

Yusef Shakur: An Introduction

by Dr. Carl S. Taylor

Without any reservation Yusef's story is one of the most insightful and evolutionary perspectives of a young man in urban America. My prayers and meditation for my beloved native home is answered by another native son, Yusef Shakur. I grew up in Detroit during the sixties, Motown and General Motors were icons for sure. Motown music was the soundtrack of my life. The Detroit that my family knew, one that nourished my adolescence was rich. Rich in spirit, rich in love, and even more critical is the rich love of its children, youth, and families. For that point alone I owe a great debt to Detroit.

An accounting of strong role models out of my neighborhood is impressive. There were public servants, educators, clergy, skilled artisans, professional athletes, professional entertainers, doctors, lawyers and the list goes on. Not dope dealers, murderers, or rapists. That was before the riot of 1967, and then it seemed that someone just cast darkness over the city. The riot of 1967 hurled the neighborhoods into a darkness that no longer loved or cared about its people. As if it was Biblical, like a curse of some sort, Detroit was invaded by heroin. The once proud city of numerous block clubs fell short, or just disappeared. Children became dangerous or in danger. Heroin, sadly, was the first assault on Detroit. Families seemed to just morph into something totally different from all the past tradition of God-fearing communities. Whites fled, leaving behind pockets of abandoned businesses, homes,

and people. Resentment rose, hate spread with ghetto horror stories running amok. Police units continued a campaign of search and destroy tactics that sparked the original insurrection during the hot July of 1967. That seemed to be the death of the city I knew, the neighborhood that raised me and my younger brother Virgil. Upon its death, Yusef Shakur, formerly known as Joseph Ruffin, came about in the early seventies. A product of teenage parents, Yusef tells the story of the young boy who never knew or experienced a friendly, kind, or working Detroit like I did.

There is significance in having to survive in the darkness of poverty, poor education, and family dysfunction that this story tells. That survival turns a person into something else that does not reflect the living struggle that many citizens know in America. Living in America is different from surviving in America. That is not simply about race, the discrimination of social class is evident in Yusef Shakur's life. As the reader understands his journey, Yusef is not accepting the present conditions for his children. He wants society to understand what has been done. Not to merely place blame, hardly, he is giving us a first hand accounting of the struggle many people have in urban America. Not the Kodak moment for feel good stories about "inner cities," this book is about an understanding of families, social conditions, and urban decay over the past forty plus years.

Society will reap what it sows in urban ecology. Some critics see little hope; therefore, many residents of what our research has deemed the "third-city" see little hope themselves. A

hopeless people living in a hopeless place produce hopeless outcomes. I have faith in this young man. His experiences make him the leader needed in the whole experience of many challenged young men. A society that marks them as the enemy, menace to society is a coat worn by many without consideration; perhaps that coat does not fit them. When Joseph Ruffin took off the ugly coat of resentment, hopelessness and rage, he found a new coat. A better fit of humanity, dignity and honor, his rebirth is told in this humane declaration which transformed Joseph Ruffin into Yusef Shakur.

Shakur is living a life that says I am capable of living my life humanely, not barbarously. While Yusef is from Detroit, the community soil that gave rise to the Taylor Brothers (me and my brother Virgil) was fertile, positive, and nourishing. I became something positive because my home, block, neighborhood and overall Detroit were enthralled with hope. In the early seventies when Yusef was born, my mother allowed Virgil to come to East Lansing to live with me because the dark tide had set in Detroit breeding an ugly punitive environment. My younger brother found the beginning of a different Detroit, one that seemed to nurture negative qualities, not positive ones. While Virgil was spared, a young Joseph Ruffin discovered a brutal uncaring world that produced a confused young boy. This young person's early life from the beginning was not the hope that sprung me towards respectable living. Hardly, Yusef was born into hopeless conditions, a hopeless neighborhood, and hopeless schools.

I recently read his memoir-quickly, in one night. I was smiling, crying, and pondering.

Shakur tells his story by taking the reader into his life down the road he walked, suffered, was denied, and rising from the treacherous streets. There is a depth and rhythm of the blues in this book. Yusef amazingly wrestled with self-esteem, self-respect, and self-analysis, and came out for the better. Who blessed this young warrior to be able to change? That is what this book is about, social change in the midst of economic change all around him. Yusef has taken a giant step in explaining to urban youth how to overcome conditional challenges, the youth that have been lied to forever it seems. His voice will allow others to understand that there is hope. More than anything else as I look at burned out buildings and abandoned blocks, I love Yusef for being able to forgive a society that has lost its way. Yusef Shakur is important to the City of Detroit. As we all realize that we need to include young folks in the rebuilding of Detroit and a stronger community, we must also realize that it is imperative that we redeem the young folks who have been transgressors.

I look at his thirst for knowledge; I had strong parents and a solid traditional upbringing. My brother and I were given a head start by our parents and community. We knew love; we knew the Taylor Boys were expected to represent honor and dignity. Love is reflected in love. Today, the lies, deceit, and dishonesty tell urban youth that they don't count. Mesmerized into thinking less of themselves and their communities, they act out in destructive ways, killing themselves. The suicide of urban youth has yet to be acknowledged, less acted upon.

Who will address the youth better than someone who has survived the maze of social and economic barriers. Yusef improved himself, went to community college, found a church, connected with his parents, and claimed his children. More critical, he has taken his knowledge and skills and begun to fight with intelligence and education. He applies everything he has gained and decided that there is no cavalry coming to rescue African-American youth in Detroit. He does need support; however, he is not waiting for anyone. The saying is that one with God is the majority. Yusef Shakur leads the way. This writing is with the Supreme Being, it is...how else is it that someone coming from hopelessness can bring so much hope.