

# VIBES

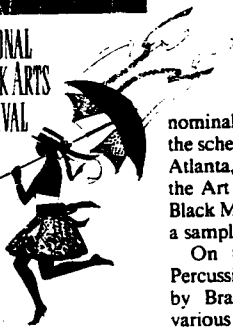


COMPOSER: Dwight Andrews.

INFLUENTIAL: Tania Leon.

ATLANTA: Alvin Singleton.

NATIONAL  
BLACK ARTS  
FESTIVAL  
1990



## FADE FROM BLACK

BY DOUG DELOACH

The prevailing influence of the African experience on the development of American music can be easily and, for the most part, inexpensively assessed during this year's National Black Arts Festival, which runs July 27 through August 5. The festival features world-class musicians performing in a variety of styles and idioms ranging from soul, salsa and gospel to jazz, symphonic and chamber music. Concert venues run the gamut from churches and amphitheaters to recital halls and city parks.

The 1990 NBAF concert calendar encompasses more than a dozen official and

nominally affiliated events. Taken as a unit, the schedule represents an unprecedented (for Atlanta, if not the planet) manifestation of the Art Ensemble of Chicago slogan, "Great Black Music — Ancient to the Future." Here's a sampling of what's in store:

On the primal root level, the African Percussion Ensemble, a nine-piece outfit led by Bradley Simmons, will be playing at various locations around the city. Sacred sounds — slave "shouts" and traditional hymns to the contemporary crooning of the Christian faithful — will be explored in a series directed by Robyn Brown (various dates, at local churches). The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra gets in on the action with a performance of compositions by Alvin Singleton, Adolphus Hailstork, George Walker and Maurice Peress at Piedmont Park (July 29).

Pop stars Anita Baker, Soul-II-Soul and Barry White headline the Atlanta Music Festival at Lakewood Stadium and Chastain Park (July 27-29). The Atlanta Sound Series places local musicians, such as Danny Harper, Bernadine Mitchell and Mose Davis, in downtown settings during lunchtime and after-work happy hours. Nigerian master percussionist Olatunji performs with a 12-piece ensemble at King Chapel at Morehouse College, the drummer's alma mater (Aug. 2). "Salsa Meets Jazz" is the title of a concert at the Variety Playhouse in Little Five Points

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featuring Atlanta's ultra-hot Orquesta Lyrica, a 12-piece ensemble led by Hassan Ortiz and Enrique Mercado, and the Joe Jennings led 18-piece Neighborhood Arts Ensemble (July 28-29 at 5 p.m. and July 30-31 at 7 p.m.).

The second installment of the 1990 Atlanta Jazz Series just happens to fall during the final weekend of the NBAF. The Atlanta debut of the Houston Person-Etta James Sextet is scheduled (Aug. 3), along with an exploration of the impact of Caribbean and African cultures on the evolution of jazz (Aug. 4-5). Guest artists include Tito Puente and his Latin All-Stars, Michelle Rosewoman's New Yor-Uba group, Randy Weston's Moroccan quintet and Abdullah Ibrahim (more on the AJS next week).

Perhaps the most ambitious and intriguing event of this year's NBAF is the Music Alive: Chamber Music Series. Conceived and directed by Alvin Singleton, former ASO composer-in-residence and now resident composer at Spelman College, Music Alive is a three-day series of concerts of new chamber music by African-American composers. The series runs next Wednesday, Aug. 1, through Friday, Aug. 3. All performances are free at the Georgia State University Recital Hall, and begin at 7:30 p.m. with a discussion session featuring the composer.

"I'm pretty sure nothing like this has ever been done before," says Singleton, "particularly when you start talking about the presentation of recent works." In all, 14 compositions will be performed, including four world premieres. All but two of the compositions were written in the last decade; nine were written in the last five years.

Singleton acknowledges that, "from the point of view of its origins," contemporary chamber music remains grounded in the Western European classical tradition. "But," Singleton notes, "the music in this series is American. It comes from growing up over here, and its main source of inspiration and direction is jazz."

The list of performers in the Music Alive series is a virtual Who's Who? and Who's Gonna Be? from the contemporary classical and, to a lesser extent, jazz scenes. The series kicks off Wednesday evening, Aug. 1, with T.J. Anderson's "Bridging and Branching," a composition for flute and double bass commissioned by sculptor Richard Hunt, a longtime Anderson supporter. Singleton scheduled Anderson's piece to coincide with the unveiling of a new sculpture by Hunt at the downtown Atlanta Public Library which takes place earlier in the afternoon.

Wednesday's program also includes the performance of a new arrangement of Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo." Ellington originally wrote "Mood Indigo" in 1930 as a trio for bass clarinet, trumpet and trombone. The 1990 version substitutes the violin for the 'bone and adds a lot more room for improvisation, Singleton notes. The work will be performed by violinist Leroy Jenkins, trumpeter Leo Smith and bass clarinetist Dwight Andrews. Jenkins and Smith are well known jazzmen who've collaborated with everybody from Sun Ra and Anthony Davis to Lukas Foss and Ornette Coleman. Andrews is an Emory University faculty member who has been composer/music director for Broadway productions of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *The Piano Lesson*, the latter a 1990 Pulitzer Prize winner for drama.

In a separate but related event, Singleton, Smith and Jenkins will team up for a special concert at the High Museum's Hill Auditorium on Sunday, July 29, at 3 p.m. "We've known each other for many years," says Singleton, "but we've never played together as a unit." Singleton is best known for his large-scale symphonic compositions ("Shadows," "After Fallen Crumbs"). He rarely performs in public, preferring the solitude of the studio and the introspective

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nature of composition to the spotlight on stage and the drudgery of endless practice sessions. Singleton credits the High Museum's Karl Boelter for prompting his Atlanta performance debut. In the true spirit of experimentation and improvisation, Singleton says that he and his fellow trio members "still aren't exactly sure" what they're going to do during Sunday's concert.

Putting together the Music Alive series was a monumental task. Singleton says he listened to "tons and tons of pieces" over the last eight months. Local saxophonist and arts administrator Amy Lee Schwartzberg served as project assistant, lending a fresh ear whenever Singleton felt like his had "burned out." Says the series' director, "I could never have pulled this together without Amy." Singleton also acknowledges the support of the GSU School of Music and the series' sponsors: the Fulton County Commission, the National Endowment for the Arts and Meet the Composer Inc.

Singleton thinks that since the Music Alive series shows so many different perspectives in 20th century music, "It might even be incidental that all of these composers are black." Nevertheless, the legacy of the Black

Diaspora underscores a majority of the series' works.

Tania Leone, born in Havana of French, Spanish, African, Chinese and Cuban descent, is, among other things, an associate professor of composition and conducting at Brooklyn College and the founder of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Community Concert Series. She has conducted the Phoenix Symphony and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and has worked as an assistant to Lukas Foss. "A La Par," Leone's Music Alive premiere piece, is the composer's first attempt to express "the dichotomy between my primary cultural heritage and my classical musical training." The piece is written in three movements predominated by a "semi-ostinato pulse" which represents the percussive sounds of "Caribbean tabletops, empty bottles, hands and spoons." The composer explains that the work's "continuous dialogue of rhythms propelled my musical heart into the fascinating world of eurythmics."

Singleton notes that some of the works in Music Alive may appear to reflect the African-based tradition of group improvisation, so central to the jazz idiom when, in fact, no true improvisation is present. In "Albatross," a 1981 work by Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson, a 39-year-old composer from Oklahoma City and

a student of Iannis Xenakis and Gunther Schuller, the harp serves as the main voice around which a flute, violin and cello revolve. Singleton says that, thanks to the composer's skillful integration of instrumental lines, "Albatross" sounds like a wailing improvisation, yet it is entirely through-composed.

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Other highlights of the Music Alive series include compositions by David Baker, one of the world's foremost jazz educators, Olly Wilson, Wendall Logan and Hale Smith. Guest instrumentalists include Diane Monroe, violinist with the New York-based Uptown String Quartet and Max Roach Double Quartet; cellist Ronald Crutcher, who played in Singleton's Fresh Images series at Spelman earlier this year; Tony Montgomery, "a fantastic pianist," says Singleton; Leo Saguigit, a Phillipino native and accomplished saxophonist currently teaching at Emory; Jennifer Jackson, a young flutist recently

transplanted to Atlanta; and percussionist Peggy Benkeser and pianist Laura Gordy, founding members of Thamyras, a local 20th century music ensemble.

"There's no denying that the African presence has defined American music, as has the European experience," says Singleton. "The result is something that the rest of the world views as wholly American." The only thing that's stunting its growth is "this thinking in terms of black and white" that Singleton says is practiced, ironically enough, "mainly by certain segments of listeners in America."

Although Singleton remains firmly committed to his role within the classical/academic music world, he emphasizes that, from the point of view of both listeners and players, "the greatest intellectual challenge today" is in jazz. "It's like when the European royalty and elite used to sit around and listen to the key changes of the great composers. That's how listeners have to approach jazz, with that same intensity and focus."

The melding of cultures and experiences, ideas and educations, colors and timbres from black Africa to white America, Caribbean bronze to Asian yellow — that's what Music Alive is all about. "Ultimately," says Singleton, "everything comes down to a swinging beige." ■