



**REMEMBERING JAMMIN' JAI RICH:
THE LESSONS AND LEGACY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

If you were fortunate enough to have lived and loved in the 60s and were blessed to have heard Jammin' Jai Rich (James Roy Richardson, 1934-2012) play and speak of our music, especially jazz, in his special way, you will immediately realize that his passing is clearly a great and grievous loss which saddens us all. But it is equally clear and reaffirming that he has left an important and enduring legacy which lifts our spirits up and points the way towards the excellence by which we, as Africans, must always understand, assert, and remember ourselves in the world. And in this lies the essential and enduring lessons and legacy of his and all our lives.

Jai marked off music and radio as the fundamental fields of making his way and doing his work in the world. He had recognized and embraced the beauty and deep meaning of Black music at an early age, was fascinated with the art and power of communication and realized that radio was the medium and means to pursue his vocation. But Jai also saw that broadcasting was a comprehensive profession and business and he prepared himself for it, studying at Los Angeles City College and the Don Martin School of Radio and Television. And thus, he studied and got involved in it in its varied related areas of sales, programming, production, promotion and performance. He pushed early for jazz to have a central space and place in radio broadcasting at the infancy of FM radio, negotiated time spots, sold ads to pay for his time, programmed and promoted artists, held concerts and developed into one of the top jazz disc jockeys of the day, along with

colleagues and contemporaries like Tollie Strode and Rick Holmes.

Indeed, it was as a DJ that he came into his own and wrote his name in history with selected sounds, accompanying commentary, and valued advice for love and life. His DJ name "Jammin' Jai Rich" speaks pointedly and strongly to what he did and how he did it. To be "jammin'" was, above all, to be excellent as a result of a magical, indeed, mojo mixture of creativity, improvisation, cooperative engagement and soul. It was what Black musicians used to do and display in jam sessions where they gathered together, played off the creative genius of each other, improvised, and offered powerful personal experiences of soul for which Black people are known, need to remember and cannot lose without losing a central aspect and defining feature of themselves.

Jai loved Black music, the musicians who made it and the people and culture in which they were grounded, grew and came into the fullness of themselves. He talked to his audience as if they were proud and reinforcing relatives; faithful, old and new-found friends, and righteous lovers looking for language and music which opened hearts and doors to unlimited possibilities of sharing good. And so, the women and men took notice and notes. It was not just the sonorous and soothing tone and tenor of his voice, but also the timing and choice of his words and records with the needed message. And it was also his introduction of the records and his after thoughts, his ability to evoke and name feelings, coin phrases and sculpture a landscape for lovers of all claims and kinds.

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Jai emerged as a radio personality in the 1960s in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement, a movement that opened up ways and minds, and defiantly celebrated Black people, Black culture and the struggle to expand the realm of freedom, justice and social opposition to the social sickness and savage oppression called racism. He was what the "Master Blaster" Tom Reed and Roland "Good Bynum", colleagues and contemporary R&B DJs, called a pioneer in numerous ways. Indeed, he and other conscious DJs opened the way to conscious Black radio talk shows, essentially playing music, but doing commentary before and after the records, mixing artistic and social commentary in the process.

These were men and women who emerged in the fire, fervor and forward thrust of a self-conscious Black Freedom Movement and were in no way confused or cautious about being Black. They did not explain away the Black origins, essence and meaning of our music. Nor did they talk of "crossing over" to expand our audience or enrich our music which was already abundantly beautiful, creative and versatile, and vital to the way we live, love, express, explain and celebrate ourselves and question, criticize and resist our oppression and oppressor. Indeed, they were part and parcel of our effort to free our minds and the very life we lived, to speak our own special cultural truth, and to sing and celebrate ourselves in varied and unending ways. And thus, music was both a site of battle and support in the larger struggle.

A model and mentor for many, Jai promoted young emerging and excellent artists like Lou Rawls, Les McCann, Ted

Edwards, the Jazz Crusaders, Jean King and the Blossoms, Gerald Wilson's Big Band and others, planning concerts after clubs shut down from 2:00-6:00am, creating a tradition in his own right. He left radio for a while and became a manager of Roscoe's House of Chicken 'n Waffles, a business to which he had sold ads. He worked at KBCA, KJAZZ and was counted among the founding DJ's at the emergence of KJLH and throughout his life, served the community in various ways.

He was the narrator for our first Kwanzaa film, helped Us found the African American Music Society and to bring talents such as Barry White to the African American Cultural Center (Us) for the Society's sessions. He was a friend and brother since the 60s and also for us **all**, lecturer, conversationalist and historian, sharing a wealth of knowledge about our music, the people who made it, and the lives they lived in love, and struggle.

Some nites, if you listen carefully when you lie down or sit in silence and are miles and moons away from the frenzied noise of freeways and wild things and thoughts that go bump and bang in the nite, you might hear him in your musical mind and imagination. It will be as always, round 'bout midnite and in the wee hours of the coming morning, and he will be still jammin' getting down and doing his thing, and with selected music and commentary, weaving webs of love, longing, insight and almost unbearable anticipation of things to come. And we will be reassured that beauty and good like this, will never perish or pass away.

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