

Griot Galaxy is a “secret” jewel of Detroit’s avant-garde jazz history – until now. That is to say, they will always be a jewel of Detroit’s avant-garde jazz history, their deeply passionate music a testament to experimentation, freedom, and blackness. But with the long-awaited reissue of their first album, the hard-to-find *Kins*, the secret is out.

*Kins*, recorded in 1981 and originally released in 1982, is a masterpiece of creative Detroit jazz. The freeness of the playing is anchored by a serious propensity for rhythm, evident in the way its members layered their collective backgrounds in bebop, funk, reggae, and other styles within the expansive possibility of sonic expression.

Griot Galaxy’s willingness to push boundaries was as affectionate as it was fearless. *Kins* is Detroit’s post-Coltrane, high-on-Sun-Ra bridge into the '80s. And all but 200 or so copies of the original 2000 pressed were unintentionally trashed. But let’s back up a little bit. Griot Galaxy doesn’t strictly begin with *Kins*. It begins with visionary bandleader and saxophonist Faruq Z. Bey’s musical and political awakening in the late ‘60s, when the 1967 Detroit Rebellion was tearing Detroit apart and Coltrane’s untimely death was devastating the jazz community.

Prior to Griot Galaxy, Bey explored his artistic interests with many musicians in a variety of settings. Informed by poetry and language, philosophy and spirituality (particularly that of Islam), black nationalism and intense intellectual studies, his work existed at the meeting place of culture, tradition, and emerging forms of expression, all within the political context of Detroit in the '70s. When the earliest groups that explored Faruq’s interests faded away, he reigned it all in under a new epithet: Griot Galaxy. This group, with a name that looked to both the past and the future, would focus more on composition and structure without sacrificing any of the musical curiosity inherent in improvisation.

Griot Galaxy itself would take many forms – including a large nine-plus ensemble that crowded the stage – before settling into the most stable, recognized configuration that helped take Bey’s desire to experiment with structure to the next level: Jaribu Shahid on bass, Tani Tabbal on drums, and Anthony Holland and David McMurray both on saxophones, with the latter on flute too.

Exactly when the final form started to take place is a little fuzzy, but the consensus seems to be that it was between 1976 and 1978. At that point, Tabbal (originally from Chicago) had come to Detroit. When he hooked up with Shahid, the two formed an unstoppable rhythm section. They eventually developed a kind of shared sonic ESP. “Tani and I, we did things with time that I can’t do with other people,” Shahid says now. Griot was full of experiences that the members hadn’t had elsewhere. To wit, saxophonist McMurray remembers meeting Faruq for the first time and playing together for a couple hours, letting the music go wherever it would. It was only *after* that they talked – the music came first. “Some of the charts that he had, it was some of the most different music. I had never played anything like that,” McMurray recalls.

Donning silver face paint and spouting poetry on stage, the group gained notoriety for both impressive musicianship and theatrical proto-Afrofuturist flourishes as they played all over town. One of their mainstays was Cobb’s Corner, a jazz bar in the Cass Corridor. “We were one of the main groups that changed it from a dive to a listening place,” Shahid says. “People started coming over from Wayne State. I remember one professor came up to us and said, ‘Everything I learned about music says that what you guys are doing is not supposed to work.’”

But it did, oh how it did! They certainly weren’t the first to experiment with polyrhythms, odd meters, and tonal scales beyond the traditional concepts, but it was in part the combination

of Shahid and Tabbal's previous experience with Sun Ra, as well as Tabbal's experience with one-time Arkestra trumpeter Phil Cohran, that allowed the group to flourish.

It is saxophonist Holland who puts the entire creative spectacle into its finest terms when asked what he learned from playing with Faruq. A moment of silence is followed by an immediate answer: "To not be scared." He's referring to time signatures – those odd meters again – but it's also about not being afraid to evolve or change, about taking the kind of risk that is inherent in the act of playing freely. Griot Galaxy was nothing if not emblematic of that risk, particularly during a time in jazz when the prevailing winds of the genre were sailing toward a different, much more commercial direction.

When Faruq met Ron DeCorte, the path to the recording of *Kins* was set in motion. A local jazz fan, DeCorte had a nice reel-to-reel and a couple microphones he used for jazz and blues recordings around Detroit, a semi-pro set-up. Bey invited DeCorte to record some live music at the Detroit Jazz Center, which led to more live recordings. Soon enough, Griot Galaxy decided they wanted a studio document of their work. With only a couple days to record, the guys performed like a well-oiled machine. They knew the music like the backs of their hands and recorded it all live, no overdubs. The engineer, Kal Sands, had mostly done rock and roll, so this was a new venture for him.

According to Ron, Sands was really into the gig: "He took certain portions of 'Xy-Moch' and had some fun with them, putting some reverb and phasing and whatever the hell else he used to get that funk sound in the second version of it, ['Xy-Moch Theme'], the last track."

“Zenolog Aintro” is one of the only other songs with effects. Shahid says, “We did some stuff when Faruq wasn't there at the end ... Faruq was like, 'What the heck was that?' He didn't know about it until it was too late.”

Most of the compositions were Faruq's, but not all: “Zycron” came from Tabbal, while Shahid contributed “Androgeny,” his tribute to Sun Ra. “He was fairly androgynous at times,” Shahid says. His memories of the musician put the androgynous vibe into perspective: “It was just this: one day it seemed like your grandmother was cooking for you, and the next day your grandfather was giving you some wisdom.”

Tabbal's inspiration for “Zycron” comes from a completely different direction: SNL's Coneheads. Tabbal recalls the skit in which the alien characters are on Family Feud, and the father is asked to name a famous explorer. His answer: “Zycron the Insistent!” When Tabbal wrote the song, he was exploring too – experimenting with the whole-tone scale – so he shortened the name and the piece became “Zycron.”

Even though Griot recorded another album live in Austria a couple years after *Kins*, the band did not get much of a chance to make it beyond Detroit. Something terrible happened in the fall of 1984: mystical, freewheeling Faruq got into a motorcycle accident.

He fell into a coma and stayed there for some weeks. A closed head injury required serious rehabilitation. He returned to music, but through a combination of circumstances tragic and personal, the band as it existed before the accident did not, could not, survive.

Some attempts to keep going were made, but the reality of what had happened presented challenges. The group had built themselves up to a certain standard; meanwhile, Bey more or

less had to relearn everything. The effort to sustain some form of the band was too much, and they had disbanded in every sense by the beginning of the '90s.

Bey *did* relearn everything, and continued to play and record until his death in 2012 at the age of 70 after a long struggle with emphysema. He left behind a tremendous legacy in Detroit's creative underground, but will always be remembered for Griot Galaxy. It's a shame that he's not around to see *Kins* – an album embedded with his spirit, talent, and fierce curiosity – finally get the attention it has always deserved.

And that original pressing, the one that was unintentionally wrecked? Strangely enough, a motorcycle accident led to that, too. DeCorte saved up some money to get the albums pressed on his own label, Black and White, but it took a while. Once the record was complete, he was living on a farm in St. Clair, Michigan, so the records were delivered there and stored in one of his dry outbuildings. Within a week or two, DeCorte was in a horrible motorcycle accident that had him in and out of the hospital for the better part of the next two years.

Shortly thereafter, his wife at the time moved to Mt. Clemens, a suburb closer to Detroit, and took the records with her. There she stored them in the basement of her grandparents' house. You can maybe guess what happened next: the basement flooded. A smattering of records made it out into the world, but the rest were destroyed, eventually left to the curb on trash day.

We're lucky that DeCorte saved the original master tapes. "Ron was one of the only people that cared enough about that music to try to get us in the studio. I'd like to give him the props for that," Shahid says now. Most of the wider world didn't get a chance to experience the wonder of Griot Galaxy at the time, but we will gloriously, happily, gratefully take what we can get now.