

# Kamau Daáood's Community Archive

Documenting Black Los Angeles



**UCLA** *Luskin Center for  
History and Policy*

Project Team:  
Samuel Lamontagne & Robin D. G. Kelley

2024

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# Acknowledgments

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The Leimert Park community and We Love Leimert family. The Village. The Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. Darol Olu Kae, T-Kay Sangwand, Antonio Buyard, Hailey Loman, Yusef Omowale, Michele Welsing, Michelle Caswell, James Epps, Esperanza Bey. And the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy for their generous support.

# Executive Summary

- Recorded multiple hours of oral history interviews connecting Kamau Daáood's life to Black Los Angeles political and cultural history

- Acquired necessary equipment to be able to pursue the organization of the materials into an archive in an independent manner

- Established contact with a community-based organization which will house and preserve the archive

- Established an overall inventory of the archive

# Introduction

For well over five decades, Kamau Daáood's work as a community artist, performer, educator, and activist, has strived to nurture the community he comes from through the arts. He is an institution in Black Los Angeles culture and history. His life work has been dedicated to South Central Los Angeles, a community that has historically been abandoned by public policy. Kamau is a performance poet. His work is mainly text-based, words geared towards performance. Collaborating with musicians, visual artists, and dancers has been an important part of his practice by integrating interdisciplinary mediums to tell stories. Kamau grew up in the African American community of South Central Los Angeles where he lived, worked and raised a family as an artist. During his journey, he has continuously worked with artists and organizations in his community. His work has been documented, honored, and shared nationally and internationally. Through an ethic of love, and community as practice, Kamau's work has been dedicated to raising political awareness and fostering unity through the arts in Black Los Angeles, in resonance with the larger African diaspora. In 1965, the Watts Rebellion had a profound impact on him. From this social movement and through his proximity to L.A. Black Panther circles, it was impossible for him to ignore the pressures of racism on South Central Los Angeles. After the Rebellion, he found his way to Watts, which had become home to a burgeoning Black artistic scene bringing together artists through radical political consciousness and racial pride. Through this community he learned and was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, beat, surrealist and Négritude poets. Another strong influence was Black music – bebop and hard bop – John Coltrane especially and the spirituality he brought to his art.

Kamau Daáood has performed, taught, mentored, and organized in the neighborhood of Leimert Park, the center for Black arts and culture in Los Angeles, where he co-founded The World Stage in 1989, an educational and performance arts gallery, which celebrates 35 years of service to the community. The World Stage has been a breeding ground for multiple generations of jazz and poetry in Los Angeles.

Since 2022, I (Samuel) have worked with Kamau on a host of projects. The overarching plan is to comprehensively organize and catalogue his archives, materials he has been collecting throughout his life, which reflect the Black artistic communities he has been part of. Through a community archive building approach, this project documents Black Los Angeles arts, culture and activism from the mid-1960s to the present day – worlds that have been lacking in-depth attention and support from public policy, and haven't received proper treatment from artistic institutions and academic studies. This extensive archival project will serve as a resource for his own practice as he's currently writing his memoirs titled *The Beauty of My Scars*, first-hand narratives about his involvement in L.A.'s artistic scenes. The archive will also be an essential resource for outside projects involving research, publications, exhibitions, and documentaries about Black Los Angeles history. Accessibility to the community is of key importance. As such, we plan the archive to be available to the community it is meant to represent and shed light on in the first place, so that it can take part in the present and futures of Black Los Angeles. Rooted in a Black archival practice, the project is tied to the idea and practice of preservation, transmission and legacy. Practices and values that have long resonated with Kamau, who is known in Black Los Angeles as a griot – which not only refers to a lineage with West African cultural practices, but also to a commitment to cultural transmission and community building.

# Kamau Daáood: A Brief Life Introduction

Kamau Daáood was born in Santa Monica in 1950. He grew up in South Central, in the neighborhood of Hyde Park. He started writing poetry in junior high school after a friend introduced him to Kahlil Gibran. He describes the Watts Rebellion of 1965 as a big influence, politicizing his art and consciousness. He recounts experiencing the curfew and law enforcement brutality, and how Watts became a symbol of Black struggle and liberation across Black Los Angeles. Right around this time, he started reading Malcolm X, which had a profound influence on him. His best friend was Gregory Carter, the younger brother of Black Panther leader Bunchy Carter. Through this friendship, he naturally developed a closeness to Black Panther circles without becoming an official member, but still greatly impacting his political awakening. Parallel to those early political experiences, music had a connected effect on his growth. Under the informal mentorship of older guys in the community, his musical tastes shifted from Motown's pop sonorities to jazz, John Coltrane in particular. This musical shift echoed his rising political awareness, and shows how the music itself was an integral part of the development of radical sensibilities. After graduating high school, he attended Southwest Junior College, and became very involved in the student movement, in particular through Black Student Unions.

As he started taking poetry more seriously, Kamau strived to articulate his political awareness through musical sensibilities. In that endeavor, Amiri Baraka represented an important early reference. As he found his way to the Watts Writers Workshop – a creative writing group which emerged after the 1965 Rebellion – Kamau encountered local Black poets, who would have a definite effect on his poetry and identity. As he joined the Workshop around 1967/1968, he met older and more experienced poets such as Ojenke, Eric Priestley, Quincy Troupe, K. Curtis Lyle, and Otis O'Solomon.



It is around that same time that he joined the ranks of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, a jazz ensemble founded by Horace Tapscott in 1961. In the Arkestra, he was known as a "word musician." Through the Workshop and the Arkestra, he was able to perform his poetry across the community, and honed his craft.

The Aquarian Center was another important place for Kamau's development. Owned by Alfred and Bernice Ligon, the Aquarian Center was a bookshop and spiritual center where classes and books about philosophy, ancient Egypt, metaphysics, astrology, occultism, numerology, alternative food diets and more were available. From the influence of the Aquarian Center, fellow Ark member Dadisi Sanyika formed the community space called The Gathering, which Kamau became a strong organizer for. Located on Western Ave and 45th Street, The Gathering became a space where they organized a food co-op with healthier diets and a New Age African School with history classes, martial arts and dance lessons, language lessons for children and community members. Cultural activity such as music and poetry readings were organized. Talks also took place at The Gathering; notable ones included C.L.R. James, and Queen Mother Moor. In the 1970s, Black arts and culture were bustling with activity in Los Angeles. Kamau developed ties with various organizations across the community, including the Compton Communicative Arts Academy, the Watts Media Center, the Malcolm X Center, The Mafundi Institute, and the Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles (PASLA). This put him in the midst of a community of master artists to learn from and grow with.

With a family to raise, Kamau worked at various organizations such as the Charles Drew Franz Fanon Research and Development Center as a research assistant, at the Watts Towers Arts Center as an arts instructor, or at the Cultural Affairs for the City of Los Angeles. As years passed and the 1980s decade started, a different social climate emerged, much more conservative and repressive, less supportive of education and the arts. This shift eventually manifested into the Ronald Reagan era, which in Black Los Angeles produced the War on Drugs with the militarization of the law enforcement and the criminalization of everyday Black life. In the midst of this social shift, Kamau worked at the Watts Towers Arts Center and was still able to dedicate his energy to community arts, in large part thanks to the leadership and mentorship of John Outterbridge, then director of the Center.

Amongst many other projects, Kamau notably worked on the Watts Towers Drum and Jazz Festival, through which he was not only able to cultivate Black musical activity but also meet many artists and musicians through various Pan-African cultural traditions.

In 1989 Kamau co-founded the World Stage, an educational and performance arts gallery, with master drummer Billy Higgins, who he had met through his work at the Watts Towers. They established the venue in Leimert Park, a neighborhood that Kamau knew well given the proximity to where he grew up. Leimert Park had a Black artistic presence, starting with the Brockman Gallery, established by the brothers Dale Brockman Davis and Alonzo Davis. In the 1980s, more Black-owned shops followed, like Sika Dwinfo's, a master jeweler who also sold African art and fabrics, artist Ben Caldwell's KAOS Network, and Carl Burnett's Artworks 4. With the World Stage, Kamau and Billy joined that energy and largely contributed to making Leimert Park the new mecca for Black arts and culture in Los Angeles by having a jazz space with shows and workshops. After the 1992 Rebellion, Leimert Park would be a thriving Black cultural space that continues to this day. Richard Fulton's 5th Street Dick's was another important space in the community, which also programmed jazz, and had a close relationship with the World Stage. Kamau also opened up a record store in the village, which he called Final Vinyl, where many young hip-hop artists came to shop and dig for records.

The World Stage has been the breeding ground for the L.A. jazz renaissance with artists such as Kamasi Washington, Terrace Martin, Josef Leimberg and more, who have all made major contributions to Los Angeles music in the past decade. This mentorship continues to this day with younger generations of artists who are coming up on various scenes, as musicians, poets, writers, thinkers, and organizers. Additionally, the free weekly workshops available at the World Stage provide a space for individuals across generations, from toddlers to elders, who can engage in creative practice, and be in fellowship with members of their community. In the tradition of the Watts Writers Workshop, Kamau co-founded the Anansi Writers Workshop, which still functions as a space to mentor new and rising South Central poets and writers. Many other workshops are available weekly at the World Stage like the Mawusi Women's African Drum Circle, the Vocal Workshop, the Billy Higgins Instrumental Jam Session, which contribute making arts and culture accessible, while bridging generations through the arts.

# Project History

I first heard of Kamau Daáood in Robin D. G. Kelley's office around 2017. As we were talking about my research on the local roots of Los Angeles hip-hop, Robin mentioned Kamau, his poetry work, and his involvement in the Watts Writers Workshop. A few weeks later, I bought Brian "B+" Cross's book *It's Not About a Salary*, and read his interview with Kamau. At this moment I didn't know I'd meet Kamau about a year later circa 2018 through my involvement with the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. In 2019, as I was conducting fieldwork and interviews for my Ph.D. dissertation, I reached out to Kamau to do an interview. We met in Leimert Park on April 13th at the now closed Black-owned bookshop *Eso Won*, and crossed the street to *Harun Coffee* to sit down and record our conversations. About an hour long, that interview delves into various aspects of Kamau's life, exploring his creative, political and personal commitments. In the background you can hear the bustling life of the Leimert Park village, people conversating and car stereos passing by. Shafiq Husayn, the great producer from the group *Sa-Ra* even joins in the conversation for a while. After that interview I would see Kamau intermittently at the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra events or in Leimert Park until the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to everything and everyone had to isolate. I talked to Kamau a few times on the phone during the first two years of the pandemic to discuss various ideas and projects with the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. During one of these calls, he let me know that he had been looking for people to help him with the organization of his archives and personal belongings, a project that had been on his mind for many years. When the world started to re-open in early 2022, I moved back to Los Angeles, and ran into Kamau at a Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra concert at the *World Stage*, where we talked more about the project. The following month I gave him a call and we set a date for me to visit him at his home to talk more about the archive project. This was in May 2022.

On this first visit, Kamau showed me the space where he stored everything. Constituted of various items, of various origins, Kamau had amassed

a massive archive in his garage with items relating to his personal life, the various scenes he had been part of, as well as items coming from decades of collecting and art dealing, all related to Black history, with a focus on Black Los Angeles. A large array of materials, including print materials such as pictures, flyers, posters, pamphlets, letters, magazines, books, business cards, contracts; objects such as paintings, artworks, and musical instruments; multi-media materials such as audio-cassettes, VHS cassettes, 3/4 video tapes, reel-to-reel tapes, vinyl records, CDs, 8-Tracks, Digital Audio Tapes and more. After a brief tour, we sat down and talked about what this archive represented, the goals he wanted to accomplish, and how I could best support. We decided to meet on a basis of twice a month.

After this initial meeting I thought to invite Los Angeles-based artist Darol Olu Kae to join our efforts. I had met Darol a few years prior helping with his film *Keeping Time*, inspired by the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. Given Darol's community sensibilities and a practice deeply engaged with archives, he seemed to be the ideal person to contribute to Kamau's project. Darol joined us the following meeting, two weeks later. During those initial meetings, we spent time getting to know each other and strategizing about how to help Kamau accomplish his goals. A few clear objectives quickly emerged out of our early sessions. The immediate goal was to first re-organize the garage so that we would have space to go through the different boxes in order to organize the materials in general sections. During the first couple sessions we were able to clear up two central tables which we used as a working space. The temporary general sections we came up with were:

- Equipment and frames
- Paintings
- Pictures and print materials
- Multimedia materials

As we started this initial work, long range objectives emerged. 1) Establish a rough inventory. 2) Contact and start conversations with organizations such as museums, archives and libraries about the possibility of acquiring the archive for proper organization and preservation. 3) Make sure that the archive would be accessible to the Black Los Angeles community. 4) Have the archive be a resource for Kamau's ongoing projects such as his memoirs, *The Beauty of my Scars*.

5) Have the archive be available for research and projects such as documentaries, books, and exhibitions. 6) Get expert perspectives and advice from professionals in the process of this work. 7) Apply to grant to support this work. 8) Document this work through oral history interviews.

Our working sessions were thus always partly divided between organization work and strategic planning. As we were re-organizing the materials and becoming familiar with the depth of the archive, Kamau told us stories about what those materials meant. It is through this long-term organic process that the archive project has been grounded. We were socialized to the archive through Kamau's stories and life experiences that he was sharing with us as we were going through the boxes and materials.

In January 2023, we brought two certified archivists to the site. T-Kay Sangwand, a UCLA librarian in the digital library program, and Antonio Buyard, an artist, editor, and volunteer for the Charles White archives. The purpose of having them come was to receive professional perspectives and advice on what we had been working on for the past six months. Their assessments were extremely useful and the advice they shared also gave us a sense of what we had been doing, and how we could go further. They offered ideas on preservation, equipment, grant support and various information on organizations involved in this type of archival community work. This session was important in realizing what we had accomplished until then, and how we could re-orient our focus from there. Following that, T-Kay introduced us to Michelle Caswell, a UCLA professor of archival studies in the Department of Information Studies. Prof. Caswell did introductions with the Hauser & Wirth Institute in New York City, a non-profit and private foundation focusing on artists' archives. After an initial meeting, we had conversations which were followed by a visit of the organization's New York facilities in June 2023. In the Spring 2023, T-Kay, who had been in touch with Jennifer Osorio, the director of UCLA Special Collections, was able to obtain archival acid-free boxes of various sizes, which were donated to Kamau. We were able to use those boxes to replace and reorganize certain materials. In particular, we used them to organize print materials, which were divided per decades, ranging from the 1960s to the 2010s.

During the Spring 2023, Michelle Caswell taught a community archiving class which required students to work on an archival site for four weeks. In this context, we were lucky to work with two students,



James Epps, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA, and Esperanza Bey, a student in the Master of Library & Information Science. We first did a few preliminary sessions, and a meeting at Harun Coffee in Leimert Park to go over the project and think about how they could best help us and provide us with archival expertise. The goals formulated during that meeting were: 1) Establish a sample collection of Kamau's archive. 2) Provide cataloging, description, and digitization services of that sample collection. 3) Establish a scope, budget, vision and mission for the overall project. 4) Provide advice on long-term equipment required (acid-free boxes, shelves, scanner, etc.). We spent the following four sessions – meeting weekly – working on those goals, while continuing to organize the archive.



Esperanza, James, Darol and Samuel on archival site.  
Pics by Kamau Daóood.

In May 2023, we worked on the application for a California Arts Council grant, titled CAC's Individual Artist Fellowships in Los Angeles County intended to support Los Angeles' artists with a commitment to a creative practice and an engagement in the larger cultural ecosystem. We thus gathered all the requested materials, and completed the application with the support of Robin D. G. Kelley. A few months later, we learned that Kamau had obtained the grant. It is also around that time that informal conversations about applying to the Luskin Center for History and Policy research grants came about. After talking with Kamau about this opportunity, we decided to apply as well. We received a positive notification a few months later as well. Getting those grants made a lot of our plans more concrete for Kamau's archive project, and came at a moment when we had received a lot of counseling from different experts in the field.

In the Summer 2023, as part of the team "The Village," I contributed to an exhibition dedicated to the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra titled The Ark and the Archive: Exploring the Legacy of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. The exhibition happened at 2220 Arts + Archives in the neighborhood of Echo Park, Los Angeles, from July 23rd to July 29th. The exhibition was a celebration of over sixty years of history of the jazz ensemble created by Horace Tapscott. The exhibition featured materials from Horace Tapscott's papers held at UCLA Library as well as print and audiovisual materials from the personal collections of Ark members. Kamau's archive was particularly featured in the exhibition. Various pictures, prints, posters, videos and flyers from his archive were on display.



Materials from Kamau's archive. Pics by Sam Lee.



SUNDAY, JULY 23-29, 2023

A WEEK LONG EXHIBIT WITH EVENTS AT 2220 ARTS + ARCHIVES, 2220 BEVERLY BLVD, 90057

# THE ARK AND THE ARCHIVE: EXPLORING THE LEGACY OF THE PAN AFRIKAN PEOPLES ARKESTRA



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EXHIBITION OPEN JULY 23-29 1:00PM-7:00PM

**SUNDAY, JULY 23, 1:00PM**

FREE SCREENING OF *AS ABOVE, SO BELOW* (1973) FILM BY LARRY CLARK

**SATURDAY, JULY 29, 6:00PM**

FREE PUBLIC CONVERSATION WITH KAMAU DAÁOOD  
& BEN CALDWELL ON BLACK LA COMMUNITY ARTS, MODERATED BY DR. SAMUEL LAMONTAGNE

**SATURDAY, JULY 29, 8:00PM**

PERFORMANCE BY THE PAN AFRIKAN PEOPLES ARKESTRA \$20

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CO-SPONSORED BY THE ANDREW W. MELLON FELLOWSHIP FOR DIVERSITY, INCLUSION & CULTURAL HERITAGE AT THE RARE BOOK SCHOOL | DIGITAL PRESENTATION COURTESY OF THE UCLA FILM & TELEVISION ARCHIVE.

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Exhibition Flyer. Design by Jay Curry



We were also able to print large-sized pictures from negatives. Besides providing various materials from his archive, Kamau also offered advice and counsel in the months leading up to the exhibition. Different programs were organized around the exhibition, such as a screening of the film *As Above, So Below* (1973) directed by L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Larry Clark, with a soundtrack performed by the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. The last day of the exhibition, I moderated a conversation on Black L.A. community arts between Kamau and artist Ben Caldwell. This conversation was followed by a performance of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. Kamau performed with the Arkestra, performing poetry on the song "Motherless Child." The exhibition was a moment of public engagement for Kamau and his archive.

The Summer of 2023 was also when I started doing oral history interviews with Kamau. We dedicated 30 minutes during each work session to record his life stories. We had a specific way to do it. Instead of sitting down and asking questions, we would start by selecting different objects and items from the archive and begin the conversations from there. This technique came to us quite naturally, based on how we had been communicating during our re-organizational/cataloging archival work. Additionally, the work that Steve Isoardi did with Kamau in 2015 was also extremely useful. Steve recorded and transcribed hours of interviews with Kamau, and compiled it all into a single document. Kamau shared a copy of this document with me and it provided me with invaluable insights, which served as a basis for me to formulate my own questions.

In the Fall 2023, artist/archivist Hailey Loman, provided advice on various organizations that could be potential homes for Kamau's archive. As the founder and director of the organization Los Angeles Contemporary Archive, she had a lot to share about the different organizations and institutions we had in mind, and also suggested new ideas. We were introduced to an organization in South Central. After meeting with the director and discussing the history and mission of the organization, we realized it could be a great fit for Kamau's archive. For a few months we had regular meetings to discuss the possibility for that organization to acquire Kamau's archive. Those meetings took place at the organization and at Kamau's so that each party could learn more about the other – in one case checking the organization's facilities and overall state, and in the other, checking the archival site and the overall collection.



Kamau in front of the archive. Pic by Samuel Lamontagne

Following this, the organization drafted a proposal which included a work plan with 1) An archival assessment. 2) A cataloging and preservation plan. 3) A digitization plan. 4) A sustainability plan. 5) An overall budget. 6) A dedicated archival space. These various stages aimed at producing a general assessment of Kamau's archive through professional archival expertise by hiring a dedicated archivist for the project, Bergis Jules. The work plan included different levels of processing and priority, depending on the state and format of materials. Sustainability was another important area. The organization offered concrete resource and methods to ensure that the archive will live on beyond the parties involved. Multiple meetings followed to discuss the initial proposal. Another area we discussed included community outreach, and the necessity for the archive to be accessible to the community for educational projects as well as for overall community cultural engagement.

# Black Archival Practice

From the start, the project aimed at departing traditional archival approaches and sites, i.e., institutional, government organizations, and university archives – implicitly understood as embedded in the reproduction of violence and erasure of Black people and Black history. Following Kamau’s life-long collecting-transmitting-preserving practice, the project strived to emphasize Black archival practices – honoring how Black people have historically engaged with archives in their own ways, and engaged in memory work, outside of institutional archival spaces and with a certain distrust for those traditional spaces. Yusef Omowale, director of the Southern California Library, in an article titled “We Already Are” (2018), wrote about how Black communities have always engaged in archival practices and memory work. Black people do memory work all the time in the attempt to preserve history and the experiences that are connected to it. In this sense, archival practices are not limited to degreed archivists, and archives are not limited to institutional archives.

Kamau’s archive has been part of social life, it is part of his family home, it mirrors the community he is part of, and the work he’s done over the years. The archive connects to relationships, stories, and shared life moments. In this way, Kamau’s archive does not just preserve memories and histories, but is meant to circulate and activate them. By working with him, Darol and I have been socialized to the archive and the knowledges it carries. Through this practice, we can begin to understand the archive as a potential Black epistemological site, that can challenge simplifying tropes, and unearth complex and diverse stories about Black life. Writing about that aspect of Black archival practices, Shelley Streeby understood Octavia Butler’s archival practice as “knowledge production, an apparatus for producing counter-historical narratives and forms of radical speculation that provide alternatives to dominant histories and ways of knowing” (2018, 4).

Although not trained archivists, Darol and I have approached this archival work with what Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor call “radical empathy” and an “ethics of care,” through proximity, personal relationship, community, and caregiving (2016).

As PG Watkins, Founder and Director of Black Bottom Archives in Detroit writes, ultimately, our intention has been to “be in the practice of collecting those stories, of honoring those memories, of making them accessible to people so that the memory lives on beyond us, beyond the Elder who told the story” (2022, 82).



# Overall Inventory

## **-Garage:**

- 5 boxes of audio-cassettes
- 1 tote of framed pictures
- 1 box of recorded CDs
- 12 boxes of magazines and periodicals
- 6 boxes of personal pictures
- 2 boxes of 3/4 inch video tapes
- 1 box of reel-to-reels
- 1 box of VHS cassettes
- 1 box of slides and negatives
- 1 shelf of equipment (including a projector and speakers)
- 1 shelf of supplies (including frames and CD boxes)
- 2 office flat files (containing posters and large pictures and prints)

## **-Office:**

- 5 drawers of printed ephemera and pamphlets
- 5 boxes of photographs
- 1 crate of photos and negatives
- 8 boxes of ephemera print materials (flyers, posters, brochures)
- 2 boxes of small published press
- 2 yellow crates of recordings and publications by Kamau

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