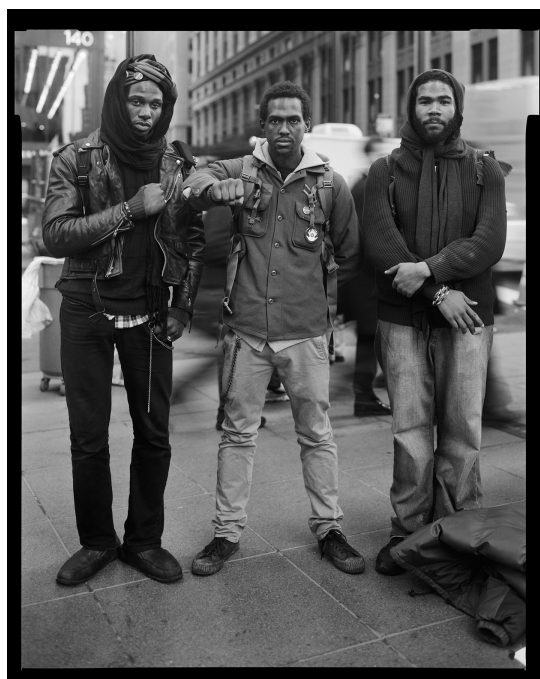


Express Newark Announces “Blues People” as Its 2023-2024 Annual Theme, With New Works, Performances, and Public Conversations Inspired by the 60th Anniversary of *Blues People* by Leroi Jones Later Known as Amiri Baraka



Accra Shepp, *Three Black men at Occupy Wall Street, who requested anonymity for fear of the police*, January 24, 2012.

Blues People has always meant a great deal to me. It was a dramatic self-confirmation, as a personal intellectual and artistic “presence,” but also as the expression of a set of ideas and measures that I have carried with me for many years. Most, even until today. -**Amiri Baraka**

(NEWARK, NJ - November 27, 2023) – **Express Newark**, the center for socially engaged art and design at **Rutgers University—Newark**, announces its 2023–24 annual theme as “**Blues People.**” Inspired by the 60th anniversary of the acclaimed book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* by writer, poet, and political activist Leroi Jones, who later renamed himself Amiri Baraka, the programming is made up of concerts and live performances, public lectures, community activations, and master classes that explore race, class, performativity, and social justice movements.

In the spirit of returning to this groundbreaking book, Express Newark will feature the following award-winning writers, musicians, and visual artists revisiting and reimagining a pivotal work of theirs that is in conversation with Jones’s vanguard ideas: **Derrick Adams, Adama Delphine Fawundu, Nikky Finney, Adebunmi Gbadebo, Jasmine Mans, Cesar Melgar, Kevin Quashie, Guthrie Ramsey, Evie Shockley, Accra Shepp, and Tracy K. Smith.**

“Reading *Blues People* is both a tour de force and a rite of passage,” said Salamishah Tillet, Pulitzer prize-winning cultural critic and the executive director of Express Newark. “In his hometown, Express Newark is deeply honored to return to Baraka’s iconic work to celebrate his legacy and consider his influence on contemporary artists and thinkers today because his book’s emphasis on artistic innovation, class difference, and Black American identity was as relevant and groundbreaking sixty years ago as it is now.”

On **December 14, 2023** at 7:30 pm, musician and musicologist **Dr. Guthrie Ramsey**, Express Newark’s inaugural Free School Fellow, will open the series with a concert called “**Amiri’s Dream and The Blue Futures of Negro Music**” that trace the evolution of African American music from slavery to Bebop to hip hop, and investigate how the story of Black life in America can be traced through the evolution of Black music.

At 2:30pm, he will teach a master music class and be in conversation with Rutgers professor and Grammy-nominated jazz musician **Stefon Harris** that is free and open to the public. The Free School at Express Newark is an art and justice education program for Newark artists of all ages and Rutgers University--Newark students.

On **February 20, 2024**, Express Newark will host the opening of five newly commissioned art installations that explore what it means to be “Blues People” in the twenty-first century. Inside the Paul Robeson Gallery, multidisciplinary artist **Derrick Adams** reimagines “**The Holdout**,” a social sculpture with a curated radio station that he initially exhibited at Alijira: A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark in 2015. Experimenting with the format of a pirate radio station and live guest DJ sets, Adams features conversations with renowned artists and local activists about gentrification, economic development, and land ownership.

Surrounding Adams’s sculpture will be street photographer **Cesar Melgar’s “Newark Master Plan**,” a series of black and white images of homes in Newark from 2019 to 2022 that bear “Notice of Public Hearing on Proposed Development” banners now being shown for the first time. Exhibiting alongside his photos from his 2018 “**Street Views**” series set in the Ironbound and Downtown Newark, Melgar’s poignant work captures how increased living costs, residential displacement, and rapid redevelopment actively threaten the vitality of Newark today.

Multimedia artist **Adebunmi Gbadebo** will feature two newly hand-made site-specific paper textiles inspired by her work “**At the Bottom of the Atlantic Ocean There is a Railroad Made of Human Bones**” in the Window Gallery. Taking its title from a line in Baraka’s poem “Wise, why’s, y’s” and made up of Black hair, cotton, rice paper, and indigo dye, her piece explores labor, land, and familial legacy at “True Blue Plantation,” the rice and indigo plantation where her ancestors were enslaved in Fort Motte, South Carolina. Across in the Box Gallery, photographer and visual artist **Adama Delphine Fawundu’s** revisit of her experimental short film, “**Who We Be**”

(2017) explicitly takes up Jones's emphasis on Black music by exploring hip hop, social language, and activism in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa. Fawundu's wallpaper comprises photographic transfers of Black hand gestures throughout the African diaspora, which will serve as the backdrop to the room.

Exhibited on the first floor of Express Newark are photographer **Accra Shepp's "Occupying Wall Street"** and **"Covid-19 Journals,"** a series of black-and-white portraits of the protestors of New York City's 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement and their counterparts in the Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020. Installed on the main floor of the building and incorporating Baraka's poetry and the music of his father, avant-garde jazz musician, and Baraka's good friend **Archie Shepp**, Accra Shepp's installation dissolves the boundaries between the individual and the collective, reminding us that each person present at these marches plays an essential role in the safeguarding of American democracy and achieving radical forms of justice.

Bridging last year's topic of "Aliveness" and this year's theme is a public conversation by our foremost contemporary Black poets and scholars. On **March 7, 2024**, Rutgers Professor John Keene will moderate the public conversation **"Aliveness and The Black Poem"** that features **Nikky Finney, Kevin Quashie, Evie Shockley,** and **Tracy K. Smith** on the making and meaning of contemporary African American poetry. Later that spring, **Jasmine Mans**, the inaugural poet-in-residence at New Arts Justice, will do the public activation **"Nana's Kitchen"** based on her book *BLACK GIRL, CALL HOME*.

Our spring programming will culminate with a public conversation about the legacy of "Blues People" today with a public conversation between art historian and curator **Kellie Jones** and artist, activist, and the City of Newark's **Mayor Ras Baraka** that Professor Salamishah Tillet will moderate.

"Blues People" is organized by Alliyah Allen, Express Newark's associate curator and program coordinator. Additional support is provided by executive director Salamishah Tillet, creative director Nick Kline, Anonda Bell, the Director of the Paul Robeson Galleries, Brooke Finister, the program coordinator of New Arts Justice, and Anthony Alvarez, the assistant director of Shine Portrait Studio and the coordinator of the Free School at Express Newark.

Rutgers University - Newark, the Ford Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation, The HarbourView Equity Foundation, and Duggal Visual Solutions provide generous funding for this exhibition. Additional support is from New Arts Justice, Shine Portrait Studio, Paul Robeson Galleries, and Harmony Lab.

About Express Newark

Express Newark is a center for socially engaged art and design where people can create art together, learn collaboratively, and build coalitions to advocate for change. Express Newark honors our city's historical legacy as an epicenter of art and activism by being a third space that bridges the campus and community and supports contemporary artists dedicated to social justice in Newark and beyond.

About Rutgers University - Newark

Rutgers University–Newark is one of three regional campuses of Rutgers University, New Jersey's State University. It is a remarkably diverse, urban, public research university that is not just in Newark but of Newark—an anchor institution of our home city. We think of anchor institutions as place-based organizations that persist in their communities over generations, even in the face of substantial capital flight, serving as social glue, economic engines, or both.

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