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Remembering

JOHN O'NEAL

September 25, 1940 - February 14, 2019

It is unfortunate that consideration of the mid-twentieth century southern freedom movement largely ignores its powerful creativity in the arts. Our art has always been tied to our struggle. This is a centuries-old truth of Black life. Beauty, after all, is part of what helps you through despair, what reinforces resistance to oppression. And who can doubt that -- more than any other group in the United States -- the words of Black people have framed the ideas of freedom; and with word and song Black people have brought beauty into the struggle for that freedom. How could this not be so? For we are haunted, wrote author and Professor Jan Carew some years ago, by "Ghosts in our blood."

Sept. 1963 funeral for 4 little girls murdered in Birmingham, AL church bombing. (L-R: Emma Bell [partially hidden], Dorie Ladner, Donna Richards, Doris Derby and Sam Shirah [behind Richards]) Credit: Danny Lyon

Or consider South African poet laureate Keroapetse "Willie" Kgositsile's take that embraces Black life on both sides of the Atlantic: *". . . . There is only movement. Force. Creative power. The walk of a Sophiatown totsi or my Harlem brother on Lenox Avenue. Field Hollers. The blues. A Trane riff. Marvin Gaye or mbaganga. Anguished happiness. Creative power in whatever form it is released, moves like the dancer's muscles."*

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August 1963 in performance (L-R: John O'Neal and Gilbert Moses, co-founders, Free Southern Theatre) Credit: Herbert Randall

It is here, within this tradition, that we remember John O'Neal. An important part of what shaped his artistry was the Free Southern Theater, which emerged from the dynamic of Mississippi's freedom movement. The theater was more than an effort to bring staged performances to the South. It was a conscious and determined effort to push forward recognition of the legitimacy, strength, and voice of African-American life and experience. Creativity defined the Movement as much as protest, a point too often missed by most scholars and media analysts.

But without understanding the kind of movement creativity reflected in John O'Neal's life, which most often bubbled from the bottom up, understanding of the Movement is at best incomplete. As poet and Dillard University professor Jerry Ward once noted in conversation with literary critic Houston Baker: "In any literary history that we will write in the future, we will have to account for those writers and thinkers who were caught up in a very active way with SNCC. They moved across regions, and they were agents of cross-fertilization."

July 2016 Black Power Session, SNCC Legacy Project,Duke University (L-R seated: Emilye Crosby, John O'Neal, Bertha O'Neal, Worth Long) Credit: SNCC Legacy Project

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John O'Neal, who at the time of the Free Southern Theater's founding was a Mississippi-based SNCC field secretary, helped author the Theater's founding prospectus of principles. What you see in that document is a reflection of the organizing tradition that defined the Movement:

"Our fundamental objective is to stimulate creative and reflective thought among Negroes in Mississippi and other Southern states by the establishment of a legitimate theater, thereby providing the opportunity in the theater and the associated art forms. We theorize that within the Southern situation a theatrical form and style can be developed that is as unique to the Negro people as the origin of blues and jazz. A combination of art and social awareness can evolve into plays written for a Negro audience, which relate to the problems within the Negro himself, and within the Negro community."

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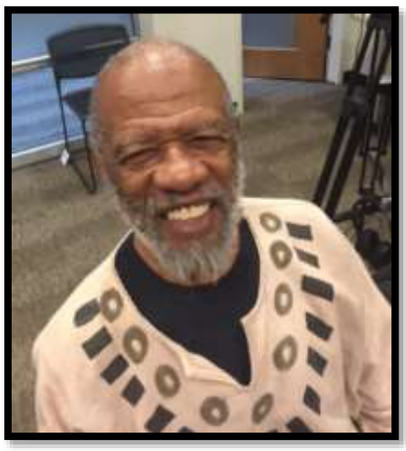
Free Southern Theatre performance at Tougaloo College in 1963 (L-R: John O'Neal with Denise Nicholas)

The formality of the language does not obscure the fact that the newly formed theater was on an organizing mission. Its value was recognized and not only by the southern movement. Indeed, while the southern movement was on the cutting edge of a direct challenge to a white supremacist order, it spread the conversation about social change not only across the South, but across the nation as well. This conversation, washing over us North and South —not only about protest, but about words and music and a liberated Black existence in America—was being held by a whole generation of young Black folks, and carrying us to a new level of Black consciousness. This was a generational exchange of political and cultural ideas.



Junebug Jabbo Jones was a voice that showed the wisdom found within Black life. We used it in our everyday life as SNCC organizers. Phrases that we passed among ourselves we gradually attributed to one figure. Thus… Junebug. John went further than any of us with this approach.

Poet and activist Amiri Baraka, speaking of this at the 2010 conference held at Shaw University to commemorate the 50th anniversary of SNCC's founding, made an essential point, about not only the Free Southern Theater or civil rights struggle, or the Black Arts Repertory theater in New York, but the Black Arts Movement in general: "We had to change the conversation." And that is exactly what happened with words and music, as well as with political ideas and stances. Few were more important to this than John O'Neal. He is missed.

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