
Added to the National Registry: 2022
Essay by A.D. Amorosi (guest post)*

“If you have to ask what jazz is, you’ll never know.”
— Louis Armstrong

“Where’s jazz going? I don’t know. Maybe it’s going to hell. You can’t make anything go anywhere. It just happens.”
— Thelonious Monk

Before introducing A Tribe Called Quest’s modern classic, “The Low End Theory,” a little history and lot of poetry is required.

Funneling the spirit of jazz through the consciousness of hip hop and the rhetoric of rap began with The Last Poets, Melvin Van Peebles and Gil Scott Heron in the 1960s, and lives on through Kendrick Lamar, Georgia Ann Muldrow and Flying Lotus in the 2020s.

Yet jazz at its freest and funkiest—jazz as an instrumental and linguistic form to express young Black America’s poetic cognizance and self-awareness, jazz at its most profoundly undefinable—truly became a tool of beat-boxers, mic-droppers, and record scratchers along the East Coast in the 1980s.

New York, New York, big city of dreams (so goes the Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five song of the same name), between 1985 and 1988, gave us the burgeoning hip hop genre artists such as painter Jean-Michel Basquiat and filmmaker Spike Lee. This period introduced us to the “Stretch Armstrong and Bobbito Show” on radio, the father and son team of cornetist Olu Dara and rapper Nas separately making their own brands of street soul, and DJ Premier, the sonic half of Gang Starr and its Beat Gen, Bop jazz vibe.

That same time period gave us, live from Queens, NY, A Tribe Called Quest.

A Tribe Called Quest featured wordsmith-producer Q-Tip, rapper Phife Dawg, DJ and co-producer Ali Shaheed Muhammad, and MC Jarobi White—a quartet of childhood friends, neighborhood acquaintances and fellow students. They were young battle rappers and blossoming DJs when they began their journey of drum machine-filled demos, and were given their band name from the guys in Jungle Brothers who attended the same high school as Q-Tip and Muhammad.
How this same group of artists united first, as part of a collective called the Native Tongues, is fascinating. Like ChiTown’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in the late 1960s that helped birth the avant-garde Art Ensemble of Chicago, the Native Tongues was a haven for free thought and action.

Taking cues, beats, samples and influence from jazz master classicists Donald Byrd, Art Blakey, Clifford Brown and Dexter Gordon, members of A Tribe Called Quest, along with Jungle Brothers and De La Soul, became an Algonquin Round Table of rap. They recorded raps on each other’s songs with clarion positivity and silly literary smarts.

The vibe of the Native Tongues—which also included women rapper-producers Queen Latifah and Monie Love—was proactive, provocative, optimistic, Afrocentric and Afrofuturist; their words observational and emotional beyond the rough rap and machismo of the street put forth by other New Yorkers such as Public Enemy, Big Daddy Kane, and KRS-One. “Doin’ Our Own Dang” became the definitive Native Tongues posse cut, its gentle, anthemic mission statement. And, jazz became its backdrop, literally and figuratively.

Pulling away from the psychedelia and funk of other members of the Tongues clique, A Tribe Called Quest moved in mellow grooving, abstract lyrical, jazzy fashion. Their first album, 1990’s “People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm,” was sweet, sonorous, commemorative, goofy and genre-jumbling in all the right places.

“LL Cool J, Big Daddy Kane, KRS-One, N.W.A, even Public Enemy, had a tough guy image,” Ali Shaheed Muhammad once said. “It was this bravado at the time that all the hip-hop artists had. ‘People's Instinctive Travels’ was not any of that. We were not trying to be tough guys. It was about having fun, being lighthearted, being witty, being poetic. Just being good with one another. That is what we presented. Just be. Just exist. Be comfortable in your own skin. ‘People's Instinctive Travels’ was about celebrating you, whoever you are.”

If “People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm” was celebratory, Tribe’s next album, 1991’s “The Low End Theory” was exploratory, a study of a study of. From its title to its lyrical codes and philosophies, from its fluttering, bass-y-bottom--the boom bap--to its stewing jazzy sinew, there was nothing like “The Low End.”

This was hip hop with nuance and detail, something that its brethren in bombast (e.g., the self-proclaimed Bomb Squad behind Public Enemy) could never hope to achieve. And yet on a rich record such as “Low End Theory,” its producers—the Tribe with Skeff Anselm—were daringly unafraid of hanging its lyrics on skeletal frameworks with spare, finespun, and meticulous musicality.

Integrating samples in a seamless fashion like no other hip hop act before (or after?) them, “The Low End Theory” is a bejeweled tapestry. On songs such as “Buggin’ Out,” samples of Jack DeJohnette's Direction, Michal Urbaniak and Lonnie Liston Smith create a soulful underpinning. On “Butter,” Gary Bartz, Chuck Jackson and Weather Report bounce and intertwine. Throughout the rest of “Low End,” the bop of Grant Green, the blues of Cannonball Adderley, the noise of Eric Dolphy, the organ funk of Brother Jack McDuff and the disco strings of Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band meet, greet and bleat as one.

The halting, hard-driving “Scenario” may have put its featured rapper, Busta Rhymes, on the map, and Brand Nubians’ Lord Jamar and Sadat X are part of its rubberty “Show Business.” But 31 years after its release, critics and fans still talk about how stand-up bass jazz legend Ron Carter is the centerpiece of “Low End” as the most dynamic element of “Verses from the Abstract”—and that includes having that track’s author, the super elastic Q-Tip, at his most
righteously random. When Q Tip goes it alone, he is hip hop’s Jon Hendricks, a post Bop voice of unparalleled dexterity, liquidity, and rap-vocalese.

Still, if there is any question as to where A Tribe Called Quest’s passion and play lay, there is “Jazz (We've Got),” and its gentle call to arms to “join in the essence of the cool-out breed.”

While jazz and hip hop become one on “The Low End Theory,” the observational nature of its first album grows more conversational, improvisational and provocative on its sophomore effort. The humor of its first album, on songs such “I Lost My Wallet in El Segundo,” is still palpable and strong on “Low End” with cleverly caustic tracks such as “Skypager” and “Check the Rhime.”

However, putting the “con” into socially-conscious rap is what fuels several of the key tracks within “The Low End Theory.” Mostly, this occurs when the abstract-minded Q-Tip and the polemic-focused Phife Dawg--rapping in co-joined battle fashion, theirs is the vocal equivalent of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis’ dueling solos--move beyond their fluid, smooth-rapping symmetry, and rip into the hard stuff.

While “Rap Promoter” and “Show Business” portray a young artist’s struggle in the music game (with oft-quoted lyrics such as “Industry rule number 4,080 / Record company people are shady”), “The Infamous Date Rape” and “Butter” peel back the layers of men relating to women in mature, sensitive fashion.

Phife’s take on teen romance within “Butter” studies how he got “played,” with its unique portrait of male vulnerability (“I feel like Heavy D, I need somebody for me”). “The Infamous Date Rape” may find Q and Phife playing around on the topic of using women as play things, but ultimately cop to hard social commentary: “This is the case, the situation is sticky”.... “I don’t wanna bone you that much, That I would go for the unforbidden touch.”

Think about rap and rock’s levels of misogyny in the 1990s (let alone the present). Angry and avaricious, many classics of hip hop, heavy metal and indie rock are hard to listen to in the 21st century. Yet, “The Low End Theory,” with its intelligent discourse told in their smoothly flowing and conversational fashion is a marvel of modern progressive male thought, let alone standing tall for progressive modern music.

With that, “The Low End Theory” is an innovative totem and a glittering prize with music weighed equally on the jazz and hip hop tips, lyrics as abstract as they are tangible, and portrayed in a fashion that took rap from being insistently pronounced into something gentler--a little less confrontation, a lot more conversation.

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