

The following is the second part of Amina Baraka's story of how the Baraka family rose from Newark, New Jersey's most wanted family to Newark's first family. The first part dealt with the 1967 Newark riots. IR

Ishmael Reed: Amina, we left off with the riot. What kind of conversations did you guys have when Amiri returned home from the hospital?

Amina Baraka: When he got home, he didn't talk much about anything because it was too much going on, you know, people were coming in and out, and we were dealing with lawyers and trying to get someone to take his case. Ray Brown was an outstanding lawyer in Newark. Anyway, he couldn't take the case. I had to get a friend of mine, Irving Booker, to take the case. We mainly talked about what happened and how we can get people organized to deal with the court case.

Ishmael Reed: What was Amiri charged with?

Amina Baraka: Inciting the riot.

Ishmael Reed: Was Hugh Addonizio the mayor at that time?

Amina Baraka: Yes, he was.

Ishmael Reed: He finally went to jail.

Amina Baraka: Yes, he did.

Ishmael Reed: I read one of Amiri's remarks about the mayor, calling him "No Neck Addonizio." That was a great line. Listen, yeah, you know I ran a paper out there for about ten weeks.

Amina Baraka: You had a newspaper?

Ishmael Reed: Yeah. Yeah, called ADVANCE. I published a profile of Amiri. I published Tom Hayden, who came to our office to drop some gossip about a Black doctor. Said that he was an abortionist. When I saw Hayden again in California, he called me his first critic.

Amina Baraka: Oh, yes, I remember Tom very well.

Ishmael Reed: I wrote in my newspaper, ADVANCE, that Tom Hayden wanted to get people to start a riot.

Amina Baraka: No, he had nothing to do with that. He was doing outstanding work.

Ishmael Reed: I resigned when the investors fired my staff. They wanted to keep me on as a figurehead. I didn't have an opportunity to tell the Black citizens of Newark the reasons for my departure. The paper sputtered on for a while. Did you get any harassment from the police after the riot?

Amina Baraka: Sometimes, when we walked down the street, the police cars would harass us with a torrent of wailing to aggravate us. We were trained not to even look in their direction. We kept walking.

Ishmael Reed: How long were you guys in court?

Amina Baraka: About a year, maybe two.

Ishmael Reed: And who paid the legal bills? Did you guys have a defense fund?

Amina Baraka: No, we didn't have a defense fund. The lawyers didn't charge us.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, and what about Spirit House? How did that come to be?

Amina Baraka: Oh, the Spirit House. We were living at 33 Sterling Street, which was called the Spirit House.

Ishmael Reed: And what kind of programs did you have there?

Amina Baraka: Oh God, we had many programs. Our programs included the African Free School there, which was a preschool and an after-school program. "The Sterling Street News," was a newsletter published by some kids on the block under the supervision of Amiri. We had permission to block that street off because there were a lot of young kids playing basketball. The staff of the newsletter interviewed the neighbors on the block, wrote about happenings in the neighborhood and the city. We printed the newsletter on a machine upstairs. The kids would sell the paper at like five cents, or something, and Amiri would let them keep the money. That's how they started to run a little newspaper.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, great. So, you know, Malika Iman is one of the actresses in my plays, and she said she was out there at Spirit House with Yusef Iman.

Amina Baraka: You mean Yusef Iman's daughter?

Ishmael Reed: Right.

Amina Baraka: She was here all the time. They came in from Brooklyn and made many recordings and music because we gutted the first floor and converted it into a theater. We could do plays and so forth. It was mainly for the communities. Yusuf and them would come over from Brooklyn, and there's a famous picture of them standing on the porch of the Spirit House after they had recorded "Black and Beautiful."

Ishmael Reed: Yeah. It's on the cover, and he's sort of in like the African outfits.

Amina Baraka: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, you do. Do you know what happened to Yoruba Richen?

Amina Baraka: No.

Ishmael Reed: Yoruba Richen is Aishah Rahman's daughter, and she's become a famous filmmaker and did the Breonna Taylor documentary for HBO recently. She does documentaries.

Amina Baraka: Well, the police didn't bother us after the rebellion because we had many people because the Spirit House was not just us living there. Two other brothers got locked up with him—Charles McCray, who lived on the second floor, and Barry Win's uncle, an elected official. Then John Oliver Killens' daughter was living there with us too.

Ishmael Reed: In the Spirit House?

Amina Baraka: Yes. Barbara Killens Riviera. She married Louis Riviera.

Ishmael Reed: Right, right. Yeah. I'm doing the introduction to Killens' unpublished novel. He's got a novel, his last, called *The Minister Primarily* that I'm doing the introduction to that Amistad's going to publish.

Amina Baraka: Oh great.

Ishmael Reed: Anyway, so then came the trial.

Amina Baraka: Yeah, the trial went on because after we lost the first trial—

Ishmael Reed: What do you mean you lost it? Amiri was found guilty?

Amina Baraka: Yeah, now Ray Brown could take the case. Irving Booker lost the first case, but he had built up enough evidence in terms of paperwork, and he worked with Ray for a while, and then Ray took over the case desiccation.

Ishmael Reed: So you guys appealed.

Amina Baraka: Yeah, we appealed.

Ishmael Reed: So what was the outcome of the second trial?

Amina Baraka: It was not guilty.

Ishmael Reed: The judges usually side with the police.

Amina Baraka: Booker did a grand job keeping the paperwork and all the documents, and he handed them over to Ray. And you know Ray is a very excellent lawyer. He's dead now, but he had he was pretty famous for dealing with these types of cases.

Ishmael Reed: What about Tom Hayden--wasn't he charged also?

Amina Baraka: I don't know. I don't remember.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, he was charged.

Amina Baraka: I thought Tom Hayden had left Newark, didn't he?

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, but he was charged also. I remember that. I'll look it up. So what about Anthony Imperiale, this Italian American who gave you guys such a hard time.

Amina Baraka: He was just a pain in the ass. What happened was he died too, and before he died, he apologized for all of his racist behavior. He said God came to him, and he was repenting, and he started to talk to Amiri. After Amiri's death, his wife came to visit us. She called and asked me if she could

bring some sweets. You know Italians have that ritual with sweets. The food was good.

Ishmael Reed: Do you remember what the food was?

Amina Baraka: It was like sweets and cakes, and she stayed a long time. We talked for a while. We can't say it was friendly because Amiri made fun of the gesture--their wish to make amends; I didn't think that was nice of him.

Ishmael Reed: The newspapers said that Imperiale and Amiri had a meeting after the riot.

Amina Baraka: This was long after the riot.

Ishmael Reed: Long after the riot. I see, and Imperiale came out and said, "We are both Americans?"

Amina Baraka: Yeah. He did.

Ishmael Reed: Okay. So then you guys went into mainstream politics. Is that correct?

Amini Baraka: Right after they had a Black Power conference here in Newark, we started building a national organization. We created the National Black Assembly, but that was years later because that trial went on forever.

Ishmael Reed: Okay. So after the trial, you wanted to create the Kawaida Towers? A residency (in Newark). What happened?

Amina Baraka: Yeah, that was with Imperiale because we wanted to build it in the North Ward, and Imperiale didn't want a high-rise in his neighborhood, so that's when we started to demonstrate. I remember it was cold as hell. We were out there demonstrating, and it was snowing and all that mess. A lot of our people went to jail.

Ishmael Reed: Is that right? For demonstrating?

Amina Baraka: Confrontation with the police.

Ishmael Reed: Well, the police were run by Organized Crime, right?

Amina Baraka: Organized Crime ran the whole city.

Ishmael Reed: Well, when I had a paper there, Dominick A. Spina, the police chief, invited me down to the police station to inspect stuff he had on a Black political leader. I never went down there. There was a Black woman who worked for Addonizio. She ran the city. She told me that if I ever came to Newark, I'd have to obey what she said.

Amina Baraka: Isn't that something? We'd always have troubles, you know. We were under the police's eyes all the time. We had to go out in twos all the time. The women did. Last week, the sister passed away, who used to be my partner walking down the street and taking care of our oldest son Olaji because he was a baby. He was two weeks old.

Ishmael Reed: Tell me about the alliance between Amiri and Ken Gibson.

Amina Baraka: Well, what happened, you know, Gibson had run for mayor before. This was in '66, and that's when we started dealing with the local

politics. Because before the rebellion, before that, we dealt with Carmichael and all of those people who came in for the Black Power Conference.

Ishmael Reed: Well, did Martin Luther King come out there?

Amina Baraka: Yes, he came out years later. I read in his book that he came to talk to Amiri to prevent Amiri from starting another riot even though he was not responsible for the first one. But anyway, he came to have peace talks with Amiri.

Ishmael Reed: He came to your house?

Amina Baraka: Yeah, he came to the house.

Ishmael Reed: Did he have an entourage?

Amina Baraka: He didn't need one, honey, because I tell you when people saw it was Dr. King, people came from everywhere. They were just following him up to the house.

Ishmael Reed: What about Sammy Davis, Jr?

Amina Baraka: When Sammy came, Amiri was still locked up, and I planned to call different people. I called Ginsberg, and all those people helped me get him out of jail. That's when Sammy came into the picture. I don't know how he got my number, but he called, and he and Amiri's father and I went over to New York to this hotel, and he asked what we needed to get him out of jail, and so I said, "I'd like to get him out as soon as possible." He came with this guy who looked like he was out of the Corleone family. He said, "You know we can have him out by the time you get back to Newark," and his father said, "Oh, that's good." I said, "No, no, no, no, no, I live here. I know these people." I said, "No, we don't want to do that," and Amiri's father and I argued about it. So when I went to visit him in prison, I told him what had happened, and he said, "I'm glad you told them no." He said, "Those people would own me," and I said, "I know it. How did your father know that?" He said, "Yeah, you did the right thing."

Ishmael Reed: Nina Simone lived in your house. But that was much later.

Amina Baraka: Yeah. She lived on South 10th Street. I had a friend here in Newark. Denise. She was working with Welfare. So I used to work for Welfare rights until I met Roi. We stayed friends. Nina had gotten to a point where she needed somewhere to stay, and Tom White, who was an entrepreneur here in Newark--he had run a store called "Worldwide." He sold furniture, jewelry and shoes, and all types, but he had a great bookstore. That's where I found *The Black West* by William Loren Katz, and he had a lot of posters drawn by people like Tom Feelings, the illustrators. He came from a wealthy family. He didn't live in Newark. He came from South Orange or somewhere. Anyway, Denise took Nina to Tom's house, and Tom had gotten tired of being her host. So Tom said, "Why don't you go to Sylvia's? She's down there with Roi Jones on Broadway, so that's how she got here."

Ishmael Reed: How long did she stay?

Amina Baraka: She must have stayed here a year or so. We would come back and forth. Roi was out of town when she arrived. I think he was out in Naropa, and when I called him, I said, "You won't believe who is here." So he said, "Who?" and I said, "Nina Simone," and he said, "You're kidding." I said, "No, I'm not either." So when he got back, we had already planned a party for Abbey Lincoln. I forgot. So I said, "Nina, oh goodness. I said I have to get ready for the party for Abbey Lincoln." She said, "You didn't give me no party."

Ishmael Reed: That's funny.

Amina Baraka: So anyway, we had a hard time, and the party took place. Of course, Amiri was here, and Nina wouldn't come down to the party, and then after a while, she made her entrance. You know I have these staircases and she came down that staircase like she was Queen of Africa, but then we got a beautiful picture of Abbey, Nina, Amiri, and myself in the living room. I think Claude Brown came over too, and it turned out because Abbey was performing at an East Orange club, and we wanted to give her a reception.

Ishmael Reed: What year was that? Do you remember?

Amina Baraka: That's what I'm studying right now

Ishmael Reed: Okay, so Ken Gibson and Amiri had a falling out.

Amina Baraka: Well, look, Amiri had a falling out with everybody. Yeah, and Gibson didn't do some of the things that Amiri wanted him to do, and they were back and forth. Sometimes in agreement, and then other times, they would fight. Near the end, Gibson came out to support Ras. Ras erected a statue of Gibson here at Lincoln Park.

Ishmael Reed: What about Mayor James Sharpe. Didn't he go to prison?

Amina Baraka: Yeah, he went to prison. He was angry with Ras for erecting the statue to Gibson, and he didn't build one for him.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, I remember Gibson.

Amina Baraka: Gibson was a musician. He played saxophone, you see, and he was pretty hip in Newark for a while until he and Amiri started arguing out loud.

Ishmael Reed: Tell me about the conference in Gary, Indiana.

Amina Baraka: Oh, you're talking about the Gary convention?

Ishmael Reed: So these bourgeois people didn't go along with the program, or what happened?

Amina Baraka: No, the National Black Assembly occurred.

Ishmael Reed: Mayor Coleman from Detroit was there, right?

Amina Baraka: Yeah, all the Black mayors that existed at that time. We had a cadre in about 20 states because we were building a Black Nation. The Congress of African People. One of the brothers in the organization was friends with the mayors. What was his name?

Ishmael Reed: The late Mayor Richard G. Hatcher.

Amina Baraka: Yes. Richard Hatcher.

Ishmael Reed: So Amiri went to Washington and asked for three states.

Amina Baraka: No, I don't remember that now.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, that's what a documentary reported. William Greaves did a documentary of what took place in 1972 in Gary, Indiana, called "Nationtime."

Amina Baraka: No, some people don't know what they were talking about. We had the same program that the Nation of Islam had and the RNA. The Republic of New Afrika. We wanted some states in the Black South. Yeah, but mainly at this point during the Gary thing, we were trying to get Black elected officials to come together to get more Black people, you know, in Congress, mayoralties, and so forth. That was the goal.

Ishmael Reed: You accomplished that.

Amina Baraka: Yeah, we did that.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, the Black Panthers did the same thing out here. They got people in Congress and on school boards, through local elections.

Amina Baraka: Yeah, we accomplished a lot.

Ishmael Reed: So I remember how Harold Cruse criticized the conference, and Amiri said he didn't even attend it. (*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* is Cruse's classic.)

Amina Baraka: I think I was the one who was supposed to escort Harold Cruse around when he visited us.

Ishmael Reed: So Ras, your son. Did he always show qualities of leadership?

Amina Baraka: Ras, I was surprised that he would run for public office because Ras was a great writer.

Ishmael Reed: That was a great eulogy that he wrote for Amiri. I showed it to my students.

Amina Baraka: He was always good at writing poetry, and he was interested in art and culture.

Ishmael Reed: Where did he go to college?

Amina Baraka: Howard. Writing is what I thought he was going to do, but suddenly, he comes home to tell us that he wanted to run for mayor.

Ishmael Reed: Oh boy. That must have been something.

Amina Baraka: So he ran, he lost that one and then ran again for councilman at large, and he lost that one, too. Amiri, Junior was at Howard. He said, "Mommy. Why does Ras keep losing?" I said, "I don't know."

Ishmael Reed: What was this son's name again?

Amina Baraka: He was named after his father. Amiri, Jr.

Ishmael Reed: So he asked why Ras kept losing?

Amina Baraka: Yes, he kept asking. So I said, "Damned if I know." But he said he was going to run again. I said, "Run for what?" I said, "You ran for

mayor, you ran for councilman-at-large, what else are you going to run for?" He said, "Our ward. The South Ward," because we live in the South Ward. So he said, "Are you going to help us?" So I said, "Of course I am. But okay, you all do what you wanna do." And Ras won. Little Amiri--he worked his butt off. He's a great organizer. He is Ras's chief of staff, which he should be. He hadn't even graduated yet, but he always had ties to the neighborhood because he was a coach. He worked with kids.

Ishmael Reed: What is he doing now?

Amina Baraka: He's his brother's chief of staff.

Ishmael Reed: Wow. That's incredible.

Amina Baraka: Yeah, he just got an award for basketball in the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

Ishmael Reed: Now Amiri ran for office, right?

Amina Baraka: No.

Ishmael Reed: I thought he did.

Amina Baraka: No. Never.

Ishmael Reed: Amina, thank you very much for this.

Amina Baraka: Thank you.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, bye