

Jazz comp aficionados might know The Positive Force with Ade Olatunji's "The Afrikan In Winter" from Jazzman's essential 2008 collection, *Spiritual Jazz – Esoteric, Modal And Deep Jazz From The Underground 1968-77*, a standout track in a collection full of them. The selection was pulled from a hyper-rare private press album, 1977's *Oracy*. An invigorating blend of spiritual jazz, funk rhythms, and socially-conscious poetry, this incandescent document of the independent Black art scene of '70s Detroit has recently been reissued by New Zealand label Rain&Shine.

The Positive Force sprang up from the same ground that shaped jazz icons Alice Coltrane and Dorothy Ashby, as well as lesser-known bands like Griot Galaxy, two members of which actually appear on the album: bassist Jaribu Shahid under the name Jeribu Gonvi and saxophonist and flutist Dave McMurray. The album arrived at a precarious time, released just three years before the birth of the Detroit Jazz Festival, and directly following the closing of two influential local Black-owned labels: Strata in 1975, Tribe the following year. Positioned directly in between a tradition of creative independence and the commercial strain that would eventually win the jazz battle, *Oracy* makes a strong case for the continued power of the former.

In conversation with Rain&Shine, Olatunji remembered Detroit as a cultural hotbed in '77, with poetry, theater, and music everywhere. That year, he traveled to Lagos, Nigeria, for Festac '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. There he learned the term "oracy" from the Nigerian playwright, poet, and essayist Wole Soyinka. Shorthand for "oral literacy," the term struck Olatunji as perfect for describing his creative practice. "When we decided to produce a record of poetry and music there was no question that it would be titled *Oracy*," he tells Rain&Shine.

The resulting record is as much for lovers of words as it is for lovers of jazz, bringing to mind both Wanda Robinson and Gil-Scott Heron. Throughout the album, the band and poet carefully cultivate a mood, balancing politics (see “Praise Song,” a glorious paean to Malcolm X that evokes Albert Ayler’s free jazz and Horace Silver’s hard bop), Black admiration (“Poem For My Lady,” a spiritual sibling of Phil Ranelin’s “Wife”), and vivid scenes of everyday life (the gutting “Kupenda Na Kuhitaji” which recounts a chance meeting in a bookstore, and “Brothers,” which documents the divergent paths of two young Black men). Like Baldwin before him, Olatunji examines the personal and the societal in tandem. On the closer “The Weight Don’t Make Things No Lighter,” he speaks the truths of relationships until the song explodes into the freedom of its final musical message.

The tracks on *Oracy* were recorded at the Alexander Crummell Center for Worship and Learning, in Highland Park, Michigan, which is one of two weird small cities in Michigan that are entirely surrounded by Detroit. (Hamtramck is the other one.) The Center was a community, cultural, and service center, with worship services, education, and resources for cultural production, such as the studio where *Oracy* came to life. It’s also notable for founding Detroit’s first African-centered school; one wonders if the students were played this record.

*Oracy* feels like an Athena of Black Detroit art, springing fully formed from the Zeus of the larger creative community in the ‘70s, a reflection on the jazz tradition and the social unrest that was everywhere in Detroit. The record is made even more powerful by the clarifying presence of a gifted poet, whose incisive words retain their urgency many years later.