Black Power Chronicles: James Phillips and Nelson Stevens

The conversation delves into the history and impact of the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists (AfriCOBRA), founded in 1968 by Jeff Donaldson. Key members include Nelson Stevens, James Phillips, Barbara Jones, and Wadsworth Jarrell. The discussion highlights their contributions to the Black Arts Movement, emphasizing the importance of visual representation and cultural expression. AfriCOBRA's manifesto focused on colorful, figurative art that reflected the African American experience. The group's collective efforts, including silkscreen prints and murals, aimed to make art accessible and relevant to the community. The conversation also touches on the influence of music and the broader cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s.

A. B. Spellman: My name is A.B. Spellman. It's January 23rd. We're in The Potter's House in Washington, DC. In 2017. We have two distinguished artists: James Phillips on my left and Nelson Stevens on my right.

Nelson Stevens is a native of Brooklyn [New York]. He attended Ohio University and majored in fine art in the early 1960s. He taught in the Cleveland Public Schools, where he often went to the Jazz Temple near John Coltrane. Mr. Phillips and Mr. Stevens share a bond with me among people who actually heard John Coltrane live, which is an experience which changed all our lives forever.

He [Nelson Stevens] taught at the University of Massachusetts, where he [was a friend of] Max Roach, a great drummer, and Archie Shepp, a great saxophonist. They were both on the faculty [of University of Massachusetts] with him. He did covers for their LPs. He has been on exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum, Brooklyn Museum, other museums and distinguished liberal arts centers.

Stevens has a gift for bending design around the figures. It's complex. The surfaces are alive with the movement which makes his portraiture, in particular, deep and true. He was a founding member of AfriCOBRA [the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists], the subject of our conversation this evening.[1]

[1] Previously known as the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists [COBRA].

James Phillips, I met on the streets of New York when, I believe, he was a member of the [indistinct] collective at that time. He introduced himself to me because it turned out he's from Gretna, Virginia, where my father was his art teacher. Even though my father had no training in art whatsoever, he managed to impart something or the other to James Phillips.

Like Stevens, James Phillips is a very distinguished muralist. His work is included in the Smithsonian Collection, and he has a piece in the—is it on exhibition now at the National Museum of African American History and Culture?

Nelson Stevens: Both of us. Yes.

James Phillips: Both.

A.B. Spellman: You both are?

Nelson Stevens: They have good taste.

A.B. Spellman: That they do. The State Department bought two works for the Art in Embassies program from James Phillips. The Philadelphia Airport Commission [also bought] a triptych for their domestic wing. He's in the Schomburg Center [for Research in Black Culture] and other prominent collections, including the collection of A.B. and Karen Spellman where he illuminates our house with his work.

James Phillips: I'd like to add, I was also born in Brooklyn.

A.B. Spellman: You were born in Brooklyn? [Indistinct].

AfriCOBRA is a very important movement in the arts. It has not, I think, received the recognition it deserves for its influence on American art. Tell me how AfriCOBRA came to be. What was the environment and the community which impelled artists and others to express the strength and vitality of the struggle for liberation at the time, which led to the founding of AfriCOBRA?

Nelson Stevens: The inception of AfriCOBRA—originally the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists—is from 1968, formulated chiefly by Jeff Donaldson.[2] Two years prior to that—and it

[2] Jeff Donaldson (1932–2018) was an influential African American artist, educator, and one of the founding members of AfriCOBRA (The African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. Donaldson's art often incorporated elements of African symbolism, as well as vibrant, bold colors and imagery to challenge the dominant narratives in mainstream art. His commitment to representing the Black experience and promoting social change through art was central to his work and activism.

makes this year an anniversary—was the *Wall of Respect* and that's really where it starts: 43rd [and] Langley Avenue, Chicago [IL].[3]

I first ran into Jeff Donaldson at a College Art Association Conference in 1969. I showed him my slides, and I was already aware of him because *Ebony Magazine* had run an issue on the *Wall of Respect*, showing Haki [R.Madhubuti] and many of the people in Chicago, with Jeff being central to the whole thing. This was a true visual statement of taking over the Black community through art. For years, Mayor [Richard] Daley tried to have it taken down—it's important not to forget that part.

When I showed Jeff Donaldson my slides, he knew I was looking for a job. He said, "Try and get as close to Chicago as possible." So, I went to Northern Illinois University, an hour and 15 minutes outside of Chicago, and I became an AfriCOBRA member in August of [19]69.

When I went to the first meeting of COBRA—the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists—Barbara Jones [a founding member of AfriCOBRA] was there. She was an outstanding printmaker and political scientist, bar none. Jeff Donaldson was the titular head, basically, but they were the philosophical basis of the organization. They did the reading basically.

[Others include] Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Carolyn Lawrence, and Gerald Williams. Napoleon Henderson and I became the seventh and eighth members of AfriCOBRA. Sorry—at that time, it was still COBRA, but soon we became AfriCOBRA—the Coalition of Black Relevant Artists. I didn't vote for "relevant." Pardon me, to say.

We went through that metamorphosis. But you've got to start at AfriCOBRA to COBRA to the *Wall of Respect* to understand the foundation of the organization that exists now.

One more thing before I hand it over to James—I'm just on a roll right now. Anytime I went to an AfriCOBRA meeting, it was very important. Sunday afternoons, no football, [just] paintings. We all ate together and critiqued together. The critique was about, "If you can improve it, speak. If you can't improve it, lay out."

It worked very well. It's worked very well for me as a professional artist, dealing with the white boys all the time, because that's the last thing they think of. And I resigned from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in [20]03 as professor emeritus in the art department and in the African-American Studies department. But of all the organizations I belong to, AfriCOBRA is in my life. Despite the fact that my department had James Baldwin and Chinua Achebe, I like Jeff Donaldson.

[3] The Wall of Respect, created in 1967 on the side of a building at 43rd and Langley Avenue in Chicago, is widely regarded as the birthplace of the Black Arts Movement and the Street Art Movement. It was a mural dedicated to honoring African American culture, history, and leaders, and it became a symbol of empowerment, serving as a model for future public art initiatives with political and social messages.

James Phillips: I wasn't in Chicago when they [AfricCOBRA] first organized. I was actually in Philadelphia and New York. I actually became part of a group that was a year or two older than AfriCOBRA. They call themselves the Weusi Artists now. "Weusi nyumba ya sanaa," means "House of Black Art."

They had their own gallery and it was a co-op gallery. That meant each member was responsible for keeping the doors open. Shortly after I joined them, I became artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum when Ed Spriggs was director.

Originally, the Studio Museum was run very differently from how it became. They had two spaces: one was a very large room that became the East Gallery, and then they had the West Gallery which was a very small space. The original idea, I think, was that William T. Williams [a renowned painter] was supposed to be the artist-in-residence, and the East Gallery was supposed to be his studio. The exhibit space was the spaller space, the western wing.

Spriggs came in and turned that around. He found some space upstairs for the artists-in-residence space. He turned what was supposed to be William T. Williams studio space into another gallery. So, the whole downstairs area was one large gallery and the artists-in-residence were upstairs. It was through that time that AfriCOBRA came to New York to do an exhibition [at the] Studio Museum.

Prior to that, I was having some serious problems seeing the people weren't relating to what I was doing. One of the reasons was that since Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones—or Amiri Baraka—founded the Black Arts Movement, it seemed to me, I thought, it was more about the music.[4]

Now, when you look at the book that just came out on the Black Arts Movement, it seems to be considered a writers' movement, according to some people. So, when they laid out the tenets of what Black arts was supposed to be—what Black visual art was supposed to be about—apparently I missed the directive that the work should be people-oriented images.

So, I'm painting things that I see, that I feel in the music, and I was getting a lot of flack that it wasn't relevant. When AfriCOBRA showed up, and I saw what they were doing, I saw a place that I had a sense of belonging. After I met—well, first, I met Napoleon, then I met Wadsworth and Jeff. And we just seemed to bond. That's how I became a part of the group and eventually coming down here to D.C.

A.B. Spellman: Let me go earlier, if I may. The collective movement was rather widespread in the United States, among African-Americans at that time. Everything from farmers to—

Nelson Stevens: Co-ops everywhere.

[4] Cultural critic and playwright Larry Neal, alongside poet Amiri Baraka, were leading members of the Black Arts Movement.

A.B. Spellman: Farmers to tenants. Chicago was particularly rich in cultural co-ops. OBAC [Organization for Black American Culture] was one, I think of OBAC and [indistinct].

NOTE: VIDEO EDITED TO CUT TO A DIFFERENT SECTION OF THE INTERVIEW

Nelson Stevens: Before I went to an AfriCOBRA meeting, I would go by the *Wall of Respect* before the meeting. You gotta remember, I was two years late to it. I would sit in front of the *Wall of Respect* and say, "Let me take what they did off and put up what I want to put up." So, I replaced, in my head, everybody's—I'm pretty egotistical—everybody's composition. The *Wall of Respect* was on 43rd [Street] and Langley Avenue. It was dedicated to Malcolm [X], Martin [Luther King Jr.] It was dedicated to all the musicians, the nations and there were about 10 artists who had 10 different sections.

That's what made it so outstanding. The whole wall was painted, and around the corner is painted. Geographically and topographically, everybody had about the same amount of space. There are a lot of different photographs of it because a lot of different changes were made.

But the history of it is fascinating, and Jeff tells it pretty good in a magazine that comes out of Hampton—I'm trying to think of the name—*The International Review of African-American Art.* He does an outstanding job of explaining what that mural [represented].

You've got to understand, there was no mural prior to that. If you deal with murals in the New World, you deal with the Mexicans, the WPA [Works Progress Administration], and then after that, it's gone. It's not until the *Wall of Respect* is revitalized. And who gives it more play than anybody? The Chicano artists. They've taken it and run with it.

What I'm getting at is that there are walls in Chile and walls in Zimbabwe that duplicate this whole thing. While I've got the mic, I've got to admit that I swallowed the Kool-Aid. I'm from Brooklyn, New York, and I swallowed the Kool-Aid. I'm a Jackie Robinson [fan]. When Jackie came I was 9 or 10 years old. I learned how to do division to figure out his [batting] average. You know what I mean?

There's a story about Pee Wee Reese putting his arm around Jackie Robinson. Ken Burns [a filmmaker] has tried his best to find out where that story comes from, and he says he can't find any foundation in fact. There are sculpture pieces made of it in different places. You talking about hidden in plain view? You talk about our history being wrong? You talk about—phew, that for me is heavy.

It’s part of the folklore that Pee Wee Reese comes along and puts his arm around Jackie Robinson to show brotherhood and explain to his relatives in the stands…fictitious. I know you know the story. Wiped from your mind. You went for the Kool-Aid too.

Ken Burns is an expert on civil war and baseball, and you can go check that out. He said he'd love to prove that it was true, but there's no way he can. I'm talking about a visual phenomenon. There were sculpture pieces made up. I don’t know what the question was.

James Phillips: The original question was to talk about the collectives…OBAC. We were talking about AfriCOBRA [indistinct] and how that fits a sense of self-empowerment.

Nelson Stevens: We all saw ourselves as different spokes on the same umbrella. I talked to David Murray about it, and he understands exactly what I’m talking about. Richard Muhal Evans [referring to Muhal Richard Abrams] used to come to our AfriCOBRA meetings in Chicago—that’s how I know.

A.B. Spellman: You talking about in AACM [Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians]?

Nelson Stevens: Yes, the visionary—we’re talking about the same person. I don’t generally talk this much, but I had a very eerie walk over here because the last time I walked on these streets, I was with [Alexander] Skunder Boghossian, this man [James Phillips], Jeff Donaldson, and Larry Neal.

A.B. Spellman: A lot of power there.

Nelson Stevens: A lot of power. Each one of those names are books. Thank you very much.

James Phillips: I really can't talk about OBAC because I wasn't there. I didn't join the group till [19]74, so I really don’t know that much about their history in that respect. But I can tell you…I guess my experiences in New York—first of all, the Weusi, again, they grew out of a larger organization called the 20th Century Creators. And when that group split up, one group that was in that organization went to Brooklyn and they started a gallery out there.

Then the Weusi Artists started what they were doing with the co-op in Harlem. The co-op used to be on 132nd Street of 7th Avenue across the street from Kimako’s [Baraka] restaurant. With Kimaka being Amiri Baraka’s—

A.B. Spellman: Sister.

James Phillips: When I got involved it was like [19]68. Kimako might have been there maybe a year or so longer than that.

Nelson Stevens: And she was still there when we had an exhibit in [19]70. I got jewelry there. I remember that.

James Phillips: My involvement with the Weusi actually goes back to Philadelphia. When I was growing up—through junior high school and high school—there were four of us, four Blacks that were supposed to be aspiring artists in one school at the same time, which was kind of unusual. One of my classmates has made it pretty big in terms of developing a reputation—Stanley Whitney. He just had a recent show at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

After high school, we went our separate ways. I stayed in Philadelphia. One of my other friends, Harry, had a brother named Alfie Pollitt. Alfie Pollitt is a musician, a piano player. I guess the thing that probably makes him most famous is that he became Teddy Pendergrass' musical director. He started out playing jazz. He knew Elvin [Jones]; he knew all the people in the culture. I used to hang out with him in downtown Philadelphia on the music scene. Back in those days, John Coltrane in Philadelphia was like—you say "John," and it was like God just walked into the room or something.

I befriended another musician and went to New York. I was able [to] because I had this musician friend of mine. That was Norman Connors [jazz drummer and composer]. I could get into all the clubs just by hanging out with him. That's how I got to see so much of Coltrane. I got to see people like Cecil Taylor. He also played with Sun Ra, so I got to meet all the members of the Sun Ra band.

I was just hanging out on the Lower East Side [New York], and it was kind of phenomenal. You'd walk out of the house, and there's Albert Ayler walking down the street. There's Don Pullen [jazz pianist. In fact, I didn't know it at the time, but one of the people that was on the scene at the same time that I was was Martin Puryear.

How I found that out: There was this sister from Philadelphia [PA] named Khadija. She had a shop down the street from the Five Spot [Cafe]. Andy [indistinct], a sculptor, he used to work there and he told me about how Martin used to come in and watch him. Basically, he was trying to say Martin was stealing his shit. But Andy would say that about anybody. It was from that experience that I got into the music, and that's my association with the music.

Also, I used to see this man [A.B. Spellman] in Nedick's. Nedick's is a coffee shop and they had one across on West 4th Street and 6th Avenue. Yeah, I'd see him in there.

A.B. Spellman: I have always envied poets. I cannot write a word. I've always envied painters, because you guys could always get in, turn it way up and get into the work. So how does music actually manifest itself in that world?

James Phillips: I had an experience—again, going back to my friend tied to my friend Alfie Pollitt—his brother, Harry went to New York and studied at the Art Students League. He would go down to the Half Note [Club] and bring back all these drawings. He had Coltrane playing, Elvin, and so on. So, when I hit New York, the first thing I wanted to do was go to a club, sit down, and draw pictures of John Coltrane playing.

He was at the Village Gate. I think this was the night they played—you [A.B. Spellman] wrote a review about it. That was the first time, I think, people saw Rashied [Ali]. Elvin [Jones] didn't show up for the first set, but Elvin did show up for the second set. That might have been the first time they had two drummers.

I came into the club, got my sketchbook, and this guy taps me on the shoulder. He says, "You came here to draw?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "When they start playing, you ain't gonna draw nothing." Turns out the guy was Marzette Watts, a musician and a painter. And sure enough, once that band hit, I was transfixed.

When I was already an artist at the Studio Museum, they used to try to mess with my head. They'd say things like, "He can't paint without listening to Coltrane music." So, one time I was doing this painting, I decided I'm not going to listen to no music. I did this painting. First and last time I ever did it and it was torture, but I did it.

Nelson Stevens: My relationship to music…I've always had music on while I'm working. When I was 16 or 17, growing up in Brooklyn, my father knew a guy who worked at the Blue Coronet [a Brooklyn jazz club], that was three blocks away. I used to go in there and draw.

One evening, the manager was moving—because all I'm doing is drinking up the mix and eating donuts—I'm not making them any money. So, he's trying to get me out the door and a guy comes over. He says,"Oh, let him sit here at the table," which was the musicians' table, because they were going up. When I sat down at the musicians' table, I said, "That's a really nice white guy." Then this woman said, "That's not a white guy, that's Jackie McLean."

I've told Jackie that story. I've told Dolly that story. They have laughed about it in the past, but music has always been part of—when I was in junior college, I figured out, if I put a painting on the wall, I could eat there free. I had about five different places, all that played music.

In Utica, New York, I was adopted by a family of beatniks.[5] They read [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti, [Allen] Ginsberg, and Ted Joans, as well as LeRoi [Jones] (Amiri Baraka). They got me interested in this whole alternative kind of thing. Through them, I ran into musicians because one of them played bongos [and] congas. My major was advertising.

Soon, what was happening on Sundays, I was going around getting a bar that would let us play music. I had the door, he had the bar. And I got through junior college doing that. Five musicians, paying scale and…I'm one of the few artists who knows who James C. Petrillo is. He's the musicians union [referring to the American Federation of Musicians**]** president back in the day, and he made sure everything was on the up and up.

When I painted murals, I always kept the boombox going. And after a while, what was interesting is people would bring back—if you're out on the street, doing a mural, which I did about six of them, mostly in Boston, in Springfield, Massachusetts, because I got students to do it. And it was one of the best programs in the country in terms of putting together murals.

What am I getting at? The fact that they will feed you, the community. You go out with your paintbrush and start—they are critics. They'll tell you it was better yesterday than today. But they will feed you and bring you CDs, or the equivalent, for you to listen to. I call it nourishment in all kinds of ways.

I've had great success [with murals]. Probably the biggest one was at Tuskegee [University], because I did the 100th birthday mural for Tuskegee in the late [19]70s. I spent a year down there and had a great time. It's one of the few times I was really out of UMass [University of Massachusetts] Amherst, because I was there for 35 years. One year, though, being here in D.C., living with Larry Neal on East Capitol Street.

I went to Tuskegee after that and then I went back to UMass Amherst.

A.B. Spellman: What year was this?

Nelson Stevens: All before 1980, because Larry Neal died on January 5, 1981. We were dear friends for about 10 years. I met him at Northern Illinois [University]. He came because Paul Carter Harrison was teaching summer school there. I was working on my degree at Kent [State University], so Larry and I immediately bonded.

A.B. Spellman: Paul Carter Harrison was the theatre director of [indistinct].

Nelson Stevens: Yes, "Tabernacle" [his first full length play] — so many things, bunches and bunches of things. As a matter of fact…I don't know if I can get back to that point, but the

[5] Beat movement, American social and literary movement originating in the 1950s and centered in the bohemian artist communities of San Francisco's North Beach, Los Angeles' Venice West, and New York City's Greenwich Village.

reason I was invited to Amherst was because of a guy named Acklyn Lynch, who was calling on every academic Black Studies department to incorporate more culture.

He came up with this program of getting Max Roach, Archie Shepp—my dear friend, who is doing well in France and speaks French fluently, monsieur—Diana Ramos in dance, Paul Carter Harrison in theater, and myself as the visual component.

What we were supposed to do was come up with a 21st-century aesthetic that incorporated all [disciplines], understanding that the white aesthetic of the time—and now—is minimal. So, they shave away, shave away, shave away. And we were coming from the additive, additive, additive as opposed to the sterile.

That's how we became part of the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of African-American Studies, which I'm very proud of, because, like I said, Chinua Achebe was there, Paul Carter Harrison was there, and Max Roach was there, [James] Baldwin was there. Sister President was there too, teaching anthropology, Johnnetta Cole.

A.B. Spellman: You mentioned aesthetics. AfriCOBRA had an aesthetic position. You had a manifesto. Could you talk a little bit about that.

Nelson Stevens: One of the major pieces of the manifesto is colorful art. Colorful. It helped tremendously that I had a background in silkscreen, but far superior to everyone [was] Barbara Jones [who] had a background in silkscreen, and her sense of design was flawless.

When we had a major exhibit at the Studio Museum, we asked people to fill out a ballot. The ballot was: if you could afford it, which one of the pieces would you most likely want to buy, despite price? When we got back to Chicago, we had a very good idea of what the population wanted in terms of everybody's image. Because everybody had three or four images, and everybody has their most popular [piece] voted by. So, we made silkscreen prints of those—and that's how we bankrolled ourselves.

Jeff was not about to hand out [applications to the] National Endowment for the Arts program. He wasn't about to sign up for that. But that's how we funded ourselves. By selling prints. Now these prints are $1,000. They were $10. On eBay, now they're thousands of dollars.

A.B. Spellman: That was part of the commitment of the movement. Was it not to—

Nelson Stevens: Make art available? Yes. Our people deserve the very best. We gonna to give it to them.

A.B. Spellman: People like Emory [Douglas] on the West Coast.[6] Tom Feelings, making very cheap prints.

Nelson Stevens: So that people could have it. On that list [is] John Clark too, from Trinidad — LeRoy Clarke. He did some great black and white work. And of course Emory, great black and white work [and] inexpensive.

A.B. Spellman: The manifesto spoke of images that were consistent with the culture of the community and expressions of the community. And they gave examples of things that were to try to capture aesthetically. It provided examples of aesthetics we aimed to capture, like the energy of the Holiness Church, the power of Alcindor's [referring to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar] dunk, the blues, and an emphasis on color—specifically, Kool-Aid colors.

Nelson Stevens: Yeah. We was in love with purple.

A.B. Spellman: James, you're a great colorist.

James Phillips: In terms of principles, the one that related me to AfriCOBRA—and related to my work was probably midpoint to mimesis.[7] It's at that point where it's not abstract [and] it still has that figurative form to it because of the way I use foreground against background. It's what's called reverse figure-ground relationship, where you can't tell the foreground from the background. Now the colors…I had developed my own color sensibility and it just happened to fit in with what AfriCOBRA was doing. I wasn't calling it Kool-Aid colors, but I like working a lot with tints as opposed to shades or tones in my paintings.

A.B. Spellman: There was a movement which was consistent across the arts—to try to not only make art that spoke to the condition of African-American people, but also art that emanated from the people. There was a great wealth of cultural expression to draw from because, of course, the African-American community has been the source of much of the cultural development of the 20th century in America across the board.

Could you talk a bit about how you saw yourself and the placement of the artist in the community?

Nelson Stevens: Going over this relatively long life I've had, many of my inspirations have been in the music and the musicians. There's something about our musicians that I find intriguing, very interesting. Every other discipline that you deal with, has to be certified by some white authority. Everywhere. Dentists, doctors, lawyers, all of them. Not our musicians. Our musicians seek praise from each other.

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[6] Emory Douglas is a prominent artist best known for his work as the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party.
[7] Mimesis refers to the concept of imitation or representation, particularly in art.

That's why I have real problems with that thing they put out on Miles Davis—it's awful. Who is this guy to tell Miles Davis who his music is about? Please.

Anyway, my point is that there's a strength there that we kind of overlook—and they do too, because they take it for granted. The rest of us don't take it for granted. I've got degrees on top of degrees, I'm stamped and certified. None of them [are]. Except by each other. And I think that's a key. Not sure what it's the key to.

Like Sun Ra used to say, "You're on the right road, going in the wrong direction," you know what I mean?

But I find it fascinating that that's the only [field where this happens]—and it's the area we know the most about. We are steeped in our culture. We can tell [Oscar] Peterson from anybody. We know.

James Phillips: Well, it's interesting that he brought up Sun Ra because Sun Ra had this saying: "If you're not reality, then who's the myth are you?"

I think the artist's role is to define our image and ourselves, as opposed to the image that maybe Hollywood and D.W. Griffith made about us. All the different stereotype-casting of what Black men and Black women are supposed to be. It's the visual artist's job, then and now, to make a definitive statement about who we are and what we should be about.

Nelson Stevens: I'd like to make an addendum on my point that I was making. That's what AfriCOBRA does. We look out and we say who's out there that's bad? And we know what we mean and we recruit them. We are not recruiting our peers. We're recruiting those 40-year-olds that are on the cutting edge. [Radcliffe] Bailey has just become a member.

My point is that we're doing the same thing that the musicians are doing by selecting those people we want to play with. And we've been very successful. If you go to what I call our museum in D.C. [National Museum of African American History and Culture], AfriCOBRA is well represented. On one side is Radcliffe's work; on the other side is Renée's [Stout] work. Two wonderful cutting edge [artists] in this tradition.

A.B. Spellman: Going back to the [19]60s, America was on fire with struggle in the African-American community. The slogan Black Power had caught on everywhere. It was a real place to stand. It was a statement that defined everything for you. Can you talk about how that fit into the thinking of artists at the time.

Nelson Stevens: It's [a] revolutionary [saying] that becomes a cliché. You say Black Power or Black is beautiful…interesting thing. I'm having a conversation with a woman I've known for about 50 years. We talk once a month or so, and the subject was Nina Simone. I'm explaining to her, "You ought to go see the documentary—forget about the movie."

She said, "I saw the documentary. And an interesting thing—when I used to see her, she didn't appear attractive at all to me and now she does." I asked, "What are you saying? The image hasn't changed." She said, "No, exactly—I've changed."

Fifty years ago, this woman's perception of Nina Simone was one of being unattractive. Now it's not because she is Nina Simone that she becomes attractive. It's not personality, it's not celebrity. It's out of a change of attitude about what beauty is about. So, you talk about Black is beautiful, I'm putting this in conversation giving it a lot of weight. Because I'm talking to a woman that is 75 years old who's made up her mind [to say], "I have changed."

A.B. Spellman: Jeff Donaldson did a history of Black artists based on the Black aesthetic period. My particular essay in there talked about afros, but that's what I remember as being the heart of it. Black women with huge afros. And that was to be the statement of beauty.

This was all inspired, of course, by the will of people to change their lives, to define not only their material condition, but also their aesthetic position. So again, I think that it's worth it to talk about how this hooks up with the struggle that was going on, seeing the artists were trying to integrate themselves into that.

James Phillips: I would say the afro, the music, playing off of the 12-tone scale, the colors we're using—all of that is part seeking identity. Also, it's a statement about the oppression we were dealing with at the time. Maybe you're not a painter, so you have a big afro. You're not a musician, so you wear big earrings. It's the same thing—it's just being manifested in a different avenue.

A.B. Spellman: There was a will not to wait for certification—you were speaking of—from the establishment, but to take control of your lives, your careers, and control of the placement of that in the world.

James Phillips: Case in point was the Weusi Artists. They're all, except for maybe one member, self-taught artists. They took it upon themselves to name themselves the Weusi Academy. A lot of people in the arts community—and a lot of people in the Black arts community—kind of frowned on them because they were taking on these documents. I still do respect them for that. They took it on and made themselves and validated themselves.

Just like African-American art has to be validated by Black people. It's not validated by the Whitney Museum or the Hirshhorn. It has to be validated by us as the people.

Nelson Stevens: On that point, anyone who's doing any research on the Black Arts Movement has to give special attention to Jeff Donaldson for the *Wall of Respect*. Prior to that, the cultural organization, then the *Wall of Respect*, then COBRA, then AfriCOBRA.

CONFABA [Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art] in 1970 was great. You were there. Great importance. It united artists from all across the country and gave me…I'm at a university trying to teach a course called Black art and the art history department is saying, "Where's your documentation? What are you talking about?" Well, I came back from that conference with packets of information and said, "Here—you sort it out. But it's here."

One of the things that Jeff did…the whole thing with FESTAC—the Second World Festival of Black and African Arts—I got caught in the vice. Because one of my best friends is Max Roach, and he and Jeff were trying to strangle each other. Talking about, "Well, you know what your man said."

At any rate, we're talking about turbulent times. We're talking about times with very complicated handshakes, wide pants, big afros, large earrings. We're talking about an attitude that is new, vibrant, alive—that is taking up more space than the person physically is taking up.

I don't know how to say it, except that every now and then, I shrink a little—so I know what I'm talking about. We occupied a lot more space at one time. That's why I'm wearing this pin. I'm supporting all the youngsters. And I don't think there's a generation gap anymore because everyone has seen fascism creeping.

When Harry Belafonte greets the crowd at Riverside [Church] with, ″Welcome to the Fourth Reich,″ you know we're in trouble. Is art vital? Yes. Can it stand by itself? No. Does it need a lot more? Always. Should we support local artists? All the time.

A lot of our artists were untrained, as Jeff says. The difference is, in AfriCOBRA, everybody is degreed. The difference is that, in AfriCOBRA, everyone has at least a degree.

A.B. Spellman: On that point, Jeff also came to Washington to be the chairman of the art department at Howard [University].

Nelson Stevens: I left that off the list, I'm sorry.

A.B. Spellman: That actually became, at least in this town, a center of the vocal movement.

Nelson Stevens: I was supposed to be a piece of that in [19]72. Acklyn Lynch was inviting me, and Jeff was inviting me, but Jeff couldn't get the paperwork done. I'm finding out now that he was such a strong leader that he couldn't get the paperwork done.

A.B. Spellman: I didn't get that.

James Phillips: They were blocking him.

Nelson Stevens: He was being blocked. None of us will ever get the due that we are due. We know that from jump street. But is it worth it? Definitely. I'm standing on the shoulders of Charles [W.] White, Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden, a bunch of cats I live and admire. And who paid a lot more dues than we pay.

Elizabeth Catlett gave up her citizenship, she said, later. At CONFABA she was the keynote speaker in 1970. Jeff organized it. The United States government wasn't going to let come out, and wasn't going to let her in. They locked up the Mexican government saying no. Jeff, with 20th-century equipment, tied an AT&T phone to a microphone so everyone could hear her speech from Mexico City.

I'm talking about a giant man. We're hanging out at a party—it's just a bunch of guys—and he starts singing, ″There I go, there I go, there I go.″ Then, "Pretty baby, you are the soul who snaps my control." [Lyrics to "Moody's Mood for Love" by Eddie Jefferson]. Everybody's singing. And if anybody realizes they may not know the words, they go to the wall. But finally, in the middle of it, there's Frank Smith, there's Larry—we know each other. And one person says, "This should be Black people's national anthem." Another person says it should be Black people's national anthem. And Jeff said, "Yeah, but it doesn't have anything about weapons in it." I'm trying to tell you Jeff Donaldson is brilliance. Absolute brilliance. I have been very fortunate to have him and Larry Neal and Max Roach as big brothers. Acklyn Lynch too.

A.B. Spellman: James, can you talk a bit about the Howard University art department under Jeff?

James Phillips: Jeff brought me in. He also brought in Skunder Boghossian before me. He made one of the strongest art departments we've had, with Valerie Maynard, Ed [Edward] Spriggs, and a guy from Sudan—I can't think of his name right now, I'm having one of those moments.

He brought a very strong nucleus of a Pan-African aesthetic to the campus and it's been there ever since. And we're still working on it.

Jeff came to Atlanta [GA] in about 1967. He came by our house, and we had a sculpture that Skunder had made—a bird planted inside a school. Jeff said, "What is that?" I told him it was a piece done by an Ethiopian artist named Skunder. And Jeff said, "Where can I meet him?"

A.B. Spellman: I remember introducing him to Jeff, and I was very proud that you [Nelson Stevens] were basically together. There was another thing about the ease of communication between African-American artists at the time and African artists.

James Phillips: In the mainstream of everything, a lot of it has to do with what [Michael Babatunde] Olatunji did. He was a major exponent of African culture. He reintroduced African culture to a lot of African-Americans. That set the pace.

Then, along came people like Maikala and the Human Circle. From my own experience, I remember Ballet Africa coming to Philadelphia—that was a big moment. Then comes a long people like Hugh Masekela. From my own experience, I remember [Les] Ballets Africains coming to Philadelphia and that was real big. There's really no difference between the cultures, except one lives on one side of the Atlantic and the other on the other side. We still deal with the same predicament, so it's very easy for us to have a dialogue.

Nelson Stevens: What I found fascinating is that, since we are products basically of West Africa, that we would have more in common. But culturally, it seems it's South African because of similarity in racism. Hugh Masekela is an institution in the Black Arts Movement because when he starts talking about that train moving, we know exactly what he's talking about.

When I went to FESTAC, a guy came up to me, showed me some photographs and cloth, and told me his name was Adger Cowans. He asked, "Do you know James Phillips?" I said, "Yeah, I know James we're tight." It was great. Adjer was on the trip, and we've been inseparable ever since.

The point I'm making is that when I was at FESTAC, I had the chance to hang with Fela [Kuti] [a renowned musician] and the musicians with him for about three or four days. But I hung with a visual artist named Malangatana [Ngwenya] from Mozambique. We did drawings with each other for about a day and a half. Then, I had to go to the International Secretariat building.

Now we're getting along like brothers—we're tight. Then, it turns out there's a guy named Sanders who works for the USIS who wants to see me about some papers.

As soon as we got in front of this guy, Malangatana started speaking French. He didn't want to be associated with anyone from the United States or the USIS [United States Information Service]. So, he disappeared into the crowd and said, "See you later."

What I'm getting at is that artists have faced all kinds of crises. I'm going to take you on a little trip here—artists have always dealt with these struggles. There was the House Un-American Activities hearings in the '50s where anyone associated with communists got blacklisted. We know about the writers and the actors and stuff like that. No artists.

The mode of the day was abstract expressionism. What can you say with that? The teeth had been pulled out? You see what I'm getting at here? That's why the *Wall of Respect* is so important. The image comes back, but the teeth have been pulled out of art.

In 1936, [Pablo] Picasso does *Guernica*—one of the greatest pieces of mankind—about the Nazis coming down on the town and the whole thing. People screaming, a mother, a baby, a horse turned upside down—everything. It doesn't get the play that it should get because right after that we get abstract expressionism.

The House Un-American Activities [Committee] didn't indict any abstract expressionism—come on. I'm saying the teeth have been pulled out of art. And I'm saying that Jeff and a bunch of others had a lot to do with putting art with teeth back in the scene. The more you know about our history, the more you'll agree.

A.B. Spellman: You talked about the mimesis for a while, and I thought there was kind of an anti mimesis movement in the work of AfriCOBRA. They were presenting possible worlds as opposed to this world. Especially among figurative artists, there was this dramatic expression of a Pan-Africanist world that could be and should be. Can you talk a bit about that?

Nelson Stevens: Originally, it was a figurative movement. Everything on the *Wall of Respect* is a figure of something—I'm holding on to it. For those of you with cameras that haven't seen my work—or even if you have—you ought to look up Nelson Stevens right now. I'm still in the 20th century. I don't know how it gets there, but there are about 10 different images that pop up just by putting my name in. I think I'm a lucky guy. I think I'm over there somewhere.

My daughter was watching television and she saw someone in a parade. She backed up the television to the parade, took a picture of it, got in touch with the person whose picture it was, and 15 minutes later they were talking on the phone. I have no idea how that happened.

You do. Or a piece of it, you know what I'm saying? I'm thinking that images are more important now than they ever have been. We're in the business not only of drawing from our people, but giving the very best we can in something visual—to excite, to stimulate, to liberate them from…

A.B. Spellman: Jeff's images, for example, were not just archetypes—they were ideals. I think of some of Al Smith's pieces, the more Afrocentric ones, which are possible villages of people who are clearly of African descent. But they're very contemporary. There's movement, joy, and a sense of community. And then thinking of Wadsworth's images, which have a lot of fierceness in them.

Nelson Stevens: But it all falls under hitting on the celebration of life. Basically, we were all into that celebration life. Through vibration, through the physical, through whatever [medium] we used. Now, that's not a big slice of the art movement and certainly not celebrating Black folks' lives. That's part of this whole phenomenon, too.

That's why I'm particularly proud of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. They seem to have gotten it right in terms of what the movements are about. And that doesn't happen often. So, I have to take my hat off to them for that.

James Phillips: Well, when we look at Jeff's work, it does have that heroic type element to it. But in certain pieces, there's also a sense of postmodernism. This one particular painting of Egyptian warriors. They're running into battle, but they have sneakers on instead of sandals. He did certain things that would push you forward and bring you back at the same time. His way of playing with certain dynamics caught you off guard—you had to stop and look.

And that's key. That's the hook of an artist in the first place—to get somebody to look, to examine. Trying to figure out what this particular person is trying to say. Or, what am I looking at and how do I relate to it? Because in a certain sense, that's the viewer participating in what the artist is doing. And that's equally as important—it goes back to a complete art form, where music, dance, and the visual.

That's one of the things Sun Ra had going. He had all those elements working together at the same time. You can see that in places like Tibet, in Buddhism where they bring the music and the vocal individual. It's all one thing.

A.B. Spellman: Karen, my wife suggests a question for you, James—talk about while you were in D.C., how you found the Black Arts Movement there, and what it was like.

James Phillips: It was pretty much the same as in New York or Philadelphia. You had the same artists with the same interests, all working in the same direction. The Black Arts Movement was happening all across the country. These younger artists rebelled against us because they felt it was too uniform. But there's strength in numbers.

I don't think there is any difference. In my case, it was a little different because everywhere I've gone, I've had to reestablish myself—because of my work, the way it is. But once people get to see exactly what I'm doing they get a sense of me being a part of it.

Karen Spellman: Who are some of the people in Washington that you recall being actively involved in the Black Arts Movement?

James Phillips: There's Skunder Boghossian, Gaston Neal, [indistinct] Oscar Brown Jr., [indistinct]. [Evangeline] EJ Montgomery—she came later. Akili Ron Anderson, Haki [R. Madhubuti.

There were a lot of people up at Howard that were here at the time. A lot of people that were involved in the Black Arts Movement came out of Howard. People like Mark Fisher, William

White, Marion Brown and you came out of there [James Phillips] and Baraka. Stokely [Carmichael], Mary Lovelace O'Neal. These names just start coming back to me.

A.B. Spellman: You guys have any summary statements to make?

Nelson Stevens: Next year, AfriCOBRA will be 50 years for me. I've been a student and a teacher in the organization—a lifelong member. A word to younger artists: don't isolate yourself. Try to meet other people traveling in the same direction. You have a much better chance of doing that than we did because we started as a very small nucleus. They've got a world to choose their 10 favorite [things]. And I would pursue them. I've been very fortunate in my teaching career. I'm a grateful Negro. That's what it's going to turn out to be. I had a lot of fire at one point, but I'm turning out to be very, very grateful for a lot of opportunities that people made for me.

I'm eternally grateful for the organization. I think there should be more like it. Doctors ought to work together, nurses ought to work together—across the board, there should be people joining together. People say, "An artist group lasting 50 years?" We are the least likely people to be together. So, what's your problem? I would advise it for anyone. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

James Phillips: Teaching was an important element of AfriCOBRA as it is for AACM [Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians] for the development and the continuation of the line.

Nelson Stevens: Lately, I've been interviewed, and it turns out my career is a straight line that I didn't know existed. When I went to college, I couldn't get back to the East Coast because I was in Ohio. So, I became a camp counselor—did it for a while—and got really good at handling knuckleheads. So when I started teaching, they put me in the worst school in Cleveland, full of knuckleheads—and I was down with them. I've been down with my students ever since. That doesn't mean anybody gets an A. You work your butt off. But I've been very fortunate that I started teaching when I did. Because there would be sexual charges on me immediately today. Because I say things like, "not just another pretty face," and that'll get them. Right. See the face? Exactly. My point is, I came along at the right time. I had the right breaks at the time and that's why I'm as fortunate as I am. But I still miss a lot of people who are no longer traveling that trail. Like Jeff, like Skunder, like Larry. So, I carry them with me, as most of us older folks do—carry many people with them.

James Phillips: Well, I'm going to promote my show—it's my summary. If you want to see it, it's supposed to be a retrospective, but it's not really a retrospective because there were certain key pieces I wasn't able to get for the exhibition. It's going to be at the University of Maryland, at the Marriott Center. It opened on the 15th and it's up until April 16th.

There will be a reception and a panel discussion on February 4th—I think that's a Saturday—from 3 to 5 p.m. The panel will consist of Dr. Michael Harris and professor Melanie Harvey. Both of those writers contribute to the catalog and myself.

As for young artists, one of the most important things is to work—work seriously. Look at other things, other cultures, and see what they can bring to them [to your work]. But the most important thing is to make sure you come through in the work. Don't lose yourself.

A.B. Spellman: Tell me about the importance of Skunder.

James Phillips: He was one of the people who revived Africanism in the [Howard University] fine art department and in the art world period. He was one of the first African artists that the Museum of Modern Art bought work from.

He designed a stamp for the Union and contributed in so many ways. There's a number of African-American artists—not just here in the district, but in New York and Philadelphia—who were influenced by him. Ethiopian and African-American artists that were influenced by him.

Around the time he died, there was a big Ethiopian exhibition at the Museum of African Art. In fact, he died on the day of the opening. I think the school in Ethiopia [Skunder Boghossian College of Performing and Visual Arts] is now named after him. We still have students that come through the department that know about him, his work and his legacy.

Nelson Stevens: This is my last sign-off. One of my best murals is dedicated to Black women. It reads, "I am a Black woman tall as a cyprus, strong beyond definition, still defying time, place and circumstance. Assailed, impervious, indestructible. Look on me and be renewed." That is Mari Evans [from the poem "I Am a Black Woman"]. Thank you.