

Baba Kamau Seitu: A Life of Transformation

by

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Kamau Seitu, center, with drummer Darryl Green and a trombonist - Photo: Wanda Sabir

We deeply mourn the recent passing of Baba Kamau Seitu. He was a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather and trusted friend. He was a cultural ambassador, poet, ex-serviceman, cable car driver, band leader and African/Jazz drummer. His 67 years were full of significant events and his life offers us an opportunity to reflect on his journey of personal transformation.

Kamau was from New Orleans, Louisiana and proud of it. He grew up in the sixth ward, which was an extension of Fauberg Treme', the oldest African American urban community in the United States. Originally a suburb (Fauberg in French) of the first settlement of New Orleans, the French Quarter, it comprised slaves and the largest free African American community in the eighteenth century south. It was here that Africans gathered in Congo square and drummed and danced long after it had been outlawed everywhere else. Kamau was well aware of this tradition and embodied it in his approach to music and life. His early life was surrounded by institutions steeped in African history such as attending St. Peter Claver Elementary, named after a new world African saint. He graduated from St. Augustine High, New Orleans' most prestigious black High School which was named for an early patriarch of the Christian church, St. Augustine, who was African.

Kamau arrived in the Bay Area in 1962 after being honorably discharged from the service. He had been stationed near Novato, Ca. and came to San Francisco and the Bay Area during a time when many of the significant movements of the 60's converged. Bill Bradley (now Professor Oba T' Shaka) was director of CORE, leading civil rights protests in San Francisco that helped initiate The Free Speech Movement in Berkeley. Donald Warden was teaching black history and politics in his Afro-American Association in the East Bay. Marvin X, Ed Bullings, Hurriah Emanuel and others were writing and performing plays and creating a Black Theatre. Joe Gongalves (Dingane) was publishing the *Journal of Black Poetry* and Marcus book store, owned by Rich (Julian) and Raye Richardson, was founded and soon became one of the largest black book stores in the country. There were the hippies and summer of love'67. There was the revolutionary political activity of the Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island, the Peace and Freedom Party, the birth of Black Studies at S.F. State University and the mesmerizing, internationally inspiring Black Panther Party of Oakland.

Kamau was a man of his times and on the cusp of cutting edge cultural activities. A participant and West coast shaper of The Black Arts Movement, the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement, Kamau received one of the first degrees in Black Studies from S.F. State University, used an African name for most of his adult life and was part of a historic delegation sent to represent African Americans at FESTAC'77, one of the largest Pan-African cultural festivals ever produced.

It was in Lagos, Nigeria and brought artists of all kinds from the African Diaspora. Kamau was a drummer with the Wajumbe Cultural Ensemble from San Francisco and performed with dancers, poets and writers to convey to the world, African American culture. His experiences in Africa and his exchange with artists from the world over served as inspiration for the remainder of his life. He knew he had been part of something significant and historic and was grateful that he had been there at the right time. He was part of a generation that were transforming themselves from colored to Negro to black to African American and for some, African. Kamau knew he was an African man and embodied it effortlessly. Whether it was his African name and attire, thick well groomed beard or kuffee, progressive reading material or creative activity, you knew you were looking at a man who knew who he was. Kamau exhibited tremendous courage in carving out a new identity, consciousness and lifestyle for himself and his community. He knew his life was meant for a higher purpose and he never wavered in his search for family cohesion, artistic mastery and spiritual peace. *And he loved music.* Kamau loved all forms of music but saved his special affection for his city's heritage, Jazz. He knew jazz history, some of it first hand and met or played with many Jazz legends such as Sun Ra, who influenced him greatly. He was working on a book on Bay Area Jazz history at the time of his death.

In the early eighties, he helped form several bands, particularly Ancestral Wisdom and Kuumba Jazz Ensemble. With Kuumba, along with Mtafiti Imara, Terrance and Amanda Elliot and Nantambu, Kamau anchored the rhythm section with steady, rapid fire percussion and heart pounding solos. They combined a Coltrane-like melody with pulsating African and African American rhythms, topped off with Amanda Elliot's vocals reminiscent of an earlier Jean Carn. Their improvisational, yet accessible sound could be heard all over California and they were integral to the Bay Area Avant Guard Jazz scene which included other talented artists such as Ghasem Batamuntu, Rasul Siddiq and Diane Witherspoon, James Lewis, Dr. Anthony Brown and many others. It was a heady time and Kamau was right there keeping a steady beat.

Yet, Kamau was practical. As much as he loved Jazz, he always worked a "straight" job as a cable car driver in San Francisco or later with DMV to support his family. He was never a "starving artist". Kamau knew that the capitalistic politics and economics of America did not appreciate non-commercialized art and he watched and knew of many great musicians who suffered and died needlessly because of cultural neglect and lack of money and appreciation. He was determined to preserve his art and play music for the heart, soul and mind of his people on his own terms. And he did until the end.

No article could be written about Kamau without mentioning his deep love of people, particularly his family. His twin daughters, Taiwo and Kehinde, along with their daughters, Zion and Saige were the loves of his life and he mourned the loss of his son, Brian. He spoke with deep respect and love when relaying the passing of our mutual friend, poet and writer, M'wile Askari a few years back. His southern sensitivity and compassion was always evident and people knew Kamau cared. When he said "Brudder", you knew he meant it in the old 60's way, with sincerity and solidarity and you could hear and feel the beat of New Orleans in his voice. As an educated black southerner, he held onto certain colloquialisms on purpose out of pride and never forgot where he came from.

Kamau lived an inspirational and transformative life. He looked reality in the eye and dared to be his own man, a conscious, caring, aware, gifted, productive, proud, and intellectually and artistically independent black man. He transformed himself into a New African, a New African man in America; one proud of his heritage yet universally open to all cultures and people. We miss him, we mourn him and we pray that his spirit soars high amongst the ancestors and guides us in our life endeavors and activities.

Everyone who dies is not put on the ancestral altar in traditional African culture. According to Credo Mutwa, a Zulu master healer and seer in South Africa, it takes twenty years of psychic investigation by village elders and healers to determine who goes on the altar. They look at the intentions and deeds of the deceased throughout their life-time and decide whether they merit inclusion. *For Kamau, it will not take twenty years. His intentions and deeds stand out already and as he transformed himself, he gave us all inspiration to continue doing the same. Peace, love and farewell, my "Brudder."*



Kamau Seitu with Angela Wellman of the Oakland Public Conservatory of Music.
Photo: Wanda Sabir.