

*"Point from which creation begins": The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis.* By Benjamin Looker (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004). xxvii + 316 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Selected Bibliography. Index. \$29.95.

The Black Arts Movement, an intellectual and artistic encounter with black nationalism, hoped to capture and reclaim an African American aesthetic as a means of raising racial consciousness and sustaining a civil rights struggle threatened by the deaths of Malcolm X in 1965 and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Iterations of the Black Arts Movement could be found in major cities throughout the nation, most famously perhaps, in Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, which brought music, poetry, and theater to the streets of Harlem and Newark.

*"Point from which creation begins": The Black Artists Group of St. Louis (BAG)* by Benjamin Looker places the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the St. Louis context. Looker examines

BAG's development as a local organization rooted in the arts and activist traditions of the city. Founded in 1968, BAG's programs and performances, centered in the African American community of St. Louis, "championed ideas of cultural autonomy and liberation" while resisting traditional reformist imperatives "to promote black social and political assimilation" (p. 35). In doing so, Looker argues, its members were "carving out a place for themselves within the context of local spaces, institutions, and politics," leaving an indelible mark of fame on the city's historical and artistic landscape (p. xx).

Rich and encyclopedic in its discussion of BAG's members, Looker's excellent study presents BAG as a collaboration among local black artists, writers, poets, painters, musicians, dancers, and dramatists. Readers

are rewarded with elegant portrayals of notable names and places that remain prominent on the contemporary arts landscape. Poet Shirley LeFlore; musicians Oliver Lake, Hamiet Bluiett, and Julius Hemplill; and dramatists Malinke Elliot and LeRoi Shelton were a few among the group's personalities. Civil rights activists in their own right, BAG members linked with their colleagues from the east side of the river—including poet laureate Eugene Redmond and dancer

Georgia Collins from Katherine Dunham's program—to create an eclectic performance cooperative that served up the black political message to a wide audience.

Working together and apart, BAG members built "that St. Louis thing," as jazzist Miles Davis called the style, on the historical flow of jazz and rhythm and blues that has always characterized St. Louis's links to New Orleans, Memphis, and Chicago. Mostly concerned with local conditions, BAG meshed avant-garde art forms to proffer multimedia performances to forge unique but accessible programs that challenged the usual distance between artist and

audience. For example, "Poem for a Revolutionary Night" (the title of a poem by Larry Neal) was crafted by BAG members out of "dramatic scenarios, dance interludes, jazz scores, and rear-projection films" (p. 99).

Within the city, BAG's presence turned LaCledde Town, the site of a multiracial, mixed-income housing complex, into a local bohemia. But the organization also took its energies into other urban settings. BAG offered classes, workshops, and training in art, music, dance, and theater at public housing sites and at neighborhood centers of St. Louis's black enclaves. Its primary focus reached the poor blacks of the city through its programs and performances. Yet its need for funds alongside its attractiveness to a wide-ranging audience also connected the organization to the bastions

of white liberalism on local college campuses and spots in the Central West End. Simultaneously nationalist and multiculturalist, BAG exploited tensions inherent to promoting racial identity. Thus, its members' collaboration made for a flourishing, expansive arts scene in St. Louis in the early 1970s.

The goals of BAG, like those of the Black Arts Movement, required the kind of independent thought and action inherent to creativity. But BAG's focus on the inimitable aspects of a black aesthetic conflicted with the expectations of the public and private agencies that granted funds, capturing the organization in a range of conflicting agendas and responses. BAG became a prominent part of the St. Louis scene during its pinnacle years of the early 1970s, but its success was another reason for its disintegration. After achieving fame, many of its members moved on, taking ideas and energies with them to performance venues in other places and into international careers. In the meantime, pressures from political elites and the civil rights establishment caused BAG to struggle to maintain its integrity as a black nationalist organization for its intended audiences. Nonetheless, BAG's collaborative and community-based approaches to creativity energized both artists and audiences. Its members cast yet another black artistic institution onto the rich history of African American arts in St. Louis.

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