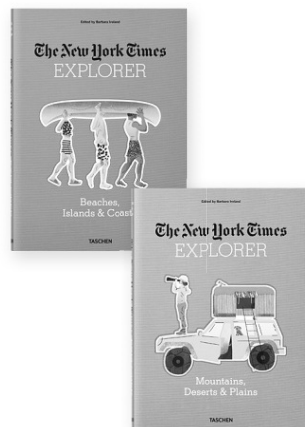


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# Rap's First Act BY WALTON MUYUMBA

DAVID NELSON, Gylan Kain and Adiodun Oyewole christened their spoken-word collective the Last Poets on May 19, 1968, on what would have been Malcolm X's 43rd birthday; they had been invited to recite their poems at a celebration in his honor. The three men were part of a flourishing Harlem artist community, and their poetry epitomized ideals of the Black Arts Movement — the multidisciplinary cultural front that was Black Power's fraternal twin.

## THE LAST POETS

By Christine Otten

Translated by Jonathan Reeder  
541 pp. World Editions. Paper, \$17.99.

Just as Carolyn Rodgers and Amiri Baraka made poems from the political realities and experiences of black folk, the Last Poets performed verses about the spiritual and cultural liberation of black people with backing from conga and djembe drummers, jazz musicians and funk ensembles. The Last Poets, who acknowledged Baraka as a mentor, were among Black Arts' most fascinating offspring — forerunners of contemporary rappers. They gained national notice in October 1968 when they appeared on “Soul!,” a nationally televised program on PBS that showcased the cultural expressions of the black liberation movement. Their breakout performance on the show earned them a recording deal with Alan Douglas, a music producer who worked with Duke Ellington, Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix.

As live performers and recording artists, the Last Poets fashioned a unique amalgam of multivocal, spoken-word poetics, sharp social critique and musical concepts from the African diaspora, all captured in their classic 1970 track “When the Revolution Comes”: “When the revolution comes / some of us will catch it on TV / with chicken hanging from our mouths / you'll know it's revolution / because there won't be no commercials / when the revolution comes / preacher pimps are gonna split the scene / with the communion wine.”

Here the Last Poets suggest that black Americans will be unprepared for the revolution because “they love commercials,” and in the last stanza the poets chide those who'll be happy to “party and bull\_\_” until it arrives. (As the title of another Last Poets track insists, folks won't be ready because “Niggers Are Scared of Revolution.”) “When the Revolution Comes” was broadly influential. Six months after its release, the poet Gil Scott-Heron recorded a response: “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” in which he stressed the power

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of television and advertising culture to distract people from the freedom movement. In 1993, Biggie Smalls converted the lament at the end of the poem into the title and hook of his first single, the now classic “Party and Bull\_\_”; already in the early 1970s, the Last Poets were playing with the basic ingredients of hip-hop. (See A Tribe Called Quest, Dr. Dre and Digable Planets, all groups that sampled the Last Poets on some of their best tracks.)

From its inception, however, the group had trouble maintaining its political agenda. Members argued over everything from whether to remain a trio or operate as a flexible musical unit — with different writers moving in and out of the lineup —



From left: Jalal Mansur Nuriddin, Abiodun Oyewole and Umar Bin Hassan in New York City circa 1971.

to word choices in the poems. Nelson left the group first, creating space for the poets Felipe Luciano and Umar Bin Hassan to join. Later, Kain and Luciano departed, leaving Oyewole and Hassan to record their first album, “The Last Poets” (1970), with Jalal Mansur Nuriddin, a New York poet, and the drummer Niliya Obabi. A year later, Oyewole was in a North Carolina prison on a robbery conviction, and the Last Poets recorded “This Is Madness” (1971) without him. The former members released an album too, rebranding themselves the Original Last Poets. The dueling groups then fought over rights to the name in court.

I've laid out this history because it's hard to grasp from “The Last Poets,” a novelized account by Christine Otten, a Dutch playwright and author who discovered the group through her 11-year-old son, a hip-hop fan. Otten subsequently traveled to the United States, and over a period of several years conducted conversations with many of the group's surviving members (not all agreed to speak with her), studied their albums and poems, and interviewed their musical partners and family members. The result is an unusual and often frustrating book, consisting of fragmented portraits of the Last Poets as young men coming of age during the 1960s and early '70s, each of its six sections named after an album, song or theme the group pursued.

Otten imagines the Last Poets as mod-

ern Romantics whose personal histories, performance styles and Afro-diasporic musical roots provide access to a sublime black aesthetic. Notice, for instance, the way she envisions the story of how the group got its name. Lore has it that Nelson found the name in “Towards a Walk in the Sun,” by the South African poet Keorapetse Kgosisile, known as Willie. Otten explains that the tale has been “repeated and written so many times that it had become a fact,” even though “the term ‘last poets’ never appeared in Kgosisile's poem.” After reading “Towards a Walk in the Sun” for the first time, Otten writes, Nelson heard God whisper to him: “‘We are the last poets of the world / and our spirit breath rhythm words ...’ That thought gave him hope. God was more reliable than history. God wouldn't forget him.” This is a moment of Romantic epiphany: Kgosisile's poem gives Nelson psychological ballast, divinely inspired.

The book unfolds episodically, but rather than form narrative arcs that capture significant moments in the group's history — its formation, for example, or the arrival of a new member — the episodes feel elliptical, forcing the reader to extract meaningful connections among them. They are also broken up in time, flashing forward from, say, “Akron, Ohio, 1967” to “Newark, New Jersey, September 2001,” or from “Harlem, 1970” to “Paris, September 2002.”

Otten has attempted to structure her book like a docudrama by including commentary between episodes by experts on the Last Poets, among them Baraka, Douglas, the Young Lords founding member Mickey Melendez and Hassan's adult daughter, Khadijah Hassan-Da Silva. But the interludes and jump cuts are almost always jarring, and the book requires close reading to understand how the sequences fit together. Jonathan Reeder's translation from the Dutch is lucid. Nonetheless, this formally ambitious work demands too much of readers; Otten compels readers to shape her narrative shards into a mosaic, to labor in order to grasp such basic things as the Last Poets' motivations for making art, or why some members decided to leave the group. In an author's note, she explains that she wanted the novel to mirror the “raw, daring, unpredictable and jazzy” feel of the Last Poets' aesthetic. Too often, though, her work has the texture of transcription, not invention or improvisation.

The Last Poets are still around. In May, the group released “Understand What Black Is,” a new album celebrating its 50th anniversary. On one track, “The Bridge,” Hassan and Oyewole, backed by reggae musicians, dub effects, a swinging horn section and a percussionist, spit thick, spiraling verses calling on us to rehabilitate ourselves and the natural world by disconnecting from controlling technologies. The song's refrain creates a lyrical bridge: “the way over, the way out.” The Last Poets sound timely and Romantic at once. □