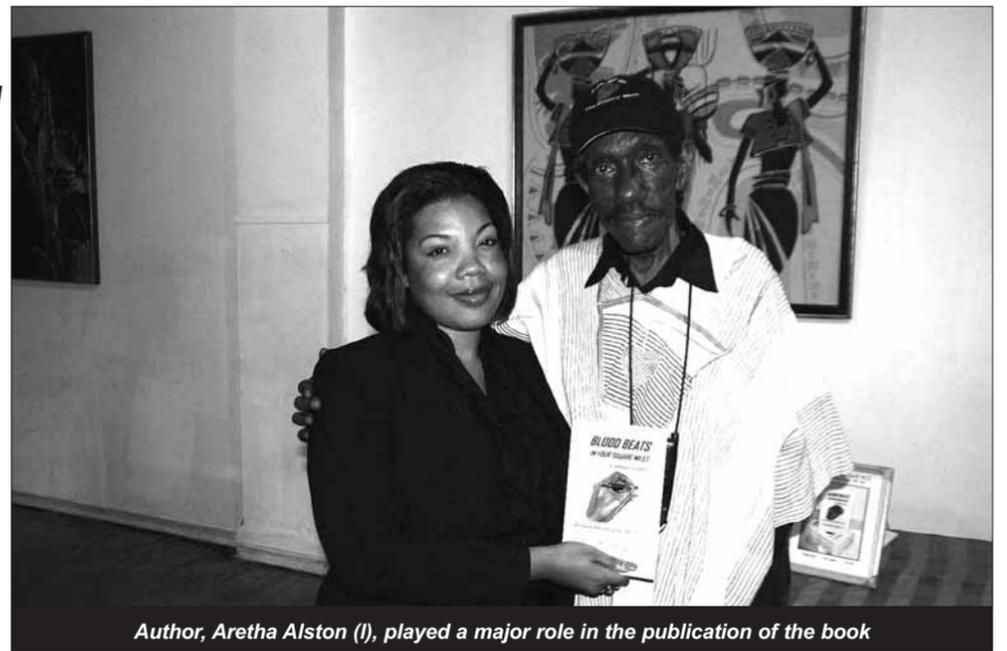
James "JaFa" Fair addressing the audience at the book launching ceremony of "Blood Beats in Four Square Miles."



(l to r) G. Mae McDowell, Maryann McCarra-Fitzpatrick and Mary Jones



Mount Vernon's legendary Billy Thomas



Author, Aretha Alston (l), played a major role in the publication of the book

to get his life in order, with the help of many caring friends.

"This is a very special day, not only for James, but for all of us," said Thomas.

Three contributing writers, G. Mae McDowell, Maryann McCarra-Fitzpatrick and Mary Jones, whose poems are found in the book, also joined JaFa and addressed the large audience, reading poems from the anthology. Fitzpatrick provided significant assistance in the creation of this anthology, and you can visit her blog at: <http://mccarra-poetry.blogspot.com>.

Following the ceremony, guests were treated to a light lunch and refreshments and many purchased autographed copies of "Blood Beats in Four Square Miles."



Saleem El-Hamin Sullivan, President of AC-BAW

Readers interested in purchasing a copy of Fair's historic book can do so at www.amazon.com, or by visiting the AC-BAW Center for the Arts, located at 128 S 4th Avenue in Mt Vernon, NY.



Guests anxiously waiting to purchase an autographed copy of "Blood Beats in Four Square Miles."



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AC-BAW fundraiser for "Jobe" a huge success

The Association of Community-Based Artists of Westchester (AC-BAW), located on South 4th Avenue in the heart of Mount Vernon's business district, hosted a recent fundraiser for a cancer stricken little boy named Jobe.

Although Jobe Fatoyinbo has been stricken with a rare form of cancer, called acinic cell carcinoma, he is a happy, active and gifted six-year-old little boy. At his fundraiser, Jobe was observed playing non-stop with other little boys, not once slowing down for a "breather."

Jobe has a talent that many kids his age do not possess—the ability to draw exceptionally well for someone his age. In fact, the AC-BAW's walls were adorned with Jobe's artwork on the night of his fundraiser, where the hundreds of guests purchased every single one of them, plus dozens of his other drawings—created during the past two years.

Jobe has spent many hours at hospitals and in doctors' offices, waiting for specialists to see him, according to his family. He was required to sit still in one place for lengthy periods of time, so Jobe learned to overcome the boredom of waiting by drawing.

"When he has an appointment, I make sure that he takes his sketchbook, pens and crayons, so he can keep himself busy drawing," said Jobe's mother, Willette Fatoyinbo.

The overflowing crowd at his fundraiser included Jobe's family, friends, elected officials and many Mount Vernonites, who simply wanted to help Jobe's parents defray some of the overwhelming medical bills they have had to contend with.

The Master of Ceremonies for Jobe's fundraiser was his grandfather, Will DeBose, the director of Veterans Affairs for the City of Mount Vernon. After an invocation by Rev. Richard A. Garner, DeBose

introduced Maureen Walker, Mount Vernon's comptroller, who recently announced her intention to become Mount Vernon's next mayor.

"I am fully aware that what we are all doing here tonight is extremely important for Jobe," said Walker. "I think his mother said that Jobe is not a Picasso, but to all of us here in Mount Vernon, he is our Picasso."

Also at the event was Councilman, Yuhanna Edwards, who has announced his bid for the mayor's office in Mount Vernon's upcoming election.

Edwards confessed that "When something happens in our family, we all come out. This is the way it's supposed to be, when we are truly family. It is very important that this young boy continue to be blessed because the future is in the hands of our young people. We must continue to do this—continue to pray—not just for this



Jobe is pictured standing by some of his drawings that adorned the walls of the AC-BAW Center.



Maureen Walker (l) standing by Jobe and his mother, Willette Fatoyinbo



Will DeBose acted as the Master of Ceremonies



Jobe's parents addressing the guests

young man, but for all children who have similar problems in life."

Jobe's mother, Willette, was also invited to speak and she said that her family may be relocating to Mount Vernon very soon.

"The challenge that we face is no different from health challenges being faced by other families," she said. "Jobe's condition normally affects people over the age of 50. Therefore, his treatment process is a little

more challenging because of his age. He has already undergone two surgeries and we are preparing him for a third one. As you can see, his spirits are high and he is very active, so I ask that you keep him in your prayers," Willette requested.

The ceremony was not very long and allowed Jobe's supporters and guests to mingle, enjoy and buy Jobe's paintings and drawings and enjoy some great food.

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