

## Joseph Jarman's *Black Case Volume I & II: Return From Exile*

May 2020

By George Grella

BLACK CASE  
Volume I & II

RETURN  
FROM  
EXILE

by Joseph Jarman

A republication of the jazz artist's 1974 self-published book, it is deeply personal, filled with typewritten text, family photographs, and pages of sheet music notated by hand.

"Call it jazz, blues, rock, reggae, it's all Great Black Music." I'm paraphrasing here, because the concert at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine at the end of which Joseph Jarman made this anthemic announcement happened sometime in the late '80s. 30 years later, the mind can't transcribe the exact words, but the force and meaning of what Jarman said grows clearer every day.



Jarman was on stage with the Art Ensemble of Chicago. He played saxophones and other woodwinds in the group, along with the "little instruments"—hand held percussion and noisemakers—that littered the platform at each AECO performance. He was an early member of what

grew out of fellow saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell's Sextet in the late 1960s (at this concert the other members were trumpeter Lester Bowie, in his lab coat, bassist Malachi Favors, and drummer Famoudou Don Moye) and was part of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), itself falling under the larger, burgeoning Black Arts Movement.

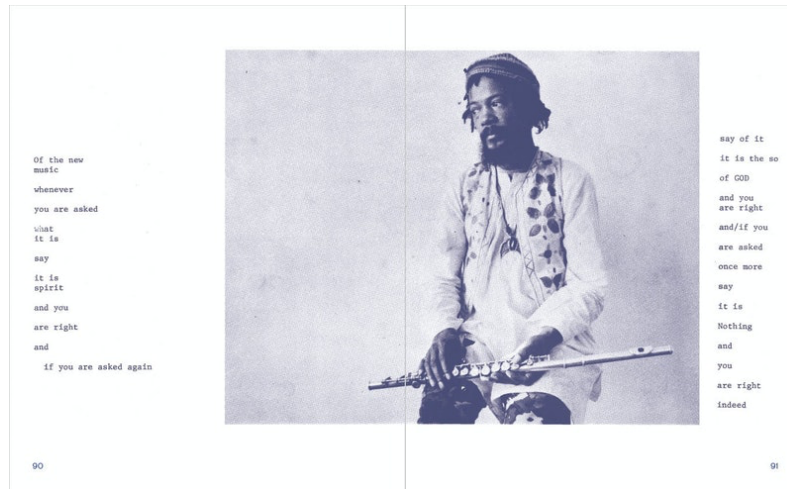
What Jarman meant by "Great Black Music" was the extraordinary, revolutionary, beautiful, soul-affirming music produced through the centuries by the African diaspora, in particular African-Americans (Henry Threadgill, another AACM member, has said his people are the latest thing on the planet). American popular music has long since conquered the world, and all of it—including country music—either began in specific African-American styles like the blues, or would have never gotten off the ground without the contributions of African-American musicians.

Great Black Music is the thread that winds its way through *Black Case Volume I & II: Return From Exile*, a republication of the original book Jarman first self-published in 1974 (a second edition was printed by the Art Ensemble of Chicago Publishing Company in 1977). This new version from Blank Forms is printed on fine paper with a sturdy binding, but otherwise seeks to capture the DIY typography and printing of Jarman's original spiral-bound book, which combined text with photographs and a few pages of sheet music notated by hand (this new publication includes warm and passionate introductory pieces from Thulani Davis and Brent Hayes Edwards).

The book is personal in the extreme. He meant it to be read by others—Davis writes that Jarman inscribed the copy he gave her with, "cause I gotta get it out there." What he got out there was a collection of poetry, both in prose-poem manner and free verse, that explores his personal history and the larger world of African-American culture surrounding him, especially as channeled by Black Arts figures like the poets Henry Dumas, Amos Mor, and Amiri Baraka. And although Jarman went on later in life to work on, as Davis notes, a conventional memoir (never realized), *Black Case* seems to be a deeper and more meaningful self exploration than a narration of events and facts in a life. In affect and effect, it reminds the reader of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, a way for

Jarman to work through his thoughts and experiences until he reached a point of clarity. It is a statement from one artist to himself, made with generosity toward anyone who might find wisdom within. Jarman explains the title as

Exile is a state of mind that people get into in order to escape from the reality of themselves in the world of the now—it is a safe place inside the mind full of mostly lies and false visions that allow the being to think that it is free of the responsibility of living in a world with all other living things. if (sic) you are “in Exile” this book...is to say...that you are loved and can indeed RETURN.



Though the phrase “Great Black Music” appears again and again, Jarman writes less about music than he does about inner confusion and turmoil, the unfettered joy and daring of boyhood, the sensations he picks up from the world around him. It is not great poetry in a technical sense, but it is great poetic writing because everything has a feeling of elemental truth to it, ideas identified and described with such ease and certainty that they can neither be reduced nor disassembled.

The words themselves will not give the reader any idea of how Jarman’s playing sounded, but will drive the reader to become a listener. And for those already familiar with Jarman’s musicianship, his writing is intuitively like his playing—warm, grounded, with a strong core and a gentle hand, self-effacing with a guileless sweetness and humanity.

The AECO, and Jarman himself, was in many ways an avant-garde group—they played free, after all. But they were also at the center of African-American music, and by extension all music. Genre types and formulas are useful, but the critical reflex to hyphenate different styles makes it seem that disparate ideas are being conjoined when most musicians see themselves as merely extending their reach along an endless continuum. Sun Ra saw no separation between ritual, free improvisation, big bad swing, and doo-wop, nor did Cameo feel self-conscious about making futuristic funk with comedic elements.

And so did the AECO play blues jazz, rock, reggae, waltzes, free improvisations, accompany soul singer Fontella Bass, and build a sonic frame around poetry readings by Jarman and others. Their concertizing, or an album, moved fluidly from spare, quiet, floating textures, to churning vamps, to a blues dirge, to some lovingly tongue-in-cheek corn-pone. What kept the group out of the avant-garde cul-de-sac that eventually did in a lot of free playing was the naturalness of their conception. They were up there to make music, not to make a point, they were revealing their souls and humanity in a way that obviated political ideology or social preconceptions.

That is the spirit in *Black Case*, and that same feeling of flow, interconnectedness, and gestalt makes some of the unexpected turns in Jarman’s life comprehensible. The curiosity about himself and the world that comes through in his writing led him to the serious study of Buddhism—it was Buddhism that seems to have unwound

what was clearly a profound case of PTSD that he bore from his service in Vietnam, and he took to it with such seriousness and dedication that he was ordained as a Jodo Shinshu priest and founded the Brooklyn Buddhist Association. He studied, mastered, and taught aikido and at his death in January 2019 was remembered with reverence by aikido students who had never heard a note of his horn playing. *Black Case* is an eloquent impression of the man Jarman was, and in some ways explains the insoluble mystery of how we can come to create beautiful things.

[https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/art\\_books/Joseph-Jarmans-Black-Case-Volume-I-II-Return-From-Exile](https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/art_books/Joseph-Jarmans-Black-Case-Volume-I-II-Return-From-Exile)