

# WIRED

January 2021

The poetry of **Thulani Davis** captures the energy of the 1970s and 80s New York scene from a loving insider's perspective. By **Phil Freeman**

## ***Nothing But The Music***

**Thulani Davis**

Blank Forms Editions Pbk 68 pp

Thulani Davis is an author, a poet, a playwright, a screenwriter, a journalist and a Buddhist teacher. Alongside her late husband Joseph Jarman she founded the Brooklyn Buddhist Association. She collaborated with her cousin, the composer Anthony Davis, on the operas *Amistad* and *X*, *The Life And Times Of Malcolm X*. She wrote the screenplay for the 2002 crime film *Paid In Full*, and won a Grammy for her sleeve notes to the Aretha Franklin compilation *Queen Of Soul: The Atlantic Recordings*. She's been a newspaper reporter in San Francisco and in New York, writing for *The Village Voice* for more than a decade.

This slim but handsome paperback gathers poems Davis wrote between 1974–92; as the subtitle indicates, it encompasses “documentaries from nightclubs, dance halls and a tailor’s shop in Dakar.” Some of them appeared previously in her books *Playing The Changes* and *All The Renegade Ghosts Rise*; one served as sleeve notes to Henry Threadgill’s *X-75, Vol. I*; others appeared in *The Village Voice*.

As a poet and a person, Davis was deeply tied into the jazz scene of the 1970s and 80s; she wrote poems and/or sleeve notes for albums including Henry Threadgill’s *Easily Slip Into Another World*, Oliver Lake’s *Expandable Language*, JuJu’s *A Message From Mozambique* and *Chapter Two: Nia*, and the

self-titled 1971 album by South Africa’s Ndikho Xaba & The Natives. She, Jessica Hagedorn and Ntozake Shange performed the theater piece *Where The Mississippi Meets The Amazon* in New York in 1977, with a backing band consisting of saxophonist David Murray, pianist Anthony Davis, guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson, bassist Fred Hopkins and drummer Pheeroan akLaff. The musicians captured in this book were (are) more than her subjects – they were (are) her friends, her people.

Similarly, the poems are about more than music; they are about life. One titled after the first side of *X-75, Vol I* begins “*at the turning of the day/ in these winters/in the city’s bottomless streets/ it seems sometimes we live behind god’s back*”. Another, inspired by a 1982 Bad Brains performance at CBGB (each poem has a note at the bottom with a date and a location and sometimes a list of who was playing), includes the lines “*the only person I ever met from southeast DC/was a genius who stabbed her boyfriend/for sneaking up on her in the kitchen ... she once burned her partner in bid whist/for making a mistake/but she would wait on a corner at night/for a guy with a suit and briefcase/who didn’t want to be seen with her in the day*”.

The message that burns through all this work is that art and life are inseparable, that each produces the other. She doesn’t glorify the musicians, or worship them; she loves them. These are love poems. □