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LITERARY

David Henderson, Innovative Poet and Hendrix Biographer, Dies at 83

Part of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, he went on to reclaim a leading musician of the psychedelic era as a distinctly African American artist.

By Alex Williams
For Hudson Literary Review

David Henderson, a poet who rose to prominence with the pathbreaking Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and went on to write a best-selling biography of Jimi Hendrix that changed the way many interpreted Hendrix's life, music and untimely end, died on May 14 in Lincoln Park, N.J. He was 83.

His death, at a nursing home, was caused by complications of dementia, his daughter, Najuma Henderson, said.

In 1962, the Harlem-born Mr. Henderson was a central figure in the founding of the Society of Umbra, a pioneering Black literary collective based in the East Village section of Manhattan.

Like Calvin Hernton, Tom Dent, Lorenzo Thomas, Askia Touré, Steve Cannon and others associated with the group, he sought to forge a new, distinctly Black aesthetic sensibility, unmoored from white Western artistic ideals.

"We were shut out of the discourse," Mr. Henderson recalled of the era in a 2009 interview with *Africultures*, a French news and culture website. "That exclusion is what Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, James Baldwin, were fighting."

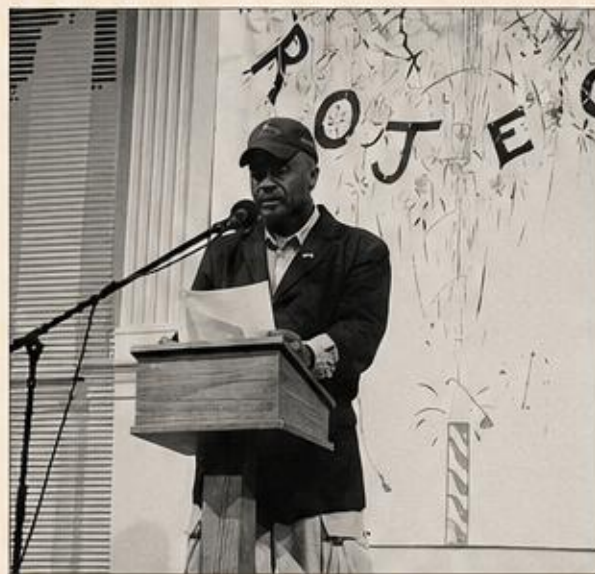
Umbra became a foundation for the broader Black Arts Movement, which emerged in the mid-1960s, spearheaded by fiery writers like LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Lawrence Neal and Mr. Touré, and which also included figures from the visual arts, theater, dance and music.

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David Henderson in 2019 at the East Village restaurant B&H Dairy. In 1962, he helped found the Society of Umbra, a pioneering Black literary collective based in the East Village.

Credit...No Land



Mr. Henderson reading as part of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the East Village in 2015. His writing channeled both the hope and rage of the civil rights era.

Credit...No Land

Mr. Henderson's "experiential montages," as *Kirkus Reviews* described his work, channeled both the hope and rage of the civil rights era, drawing from Black oral traditions and the rhythms of rock 'n' roll, Motown and jazz.

As he wrote in the title poem of his 1970 collection "De Mayor" of Harlem":

*silent natives screaming
thru western guns swords axes
tall tenor saxophones
blaring black trumpet
pages of swords.*

Umbra and the Black Arts Movement rejected the narrative conventions of white America's literary establishment.

"We were the revolutionaries," Ishmael Reed said. "We broke with that. We went to folklore, and to the street."

Mr. Henderson's influence would extend far beyond poetry, into music, politics and cultural history — most notably in his definitive portrait of Jimi Hendrix.

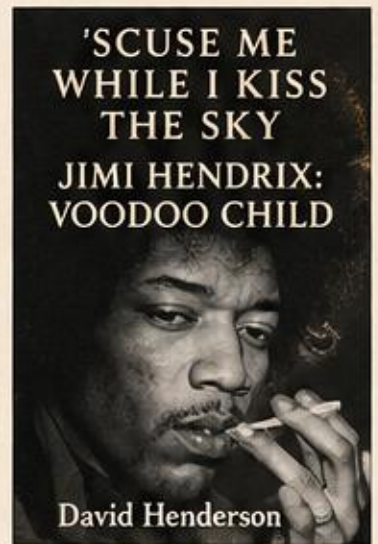
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Soon after arriving in California, Mr. Henderson embarked on a five-year journey to complete a book on Hendrix.

"Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child of the Aquarian Age," published in 1978, was the first major biography of Hendrix. It challenged widely accepted stories about his death and asserted Hendrix's Black identity, his blues roots, and his political consciousness.

Critic Greil Marcus called it "surely the most serious attempt yet to make sense of the life of a Sixties icon."

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Mr. Henderson's biography of Hendrix, first published in 1978, remains a cornerstone in rock literature. Credit...Atria

ABOUT DAVID HENDERSON

- Born September 19, 1942, in Harlem, New York
- Founding member of the Society of Umbra (1962)
- Leading voice in the Black Arts Movement
- Poet, essayist, and cultural critic
- Author of "De Mayor of Harlem"
- Author of "Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child of the Aquarian Age" (1978)
- Teacher, mentor, and collaborator with artists and musicians
- Passionate advocate for Black artistic and cultural identity

HIGHLIGHTS OF HIS LEGACY

- ★ Redefined Black literary aesthetics
- ★ Bridged poetry, music, and political thought
- ★ Pioneered new forms of poetic expression
- ★ Reclaimed Jimi Hendrix's Blackness
- ★ Influenced generations of writers and artists
- ★ Preserved Black cultural histories



EDITOR'S NOTE

David Henderson's life and work represent a powerful fusion of poetry, culture, music, and historical truth. His voice helped shape a movement and his writing continues to inspire readers, scholars, and artists around the world.

Hudson Literary Review honors his extraordinary contribution to literature and culture.

"David Henderson helped transform Black literature into a revolutionary artistic force while reclaiming Jimi Hendrix as a distinctly Black cultural figure." — Hudson Literary Review