

# *The Synthesis*

Chico, CA

Wednesday, November 18, 1998

## **The Watts Prophets**

**Laxon Auditorium**

By Nicole Seredszun

---

The Watts Prophets with their Talk Up, Not Down, hip-hop poetry and jazz performance had the possibility of being embarrassing and cheesy. Fortunately for those in attendance, it was not. The Watts Prophets performed a tight, vocally choreographed sequence of social commentary spoken word and hip-hop pieces which were high-lighted by the simple use of colored light and curtain changes.

The Watts Prophets---Richard Dedeaux, Anthony "Amde" Hamilton and Otis O'Solomon---came together in 1967 at a Watts Writers Workshop. The workshops had been started as an opportunity for the citizens of the Los Angeles community, Watts, to voice their feelings through art. The Watts Prophets were given their name by a crowd member who, impressed by their performance at an amateur talent contest shouted, "They must be the Watts Prophets!"

Each of the Prophets enjoy successful careers outside of their work with the group. Hamilton has taught poetry at San Francisco State, worked as a Coordinator of Special Programs at the Drew Postgraduate Medical School and as Associate Director of Black Commission on Alcoholism; O'Solomon has written for the Los Angeles Times, edited and designed a book of original poetry of The Watts Prophets work, and he has written commentary for song books on Quincy Jones, Marvin Hamlisch, and Cannonball Adderly; and Dedeaux has been a writing instructor for the Los Angeles City School system, has acted with the Irish Repertoire Theater and toured the country reading poetry.

The performance opened with a keyboard piano, bass and drummer playing very simple elevator jazz, which sounded great with The Watts Prophets' vocal accompaniment, but purely unoriginal when played without them. Coming to a slow fade-out, the bass player introduced The Watts Prophets, who began their commentary on man to man violence, environmental raping, poetry and sexual abuse with the emotional song, "Hey, World!" lead by Otis O'Solomon. In "Hey, World!" O'Solomon repeated the statement, "evil racist world will never be right," to the accompaniment of Dedeaux and Hamilton. The transitions were clean, with each member of the group being given equal time to lead. Very little banter was done between pieces, yet before reciting a poem titled "After I Died," O'Solomon said that this was one of two poems he had always wanted to write, but found difficulty with; the other poem that he wanted to write is titled "Before I Was Born."

"Afterthoughts," led by Dedeaux, was the story of the "king of fools" who never allowed himself to fall in love. "Too young and foolish was I," repeated Dedeaux as O'Solomon and Hamilton chanted "have fun with your loved one." I know "have fun with your loved ones," may sound corny, but the delivery of The Watts Prophets was so fun and gracious, you could feel their passion for the subject they preached about. Hamilton's "I Met ME," was about drug addiction, and the act of coming "out of one cage and into the other," moving from the oppression of racism into the self-made oppression of drug abuse. Hamilton closed the song with the repeated statement, "I'm so glad, I met me." Ending act one was the piece, "I Survived The Earthquake,"

which was led by Dedeaux. This song, towards its closure, became a moving dialogue between the three and ended with a mock earthquake; lights flashed, drums pounded wildly and the prophets fled from the stage.

Act two opened and The Watts Prophets had changed their outfits. Dedeaux changed from a pair of sassy green pants, yellow shirt and vest, to a subdued outfit based in maroons and stone colors. Hamilton had covered his Watts Prophets T-shirt with a blazer so loud in its pattern that the woman behind me said that she needed shades. The black curtain behind the musicians remained down during the entire second act, and the colored lighting, which had been a strong effect in the first act, remained virtually unused in the second, with the exception of the use of spotlights. The second act had a more gothic feel, their towering shadows became more noticeable on the auditorium walls.

“I Remember Watts,” led by Dedeaux, covered the three men’s history in Watts: no shoes, no socks, but lots and lots of cops. The drummer and bass player added to the back-up vocals of Hamilton and Solomon and the keyboard player switched to harmonica. This piece made the statement that every town has the same mentality, it is just what you make it---”it’s still the ghetto when you’re poor.” Next, Hamilton took the lead and told the crowd that he had, “all the answers to the questions that have been asked during the show.” His answers were to “teach our children,” and as he sang, his eyes filled with love as he pointed to the front row of seats, which was miraculously filled with nothing but children. The final song of the evening was titled “Tripping” and was lead by Hamilton, who repeated “don’t you be no fake,” to the backup of Dedeaux and O’Solomon. The Watts Prophets were incredible gracious performers, giving the feeling that they were honored to perform for us. I was stunned by how tight they were, not once missing a beat or cue as they performed two sets of intricate songs. Born as a reaction to oppression, violence and poverty, The Watts Prophets have truly succeeded in creating a positive outlet for their vocal rebellion.