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Enduring Power of a Detroit Jazz Collective

Though Tribe has disbanded, its members still collaborate and spark the city's musical and political culture.

By GIOVANNI RUSSONELLO

DETROIT — Wendell Harrison sat at his dining room table on Chandler Street in the North End neighborhood on a recent Sunday afternoon, leafing through the pages of old *Tribe* magazines and dusting off copies of his earliest albums, which he self-released in the 1970s.

Each LP and magazine was emblazoned with a striking insignia: two masklike profiles facing left and right, bisected by a spear. Letters spelling “Tribe” ran down the center of the logo in a twisting pattern, as if braiding the two faces into a single shape.

A saxophonist by trade and an organizer by nature, Mr. Harrison, 77, recalled when this table was the home base for the Tribe collective. Led by four jazz musicians, Tribe's members put out their own records; published a widely influential Afrocentric magazine with a circulation reaching 25,000; organized concerts, often in tandem with dancers and theater performers; and taught music to local children.

In the process, it helped define a path forward for Detroit's arts community as the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s gave way to an uncertain future in a city ravaged by postindustrial decline.

“We had phones in here,” Mr. Harrison said, gesturing across the magazine-strewn table. “We had deals where if you bought an ad, we'd give you eight tickets to give away to the kids in the community.”

Tribe officially disbanded in 1977, after the trombonist Phil Ranelin, Mr. Harrison's primary creative partner and the collective's co-founder, decamped to Los Angeles. But Mr. Harrison remained in the Chandler Street house, never slowing down or letting go of his collectivist convictions.

A boldface reminder of that arrived last month, when the British label Strut Records released “Hometown: Detroit Sessions 1990-2014,” collecting recordings that Mr. Harrison; his wife, the pianist Pamela Wise; Mr. Ranelin; and other members of their creative community made in recent decades. The album is credited to Tribe, though that name had been retired by the time these tracks were captured.

“The phrase I use is ‘the Tribe diaspora,’” the journalist and critic Mark Stryker, who has covered Detroit's jazz scene since the 1990s, said in an interview, adding that Tribe's members have had an outsized impact on their hometown by continuing to collaborate, and by constantly welcoming younger musicians into the fold.

“They all assimilated this kind of idea that if you were a jazz musician in Detroit, you didn't wait around for people to do things for you — you did it yourself,” he said.

This year Mr. Stryker published “Jazz From Detroit,” the first book-length survey of Detroit's formidable — though often overlooked — jazz history. The chapter on Tribe is part of a larger section titled “Taking Control: Self-Determination in the 1960s and '70s,” devoted to the constellation of artist-run organizations that sprang up in Detroit in those years.

“Phil and Wendell, like a lot of Detroiters of their generation, are cultural warriors — because they had to be,” Mr. Stryker said. “Through the 1970s, '80s, '90s and 2000s, maybe no city fell further in America than Detroit.”

But Mr. Ranelin, 80, who hailed from Indiana, also remembered the Motor City as a



From top, Wendell Harrison, left, and Phil Ranelin, founders of the 1970s collective the Tribe, which organized concerts, put out records and published a magazine; Mr. Ranelin rehearses with Michigan State University students before a jazz concert; as does Mr. Harrison.

beacon of promise. “There was a sense of black pride in Detroit that didn't necessarily exist in Indianapolis,” he said, in a joint interview with Mr. Harrison and Ms. Wise over the phone from Los Angeles.

Asked about Tribe's ethic of self-actualization, he was unambiguous: “As far as I'm concerned, it was about survival.”

Tribe was never a band so much as it was a group of well-organized friends and colleagues: Mr. Harrison, Mr. Ranelin, the pianist Harold McKinney and the trumpeter Marcus Belgrave. As a result, the albums released under the Tribe moniker in the 1970s — and those that its members have put out in ongoing collaborations since — represent a record of the natural, ever-evolving ecology of a local jazz scene: musicians interacting, trading leadership roles and innovating in small, interdependent ways.

“Hometown,” like many of those earlier recordings, works as a wide-lens picture of the Detroit jazz scene. The sound of these tracks reflects a group of musicians grounded in Detroit's sturdy bebop tradition — with a big, elastic swing feel undergirding some of the tunes, and dashing solos from the group's members throughout — but also adept at sculpting lush horn arrangements or incorporating propellant African drums and radical poetry (recited on

two tracks by Mbiyu Chui, the pastor at the Shrine of the Black Madonna).

All of these tracks had either never been released or were available only on limited-run albums. “Hometown” is the latest in a string of foreign reissues of Tribe-affiliated material, including “Message From the Tribe: An Anthology of Tribe Records 1972-1976” (2010) and the two-volume “Vibes From the Tribe” (1997).

Mr. Ranelin has been heartened to see Tribe's music reaching a greater audience outside Detroit now than ever before. “Since we didn't have a lot of distribution, it took 20, 25 years for it to finally roll around — and then boom, all of a sudden, these young people are really interested in Tribe,” he said. “But all this time, Tribe never left us.”

Mr. Ranelin arrived in Detroit in 1967, after taking a job at Motown Records. Mr. Harrison came three years later, returning to his hometown after nearly a decade in New York, where he had played with hard-bop and jazz-funk musicians like Grant Green and Hank Crawford, as well as the astro-jazz bandleader Sun Ra.

Mr. Harrison had picked up some business acumen from Sun Ra — who released his own albums by the dozen — and from his own mother, who ran a small real-estate business in Detroit and expected her newly

returned son to help manage it.

In fact, Mr. Belgrave was renting a room from her in the early '70s, which led him and Mr. Harrison to reconnect. Mr. McKinney had recently helped start the Metro Arts youth-education program along with the educator Amelita Mandingo; Mr. Harrison began teaching there.

Working often with Mr. Belgrave, Mr. McKinney and other like-minded musicians, Mr. Harrison and Mr. Ranelin set about recording and releasing their own albums, and established a regular performance schedule at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The program booklet that Mr. Harrison assembled for one of those shows inspired the journalist Herb Boyd to suggest that Tribe release its own publication.

Before long, the magazine — edited by Mr. Boyd — was a fully fledged general-interest publication aimed at a young, radical-minded black audience. Its cover stories ran the gamut from the keyboardist Herbie

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Hancock to the politician Coleman Young, then seeking election as the city's first black mayor, to the school-busing crisis.

“We were attracting attention, and we promoted ourselves through the magazine,” Mr. Harrison said. “It was a pipeline to our fans.”

The magazine became Tribe's money-maker, distributed internationally through a network of artists' collectives and small black businesses. But it eventually outgrew itself and folded in 1977, the same year Mr. Ranelin left for Los Angeles. Soon after, Mr. Harrison started Rebirth Inc., a nonprofit devoted to jazz education that he and Ms. Wise still run today.

The couple has continued to work with members of that Tribe diaspora, performing often and recording in their basement studio. And they remain dedicated to passing on the spirit that led to Tribe's founding almost 50 years ago.

Mr. Harrison — who last year won the Kresge Foundation's prestigious Eminent Artist lifetime-achievement award — still teaches twice a week at the Detroit School of Arts and still collaborates with Mr. Ranelin. In November they embarked on a short statewide tour, performing and speaking to students at Michigan State University and a half-dozen high schools. He and Ms. Wise often receive grants to bring jazz bands into elementary and middle schools. Every Tuesday night for the past few years they have been hosting jam sessions in their basement, which their most dedicated students attend.

“Beside the music, he gave me the mindset and made me believe I could do anything,” the saxophonist Benny Rubin, 19, said. “Sometimes I would learn more about the music from just hearing him talk.”

Mr. Rubin began studying with Mr. Harrison as a high schooler and became a regular attendee at the Tuesday-night jams. Now he's a jazz student at the New School in New York.

“Whenever I come back to Detroit, I'm excited for him to hear me play,” he said. “He doesn't really criticize me that much anymore, he just encourages me, because he understands where I'm coming from.”