Remembering 'The Drum,' a UMass Black literary magazine

Founded during the Black Power movement, 'The Drum' was instrumental in giving a voice to UMass's Black community

By Sophie Machernis and Luke Macannuco

"The Drum," founded in 1969 by University of Massachusetts student Robin Chandler, was an annual student publication chronicling the Black literary experience. The magazine included poems, essays, visual artwork, interviews and current event coverage. It had offices located in the Black Cultural Center in Mills House, where the New Africa House is now located.

The Daily Collegian wrote in September 1987 that because "The Drum" did not publish in 1977, students "appealed for a class that would help organize the magazine's production." The class Contemporary Black Image Making, was taught by Professor Nelson Stevens and focused on producing "The Drum."

Between 1984 and 1985, the Student Government Association (SGA) pulled funding from "The Drum," saying that the magazine being edited in a class violated SGA bylaws. Stevens disputed this claim, maintaining that the class was essential to the publication and that his role was merely an advisory one.

SGA claimed that "The Drum" violated other SGA bylaws, saying that the magazine did not submit a biannual constitution, only accepted "third-world members," much of the magazine was not written by students and that only 500 of 4000 issues were distributed on campus in 1986.

Cover of The Drum from 1978. Courtesy of Internet Archive.

Stevens disputed all of these claims, saying that "The Drum" did submit constitutions, that their two most recent presidents were white, that students chose and reviewed all material in the magazine and that "The Drum" advertised on WMUA telling students where to pick up the publication.

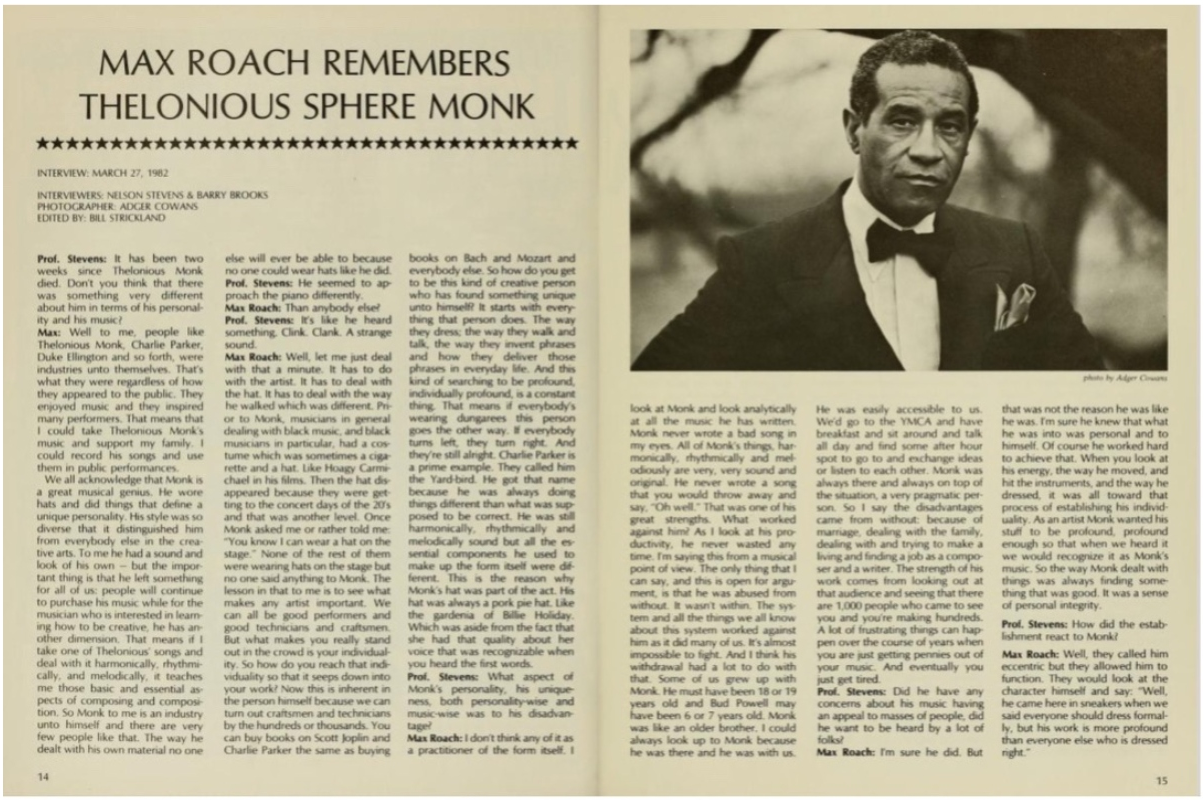
Following SGA defunding, Chancellor Joseph Duffey's office funded "The Drum" until 1988, when publication ceased. Its relative successor was Nommo, a Black culture magazine that began publication in 1990.

"The Drum" was founded in the midst of the Black Power movement, a revolutionary movement in the 1960s and 1970s that not only emphasized Black economic and political empowerment, but also Black literary and artistic expression. Kathy Forde, a professor of journalism at UMass and a historian of the press, sees the creation of "The Drum" as the UMass student body's embrace of this movement.

"['The Drum'] was really for the students and by the students on our campus, being activists at a predominantly white institution to create space for themselves and inclusion for themselves," Forde said.

Forde also sees "The Drum" as an important historical document of the time, recording Black student activism on campus, like the push for the establishment of the African American Studies Department and support of the occupation of the Mills House. "As a historical record, it's meaningful," she said, "and as a record of the literary, artistic and journalistic aspirations and expressions of the time, it's important."

The Black artistic movement of UMass flourished during "The Drum's" run. In 1971, Chancellor Randolph Bromery was hired, the first Black chancellor in UMass's history. Bromery established the Fine Arts Center at UMass, and during his time as chancellor, jazz legends Max Roach, Archie Shepp and Fred Tillis joined UMass faculty. This led to the creation of UMass' Jazz in July program, a popular summer intensive program on jazz improvisation.



MAX ROACH REMEMBERS
THELONIOUS SPHERE MONK

★★

INTERVIEW: MARCH 27, 1982

INTERVIEWERS: NELSON STEVENS & BARRY BROOKS
PHOTOGRAPHER: ADGER COWANS
EDITED BY: BILL STRICKLAND

Prof. Stevens: It has been two weeks since Thelonious Monk died. Don't you think that there was something very different about him in terms of his personality and his music?

Max: Well to me, people like Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington and so forth, were industries unto themselves. That's what they were regardless of how they appeared to the public. They enjoyed music and they inspired many performers. That means that I could take Thelonious Monk's music and support my family. I could record his songs and use them in public performances.

We all acknowledge that Monk is a great musical genius. He wore hats and did things that define a unique personality. His style was so diverse that it distinguished him from everybody else in the creative arts. To me he had a sound and look of his own — but the important thing is that he left something for all of us; people will continue to purchase his music while for the musician who is interested in learning how to be creative, he has another dimension. That means if I take one of Thelonious' songs and deal with it harmonically, rhythmically, and melodically, it teaches me those basic and essential aspects of composing and composition. So Monk to me is an industry unto himself and there are very few people like that. The way he dealt with his own material no one else will ever be able to because no one could wear hats like he did.

Prof. Stevens: He seemed to approach the piano differently.

Max Roach: Than anybody else?

Prof. Stevens: It's like he heard something, Clink. Clank. A strange sound.

Max Roach: Well, let me just deal with that a minute. It has to do with the artist. It has to deal with the hat. It has to deal with the way he walked which was different. Prior to Monk, musicians in general dealing with black music, and black musicians in particular, had a costume which was sometimes a cigarette and a hat. Like Hoagy Carmichael in his films. Then the hat disappeared because they were getting to the concert days of the 20's and that was another level. Once Monk asked me or rather told me: "You know I can wear a hat on the stage." None of the rest of them were wearing hats on the stage but no one said anything to Monk. The lesson in that to me is to see what makes any artist important. We can all be good performers and good technicians and craftsmen. But what makes you really stand out in the crowd is your individuality. So how do you reach that individuality so that it seeps down into your work? Now this is inherent in the person himself because we can turn out craftsmen and technicians by the hundreds or thousands. You can buy books on Scott Joplin and Charlie Parker the same as buying books on Bach and Mozart and everybody else. So how do you get to be this kind of creative person who has found something unique unto himself? It starts with everything that person does. The way they dress; the way they walk and talk, the way they invent phrases and how they deliver those phrases in everyday life. And this kind of searching to be profound, individually profound, is a constant thing. That means if everybody's wearing dungarees this person goes the other way. If everybody turns left, they turn right. And they're still alright. Charlie Parker is a prime example. They called him the Yard-bird. He got that name because he was always doing things different than what was supposed to be correct. He was still harmonically, rhythmically and melodically sound but all the essential components he used to make up the form itself were different. This is the reason why Monk's hat was part of the act. His hat was always a pork pie hat. Like the gardenia of Billie Holiday. Which was aside from the fact that she had that quality about her voice that was recognizable when you heard the first words.

Prof. Stevens: What aspect of Monk's personality, his uniqueness, both personality-wise and music-wise was to his disadvantage?

Max Roach: I don't think any of it as a practitioner of the form itself. I look at Monk and look analytically at all the music he has written. Monk never wrote a bad song in my eyes. All of Monk's things, harmonically, rhythmically and melodiously are very, very sound and original. He never wrote a song that you would throw away and say, "Oh well." That was one of his great strengths. What worked against him? As I look at his productivity, he never wasted any time. I'm saying this from a musical point of view. The only thing that I can say, and this is open for argument, is that he was abused from without. It wasn't within. The system and all the things we all know about this system worked against him as it did many of us. It's almost impossible to fight. And I think his withdrawal had a lot to do with that. Some of us grew up with Monk. He must have been 18 or 19 years old and Bud Powell may have been 6 or 7 years old. Monk was like an older brother. I could always look up to Monk because he was there and he was with us. He was easily accessible to us. We'd go to the YMCA and have breakfast and sit around and talk all day and find some after hour spot to go to and exchange ideas or listen to each other. Monk was always there and always on top of the situation, a very pragmatic person. So I say the disadvantages came from without: because of marriage, dealing with the family, dealing with and trying to make a living and finding a job as a composer and a writer. The strength of his work comes from looking out at that audience and seeing that there are 1,000 people who came to see you and you're making hundreds. A lot of frustrating things can happen over the course of years when you are just getting pennies out of your music. And eventually you just get tired.

Prof. Stevens: Did he have any concerns about his music having an appeal to masses of people, did he want to be heard by a lot of folks?

Max Roach: I'm sure he did. But that was not the reason he was like he was. I'm sure he knew that what he was into was personal and to himself. Of course he worked hard to achieve that. When you look at his energy, the way he moved, and hit the instruments, and the way he dressed, it was all toward that process of establishing his individuality. As an artist Monk wanted his stuff to be profound, profound enough so that when we heard it we would recognize it as Monk's music. So the way Monk dealt with things was always finding something that was good. It was a sense of personal integrity.

Prof. Stevens: How did the establishment react to Monk?

Max Roach: Well, they called him eccentric but they allowed him to function. They would look at the character himself and say: "Well, he came here in sneakers when we said everyone should dress formally, but his work is more profound than everyone else who is dressed right."

photo by Adger Cowans

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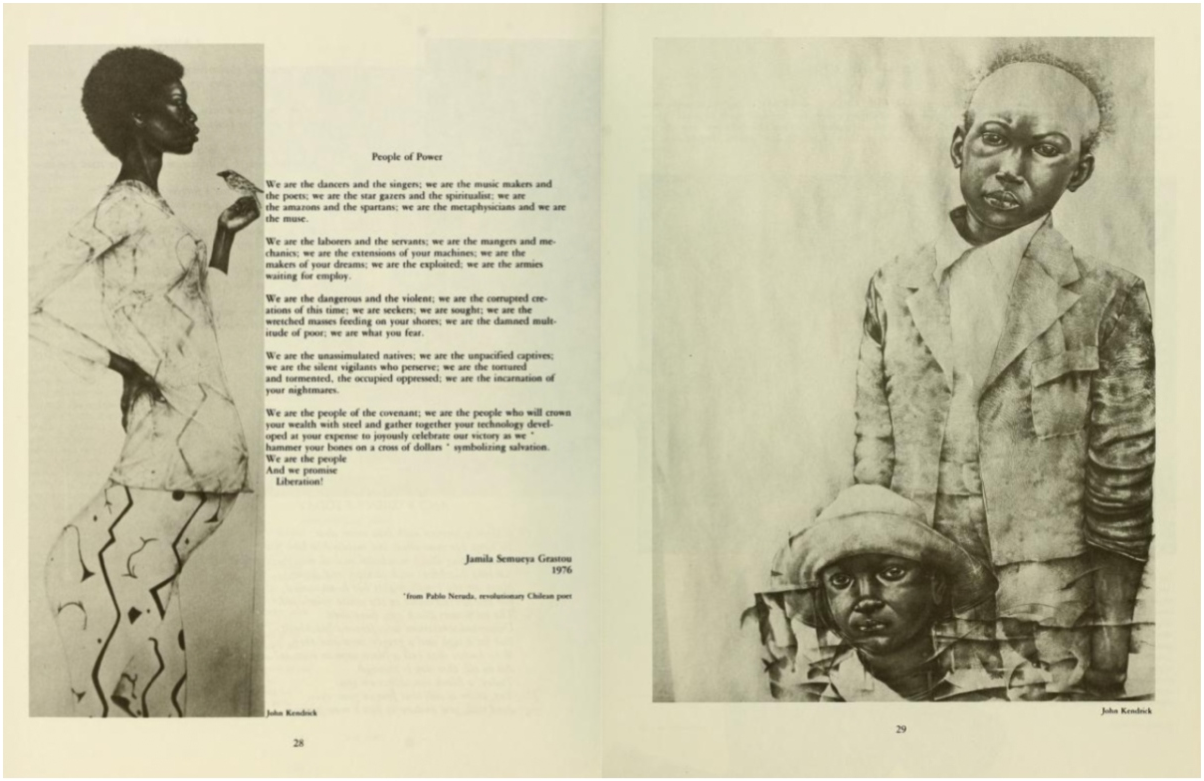
1983 interview with jazz drummer Max Roach on Thelonious Monk following his death. Courtesy of Internet Archive.

"While there were other communication and literary organizations on campus, including the Collegian and a couple of literary magazines, they did not really fit our needs, and some students had in prior years gone through rejection — their works weren't accepted or worthy," Dr. Carlton Brown, a co-editor of "The Drum" when it was first established, said.

"So we knew that it was important to develop a magazine specifically aimed for African Americans to both reach them," he continued, "affirm their worth, provide an outlet and a mechanism for their art and their expression and their thoughts and their ideas, and reflect that back to them for the sake of building culture." He recalled that he only knew Chandler for about a month before she pitched the idea of the magazine to him, but they got to work immediately.

Finding funding proved difficult at first, however, with the SGA denying their initial request. But the students persisted, and eventually received funds after returning with additional support. "For whatever reason, those people that constituted the so-called elected officials of the Student Government Association did not see the value of what we were talking about. And my only point that night was it doesn't matter that everybody sees [the value], it matters that the population in question sees the value," Brown remembered.



People of Power

We are the dancers and the singers; we are the music makers and the poets; we are the star gazers and the spiritualist; we are the amazons and the spartans; we are the metaphysicians and we are the muse.

We are the laborers and the servants; we are the mangers and mechanics; we are the extensions of your machines; we are the makers of your dreams; we are the exploited; we are the armies waiting for employ.

We are the dangerous and the violent; we are the corrupted creations of this time; we are seekers; we are sought; we are the wretched masses feeding on your shores; we are the damned multitude of poor; we are what you fear.

We are the unassimulated natives; we are the unpacified captives; we are the silent vigilants who perserve; we are the tortured and tormented, the occupied oppressed; we are the incarnation of your nightmares.

We are the people of the covenant; we are the people who will crown your wealth with steel and gather together your technology developed at your expense to joyously celebrate our victory as we * hammer your bones on a cross of dollars * symbolizing salvation.
We are the people
And we promise
Liberation!

Jamila Semueya Grastou
1976

*from Pablo Neruda, revolutionary Chilean poet

John Kendrick

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John Kendrick

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Excerpt from The Drum published in 1978. Courtesy of Internet Archive.

“The Drum” was inextricably linked to multiple other movements on campus at the time. Many students who were involved with the magazine were also involved in establishing the Afro-American Studies Department. Brown recalled his experience working with Steve Moore, a student leader shot by police during the Orangeburg Massacre — a series of protests that ended in the deaths of three South Carolina State students, with dozens of others injured. Once Moore was out of the hospital, Brown brought him back to his apartment in Amherst to recuperate, and they began talking. “He and I immediately became engaged with pushing for the African American Studies department,” Brown said, “so all of that was happening at the same time. And so, it’s a very intense time period.”

In 1970, “The Drum” also printed the statement in support of the occupation of Mills House, “We, the following black students feel that there is no black culture unless we live it. Life is culture. Culture is life. We cannot visit that culture and be a part of it.”

In February 1970, Black students barricaded themselves inside of Mills House, then a dormitory building in the Central Residential Area. This came after a fender bender involving a Black student residing in the dorm and a white student living in the fraternity house across the street escalated into a full-blown altercation between the white fraternity members and the Black residents.

Several members of the fraternity chased the group of Black students into Mills House. After kicking out the white residents and barricading themselves in, the students put forth a list of demands that included the establishment of an Afro-American Studies Department and the repurposing of Mills House into the Black Cultural Center, now the New Africa House.

Although “The Drum” is no longer active, there are other student-run publications on campus dedicated to highlighting marginalized voices.

“Obviously the journalism field is still very predominantly white, so just having that space for students to be able to come out and write and feel comfortable and see other people who have experiences like them and also have the same passions is very important,” Christmaelle Vernet, editor-in-chief of The Rebirth Project, said. The Rebirth Project offers opportunities for students of color to pursue both journalistic and creative writing. Founded by Ramona East in 2016, it was intended to be a revamp of “The Drum.”

As for the future of The Rebirth Project, Vernet emphasized the importance of having a “third space” for students of color to come together and write. “I just hope that it’s still here in the future and students know that it’s an option for them,” she said.

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