

MUSIC; Jazz trumpeter turns up the volume; Wadada Leo Smith's music enters the national conversation, which he welcomes.

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Abstract:

Smith earlier this year emerged as a finalist for the most prestigious honor in American music, the Pulitzer Prize (I served on the jury). [...]he plans to pen a composition responding "directly" to a jury's controversial decision finding George Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder in the shooting of Trayvon Martin.

Full text:

He's 71 now, a seasoned man of jazz who is entitled to kick back, relax and enjoy the admiration he commands around the world.

But Wadada Leo Smith seems to be turning up the dial with new sounds, new ideas, new risks.

Smith earlier this year emerged as a finalist for the most prestigious honor in American music, the Pulitzer Prize (I served on the jury). His epic work "Ten Freedom Summers" addresses the struggle for civil rights in America, but the Pulitzer board ultimately chose to give the award to Caroline Shaw for her suite "Partita for 8 Voices."

"The truth is, even though I was not selected as the final person to receive the prize, I actually received [the benefits of] the prize," says Smith, an early member of the Assn. for the Advancement for Creative Musicians, which was founded in Chicago in 1965. He is now on the music faculty at CalArts in Valencia.

"I've had more written [about 'Freedom'] and have been more interviewed than ever in my life, and people have actually responded to this work. That's why I have 10 performances [of 'Freedom'] ahead of me."

Smith designed the sprawling collection of 22 pieces to be performed over three nights (as it was at REDCAT in downtown Los Angeles in 2011). Among them: "The March on Washington, D.C. -- August, 1963" (Smith's final addition to a long-evolving work); "Emmett Till: Defiant, Fearless"; "Thurgood Marshall and Brown vs. Board of Education: A Dream of Equal Education, 1954"; "Malik Al Shabazz and the People of the Shahada"; and "John F. Kennedy's New Frontier and the Space Age, 1960."

To Smith, the magnum opus articulates his thoughts on race in America and has given him a platform he long yearned for.

"'Ten Freedom Summers' means to me that although it's a decade of summers, it's almost a lifetime for me," he says. "It definitely allowed me to look at something I've been thinking about nearly all my life.

"It means I can participate on the same level and in the same way in which activist artists like [author] James Baldwin and [singer] Harry Belafonte and a lot of other people. When you have the opportunity as an artist to say something about your society ... and people take a look at it, that's very meaningful.

"A lot of people can go into the woods and scream bloody murder. But screaming in the woods doesn't mean anything," Smith adds.

"There's an African proverb: 'You don't take the trumpet and go into the forest and get down into a hole and blow it.'

"The same thing when you make a point of trying to show something about the society, you don't do it just in your house or some isolated place. You do it so people can actually bounce against it and criticize it and do everything else."

The wide demand for "Ten Freedom Summers" certainly suggests that Smith's music has entered the national conversation, but he's just warming up. He's now working on an opus he's tentatively titling "The Suppression of Voters Rights" because he "was stunned by the U.S. Supreme Court decision that wiped out the oversight of voters' rights protections." He refers to the court's recent decision to strike down a key part of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

And he plans to pen a composition responding "directly" to a jury's controversial decision finding George Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder in the shooting of Trayvon Martin.

Smith believes that music can move mountains -- or at least people. "Once you get into a performance, as a listener," he says, "your whole life can be changed if you allow [the experience] to continue with you after the performance."

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Credit: Reich is an arts critic at the Chicago Tribune.

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: FOR "TEN FREEDOM SUMMERS," Wadada Leo Smith was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in music.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Carolyn Cole Los Angeles Times

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