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NEGROCITY

An Interview with Greg Tate* by Camille Goodison

As a cultural critic and founder of Burnt Sugar The Arkestra Chamber, Greg Tate has published his writings on art and culture in the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Jazz Times*. *All Ya Needs That Negrocity* is Burnt Sugar's twelfth album since their debut in 1999. Tate shared his thoughts on jazz, afro-futurism, and James Brown.

GOODISON: Tell me about your life before you came to New York.

TATE: I was born in Dayton, Ohio, and we moved to DC when I was about twelve, so that would have been about 1971, 1972, and that was about the same time I really got interested in music, collecting music, really interested in collecting jazz and rock, and reading music criticism too. It kinda all happened at the same time. I had a subscription to *Rolling Stone*. I was really into Miles Davis. He was like my god in the 1970s. Miles, George Clinton, Sun Ra, and locally we had a serious kind of band scene going on. All the guys in my high school were in a band. You were either in a band or you were just deep into music. That was definitely the major activity that all conversation and passion flowed around. More than sports, more than politics. For our generation it was definitely music and live shows, going to see a lot of live music, and in DC it was pretty much possible to see everything. There were a lot of great venues. Major venues, small venues. I started to do radio too when I was in high school. I actually got opportunities to go on two or three of the local radio stations, and program and announce, and kinda did all that up until I got to New York. I came to New York in 1982, but I started writing for the *Village Voice* in 1981, at the invitation of the music editor, Robert Christgau.

GOODISON: And what kind of music were you into then?

TATE: Musically, I was really into the punk funk scene or the punk jazz scene. We liked bands such as Defunkt, Ron Jackson and the Decoding Society, Ornette Coleman, John Zorn, Bill Laswell. Definitely checking out all the stuff they were doing, and then I was already into hip hop from DC. I was already following it then. When I first got here the main phase that was coming out was Sugar Hill, or others on really small labels. There wasn't a whole lot of hip hop at the time, but you could go to places like The Kitchen,

* This interview took place on December 23, 2011, at the Lincoln Center Atrium in Manhattan.

or Mudd Club, or the Roxie, or the Roller Rink and see different things. But I was also, you know, when you move to New York your main focus is on survival. But it was a good time.

GOODISON: How did the Black Rock Coalition come about?

TATE: Vernon [Reid] and I knew each other. I'd checked him out when he first came to DC to play gigs with Defunct. So, that was around 1980. We hooked up. We just kind of met each other then, and one of my first assignments in New York was for a magazine called *Musician*. I did a piece on Vernon, and another good friend of ours, a guitarist named Ronnie Drake. That was 1983. So, we really became tight after that. Then summer of 1985, Vernon called the first meeting of the coalition. But he just wanted to have a discussion group really, to talk about some of the problematics of race and rock, which were pretty extreme. Now just because of the way the business has changed there's not the same kind of difficulty getting your music heard, but there is the same kind of underwhelming support for black bands doing rock music. It is still difficult to get the center stage position, but at the same time, this generation of black musicians who want to do rock-oriented music don't tend to be that kind of guitar-oriented band anyway. The music has shifted in a different kind of way.

GOODISON: In what kind of way?

TATE: Sounds are just softer, not as influenced by punk and hardcore and metal. Definitely more influenced by some of the shoe-gazer British bands, like My Bloody Valentine, Cocktail Twins, just a lot more ethereal, and we were definitely into the rage aspect of rock. The rage side and then the improve side. So, a little different, but at the same token, I think when people think of "rock" they still think of skinny white guys with long hair and guitars.

GOODISON: Are the concerns that led you to starting the BRC still relevant?

TATE: Yeah, because it wasn't just about the resistance to black artists having record deals. That was a part of it, but it was also about the perception of who did what kind of music. Stereotypes still prevail for the most part. If you go to a site like *Pitchfork*, most of the black artists that they will review are doing hip hop, and there are a few folks who are doing some interesting things with electronica, electronic sounds, and vocals, who are kind of popping through. But there's a whole realm of other folks we know in New York who are definitely doing experimental stuff that never gets reviewed. Me'Shell N' degeochello would be at the top of the

list. For me, I find that the resistance is less musical and more existential, in the sense that black people who aren't doing hip hop, and who are kind of race-identified or black-identified, tend to have this repelling effect on the hipsters. It's a real subtle kind of racism.

GOODISON: It wasn't always like that though, was it?

TATE: Yeah. That's just something that prevails in life to a certain extent, and definitely in the arts. Whatever you might be doing conceptionally, I think it is more difficult to pop through, if what you're doing is seen as representing a connection to black struggle, to the struggles of black communities in America, and those issues and that drive. But things have shifted so that you don't necessarily have to go through those kinds of gatekeepers to get your stuff out, but we're not living in some post-racial integrationist cultural paradise. It's just still as it always has been. Black artists who are community identified have to create their own platforms and support base and means of production-ways to communicate.

GOODISON: One of the things you guys were trying to do with the BRC was just remind people that this is black music, rock.

TATE: After you've done something this long you've kind of made your point to the world that you're not going away. Although, inevitably, at least twice a year, someone will say well why does it have to be black rock and not just rock. Aesthetically that's true, but politically speaking, anytime in this country you put black in front of anything, it just gets more scary.

GOODISON: What are you working on now?

TATE: I'm trying to finish this book on James Brown. I'm about halfway there. That's a book I am contracted to do with publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Then I got a contract to do an anthology of my essays with Duke University Press. So, I'm going to finalize that. It probably won't be published until late next year, if I get everything in soon, but that's on the deck. Then I'm working on a book of science fiction stories. Really finishing. Then I'm going to teach a seminar course at Brown University this winter called "The History of Afro-Futurism." Burnt Sugar is going to do a tribute to Steely Dan's music in this building [Lincoln Center Atrium], right here, March 14th, and working with the BRC on the Gil Scott Heron shows coming up.

GOODISON: Why Steely Dan?

TATE: It's actually Vernon Reid's suggestion. He's going to be the musical director. He has always been a huge fan of that band, and a few years ago we actually did an interview about Steely Dan, in terms of the white Negro

aspects of their work, in my book *Everything But the Burden*. So, he suggested to me a couple years ago that Burnt Sugar do a Steely Dan project. We're working that out. One thing he really likes about them is their dialogue with black music and black culture, and their discourse around the notion of being the cynical world-weary hipster, who's kind of watching Western civilization fall to the ground. He thought that would be a really interesting take. As far as I know, I can't really think ... it's interesting. Steely Dan and Joni Mitchell are two artists that tons of black people love, but I can't think of anybody who's ever covered their music. De La Soul sampled, which is interesting in a really, really clever way, but in terms of covering that material you know they're one of those cult favorites among all these musically knowledgeable black folks.

When I posted it on *Facebook* that we'd be doing their music I got all these responses--"Great! Yeah!" It's like Joni Mitchell. It's not somebody you're necessarily going to have a conversation with everyone about, but with whom everybody is very intimately familiar with their music. It's like one of these secret thrills in the Bohemian black community.

GOODISON: Recently you were Louis Armstrong Visiting Professor at The Center for Jazz at Columbia University. You taught a course called "Black Art and Consciousness" about the role of music in black life and politics. What do you hope to do at Brown?

TATE: We're going to look at all these folks who represent black futurism or science fiction, musically, and in terms of literature and film as well. I've been reading science fiction since the third grade. So, I've always been drawn to all of that stuff. In some ways, there is an arc or trajectory that a lot of people go through, where you start out with comic books, and that leads to science fiction, and that leads to jazz or rock, and you're kind of interested in people doing operatic, visionary, or mythological takes on race and the future, or race and space, and technology. It permeates so much of black culture in the last thirty years or so. The first people I heard use digital technology in any kind of experimental exploratory way were definitely jazz artists and hip hop artists and dance artists. They just took to that stuff immediately. Kraftwerk [an electronic band], which is basically a German science fiction group, was immediately taken up by Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation group. The whole electro movement started with early hip hop, which was just about machine made music, and then that whole cyber connected interface between people and machines. Turntablism makes the technology do more than it was conceptually built for. I think all those things are definitely science fictional.

GOODISON: So, you would say black music has always been futuristic.

TATE: I would go so far as to say the existential black condition in America is very futurological, very future leaning. It's all about deliverance in its vision-post-emancipatory, post-liberation. It's very much about how do I get up out of here, into some idea of a utopia, or promise land, or even just another state of being. From an existentialist ontological perspective, it's all about becoming something other than supposedly slave or subjugated. It's like our version of post-human is becoming human. There's a way for people who are really just interested in the genre of science fiction to see all these parallels between where and how black people are situated inside of modern Western culture, and why there would be this incredible embrace, and attraction, to this whole notion of the future, or to like a mythological alternative to the present. So, dance cultures have definitely been a part of it. Electric boogie and break dancing--all of those things are so fundamentally science-fictional as expressions of activities.

GOODISON: What do you mean when you say that our version of post-human is becoming human?

TATE: We were brought here to function as if we were not human but tools, machines, disposable working parts. The laws of the land were perverted to support that inhumane assumption. Black people regaining a sense of self and subjectivity beyond that of slave, and garden tool, and essentially a non-human, is a mutation of a mutation. We were also bred to be superhuman, more than human, even in our endurance for taxing labor and suffering. So, becoming mortal represents a progression and regression for black Americans.

GOODISON: When you mention futurism, do you see this directly relating to modernization? Does living in an era of joblessness, deindustrialization, and hard times change anything? Especially when you think futurism suggests optimism, or does it?

TATE: Well, the history of science fiction has always engaged a dialectic of the dystopic and the utopic, especially if you think of classics like *Brave New World* and *1984* or Octavia Butler's Patternmaster series or Delany's *Dhalgren*. They all present us with futures where violence and progress go hand in hand. But now that we've arrived at the future that science fiction had been imagining in parts for decades--that of mood drugs, corporate nation states, global computer networks, mechanized warfare, megacities, genetic and prosthetic body modifications, etc.--we no longer have a forward moving futurism, which is why I call my class, "The History of Afro-Futurism." It's become more a historical subject than an ongoing prophetic futurological project. Largely I think because the aliens never came to see us, and we can't go see them due to the severe

limitations in our interstellar technological developments where human space flight is concerned. We're pretty much stuck here on our ass end of the galaxy and can't get out.

GOODISON: Okay, now about one of your major influences. In the process of writing your biography of James Brown, have you learned anything new about him that you didn't know before?

TATE: Almost everything. I found this with Michael Jackson as well. In writing about people who are really iconic and phenomenal in that way, there is a way in which they seem very familiar to you. They are like family. I feel like Michael is like a brother, James is like an uncle. I mean, even the way we talk about people.

GOODISON: Michael, James ...

TATE: Richard for Richard Pryor, Miles, Jimi—once the tribe takes you in the family you're on a first name basis. So, when you actually get into the hard facts of people's lives, and start separating truth from lie, or myth, they become even more astounding to you. James was somebody who was born in a log cabin in South Carolina, in a pine forest in 1933, and when he's fifteen he's sentenced to, I think, he got some crazy sentence, like seven, eight years, as an adolescent, for stealing a car. He was able to get out in four, and he started singing in a gospel group. He started singing with the Famous Flames. Three years after he gets out of prison, he has his first hit record, "Please, Please, Please."

One of the things I talk about is, I do this parallel timeline between him and Martin Luther King, because they're born relatively close to one another. Atlanta and Augusta. They couldn't have come from more different circumstances. Martin Luther King's father was taking the family to Germany to Martin Luther's village, that's how both of them went from being Michael King to Martin Luther King. When King is getting his divinity degree from Boston University, James is still in jail. But you fast forward to 1956, and the Montgomery rides, that's actually a birthing moment for both of them. Montgomery Boycott. "Please, Please, Please." You get to 1968 and the day that King was assassinated. James has a date in Boston, and he becomes the only person who can keep the city from exploding in flames. And he had definitely participated in the Civil Rights Movement in various ways. He was a participant in rallies and marches and fundraisers, and a donor, but he really becomes a political race leader in that moment. He becomes someone who in the aftermath of King's death is as important to the black community. That's incredibly fascinating.

And, then there's his drive. His control over his business, his enterprises, over his career. He was always pretty much his own manager

after a brief period in the 1950s. He pretty much ran his own show. He had advisors who worked for him, but it was never a situation like Elvis and the Colonel, or all the Motown artists under Barry Gordy. He was his own Colonel Tom Parker, his own Barry Gordy, and he was the artist and the choreographer. He was a millionaire. He was carrying a twenty-two-person entourage around by 1963, 1964. He was doing 330 dates a year. So, there's a way in which he worked, yet his belief was, he said, I'd rather have money than civil rights. Because, he said, if I have money, I can go across the street and buy myself some civil rights. And pretty much he's one of those people, like a lot of the jazz people, who existed in a way where they were their own equality. They were their own Civil Rights Movement in terms of opportunity, in terms of not having to deal with certain forms of discrimination.

GOODISON: Musically, who do you think were his predecessors?

TATE: There were tons of people in terms of gospel music who really influenced him. R&B music really begins with Ray Charles doing "What'd I Say," putting his church voice into American pop music, as early as 1951. Before then, that voice, if you listen to the vocal sound in black music, it's not the church sound. The church sound existed since the eighteenth century. Spirituals and all of that, but that was not in the popular music. Popular music was over here. The blues were kind of over there. And that's another voice, too. That's not a church voice. Bessie Smith, not a church voice. Billy Holiday's voice is not a church voice. All the jazz folks, the Sarah Vaughans, none of them. It's not that testifyin', preachin', pimp pastor voice. There are some blues people you can kind of hear it, but they're still on the other side of the street. That sound we associate with soul, you can hear it, if fully formed, in groups like the Soul Stirrers or the Dixie Hummingbirds. But it wasn't in pop, because that was considered the devil's music. So, James is just another cat singing gospel, and he thinks if he's gonna sing in a group and have some kind of career, then he's going to be singing gospel music, right. But then he's down in Georgia and Little Richard happens, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters happen, and a lot of guys just start saying, wow, as long as the church people don't find out, we can make some money, and meet some girls, and do whatever else on Saturday night, and come sing in the church on Sunday. That was the thing. So, Little Richard was a major influence on James.

If you listen to Little Richard, outside of the most well-known hits, if you listen to his body of work, outside of that stuff, you can hear his impact on James Brown and Otis Redding. I mean, James is screaming, and, in fact, at a certain period, Little Richard had left the area and went to LA to record, and he left behind all these performance dates, and Little Richard's manager hired James Brown to impersonate Little Richard. So,

there's a period of time when James spent a couple of weeks just screaming like Little Richard, but in his evolution he really didn't become the James Brown we know until six or seven years in the business, because he wasn't doing the up-tempo [songs], he was doing ballads. His first hits, like, for the first seven years of his career, were ballads. He didn't have a real up-tempo hit until *James Brown Live at the Apollo*. Then that album catapults him into another sphere economically and audience-wise. He'd developed his vocal sound, but that instrumental sound came later. That definitely comes when Pee Wee Ellis joins the band. So, the influences are everywhere. Mambo was an influence. Sangria, Sam Cooke, Ray Charles--because what he really wanted to do, and what he did, was he started working with more sophisticated musicians, with more of a background in jazz and R&B, and he really wanted to create [this new sound].

In a lot of ways, he's the real father of fusion--of jazz fusion--because Ray Charles kind of pursued it to a certain point, and then went in other directions, but James is the person who really took all of this information and this way of putting together this music from jazz, and then combining it with R&B and Soul in a really sophisticated way. Louis Jordan was one of his all-time favorites. When he was coming up in the 1940s, Louis had a string of about seventeen hits, and he was a great all-around entertainer. Played the saxophone, danced, jived around ... wrote these really great dance tunes. He was definitely a model too, for James, and was definitely on top of his business as well.

GOODISON: And what about you? Who are some of your great influences? I'm thinking Miles Davis and Hendrix.

TATE: In terms of what we're trying to do with Burnt Sugar, there's a generational influence, because the core of the band are these guys, like myself -Jared [Nickerson], Bruce [Mack], Flip [Barnes], Mikel [Banks]-who really came up in music in the 1970s, and that meant you listened to everything. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Stevie Wonder, Steely Dan, Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Marrakech New Orchestra, Chick Corea, Sun Ra, Parliament Funkadelic, and then everything that was happening in R&B. Al Green, LaBelle, Teddy Pendergrass. That period is just so rich in terms of all these different musical conceptions flourishing and being accessible live. The 1970s were just great as an era, if you really loved going out to see great bands doing live music. [This] was happening every night locally, and in terms of national acts coming through DC, I kind of tripped Quest Love of The Roots when I told him that, in the 1970s in DC, everything was a package tour. The Chitlin circuit still existed and pretty much existed all the way through to 1977. And there were local clubs and theaters where the main entertainment was like four, five bands on the same bill. One bill I remember vividly

was a band Mandrill, there was a band called Malo, there was Santana's Brother (Jorge), The Last Poets, and Bobby Womack, but another week it would be Parliament Funkadelic, WAR, Rufus and Chaka Kahn, and Sylvester. And, it was all pretty regular, and Quest was like, wow, so the same people came to see all of those bands. Yeah. It was the same audience. It hadn't become so Balkanized, as it is now, in terms of the kind of micro fandom which now exists.

GOODISON: Tell me about Burnt Sugar. You guys started up in 1999.

TATE: I was interested in seeing if you could put together a live band that had the flexibility of Miles Davis's studio Bitches Brew band, that also had that kind of split, or mixture of acoustic, electronic, and electric instrumentation. Electronic in that sense would have meant the studio mixing board itself, like the things you could do to the music, after it had been recorded, in terms of echo, or reverb, or loops; kind of treating the sound in a particular way, except by the time you get to our era, people can do that with foot pedals, or laptops, or turntables. So, I wanted to take contemporary improvisers who played all kinds of instruments, from the most traditional to the most recently invented, and I wanted to use Butch Morris's conduction method to kind of hold it all together. Because Butch was really the only person I've seen come up with a method for conducting in an ensemble of musicians from any period, style, or culture and making everyone like an equal participant, kind of forcing everybody to think on their feet and to figure out how their sound could contribute to the group sound, and it doesn't really happen that much. I mean, most people who put groups together are generally trying to work within a particular sound or style. Some people have several bands so they can kind of jump from sonic signature to sonic signature, but what Butch was more interested in was what I'm more interested in, which is the whole notion of the band as a palette, as something that has an array of colors, that you can kind of blend and combine, recombine at will, and kind of challenge people to find a vocabulary within their own vocabulary that works in that situation. That's kind of the theoretical beginning of the whole thing.

We put together about ten of us at the beginning, most of the people I knew for years. A few people that were more recent associates, but I said, yeah, let's just go into this studio at least once a week and just jam out, experiment, and see how it feels. So, we did that for a while, and then a friend of mine, Shariff Simmons, got a chance to book stuff at the old CBGB lounge basement space, and he knew we'd been doing this thing-- "Yo, y'all ready to do a gig?" and we said, sure, why not. That was kind of the beginning of it. It was like October 1999, and then in December we went into the studio and recorded the first record, the *Blood on the Leaf* record, and then we got this huge grant [from Arts International]--7,500 dollars, to be doled out over a three year period, for European touring. But

we also used it to make records, because one thing I was really fixated on was producing a lot of records as a way of keeping the band's name and its recognition in the public eye. I knew we didn't have marketing and publicity, so when you don't have that stuff, you have to find another way to hype yourself and kind of keep people familiar with you, and keep working, keep getting better gigs, better paying gigs, and it's been good. We've been consistently growing and have gotten better opportunities, better venues to perform at, so we've been able to play at pretty much a lot of places over the states, and a lot of places in Europe too, in that ten year period, and, of course, these last two or three years, we've done these interesting collaborations: first with Melvin Van Peebles, and then at the Apollo around the James Brown thing. The David Bowie thing we did here in the atrium, working with the producer Bill Bragin, who is also going to do the Steely Dan thing. So, we've developed these two really different profiles of the band. One is repertory, and then another is, like, completely off the cuff improvisational madness.

GOODISON: Could you say a bit more about Butch Morris?

TATE: I've known Butch since the first person he used to do conduction for was a jazz saxophonist called David Murray. They're both from California. They both moved here from LA in the mid-1970s. Butch came as a coronetist and composer. He was really well known for doing that. For those two things—for his writing and for his trumpet coronet playing. But he was developing the conduction thing all along, because that was really his passion. He wanted to bring that into improvisational music, because nobody had done it to the degree that he developed it. There were definitely people like Sun Ra, Frank Zappa, and Miles even. They used cues. But nobody had actually turned conducting itself into an improvisational form, and that's essentially what he's done. He's created a system that allows him to use the whole thing, with the same flexibility that anybody in the band uses their instrument. Like, the band could be a hundred pieces, and they all become like an instrument of his will. He's got enough cues, I think he said he's got about fifty cues, and he can make the music do all these different kinds of things. Basically, he's developed this system over the last thirty years for conducting improvisers, and it gives you the same flexibility in terms of rearranging the music that you may have say, sitting at a piano, or writing a score, or music samples, or moving stuff around on ProTunes. All that kind of stuff. So, it's kind of like a manual way of doing a lot of things people do digitally or at home when they have time and space just to focus on writing.

GOODISON: Is this your first time using improvisation to this extent?

TATE: There was always improvisation. My friend Mikel [Banks], who

was the lead singer for my band Women in Love, said because the band would rehearse for hours a certain way, and then we'd get to a gig and we'd be trying to figure out ways to flip it, to do more than what we had just rehearsed, there was always that kind of tension. He said to me, after a certain period of frustration, your problem is you need five bands. And it just took me five or six years to figure out how to have the five bands in one band. The thing with conduction is, it allows you to have the tightness of rehearsed music and the freedom of improvisation at the same time, because you can be so specific when you want to change something, and you can get things, really hard clear endings. Dynamic endings.

GOODISON: Is this a really different experience, something you're enjoying?

TATE: Yeah, I've been doing this for ten years now, and the thing I find is, it's not great all the time. You have good nights and bad nights, like anybody else. Sometimes you're on, sometimes you're not. And generally I find, too, in New York, except for Joe's Pub because they have such a great sound system, I think we do better conceptions outside of New York. Because outside of New York we play theaters, so there are monitor mixes where everyone can hear themselves and everybody else. Whereas in New York, you got like seventeen people on the stage, and there might be four monitors, but only two of them work, and the audience isn't necessarily getting all the nuances of what you're hearing as well. But, that said, it's still a pretty exciting way to work for sure.

GOODISON: Your music shows an awareness of history.

TATE: A writer friend, Jon Caramanica, says he considers our music living criticism. What he's suggesting is that the major influence on the band is the way that I think as a writer, and I think that's very true. Relative to the people in my band, I have pretty limited musical skills as an instrumentalist. I think I'm good at writing, composing lyrics and songs and beats and stuff on the computer, but the people I work with are virtuosos as instrumentalists. You can give them anybody's album and they can learn that stuff in a day. That's what New York musicians do at a certain level. That's their bread and butter. I never really wanted to be that kind of cat. I just wanted to know enough, to play the kind of stuff that I was kind of hearing in my head, and just to compose.

GOODISON: Do you study history?

TATE: Music history. The musical history was really something I was obsessed with when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.

I really wanted to know the whole history of African American music, going back to minstrelsy, through to ragtime, to early jazz. I used to listen to Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson--all those cats--religiously, and then all the styles. When I was a serious record collector, I would just have serious representation of each decade, and all the styles that were prevalent in that decade were in my collection. It just meant anybody who was anybody in a particular period, I had their music. Those bebop cats, I had all the music by all those trumpeters, all the major saxophone players, all the major pianists. And with jazz, the whole thing is like listening enough, so that you know each person's sound: the bass player, the drummer, the piano player. You know with him, some cases one note, some cases four bars. That's the whole thing. Unlike now, it was really a prerequisite if you wanted to have a career. No matter how well you played, you had to have your own sound. You just had to have an identifiable sound. Your sound had to have your personality. I got to be encyclopedic like that, about musicians and their sounds, the nuances, and their peculiarities, of each of the major players, from each decade, and each particular genre, and so forth. And, then, I was always looking for cats. I was always drawn to people who were playing something you'd never heard before, and that's the attraction to Parliament Funkadelic and Miles, also Sun Ra and the Art Ensemble. You could hear the historical in what they were doing, but you could hear the future, too. Whatever I did musically, I wanted to add that tension between the past and the future.

GOODISON: Which brings me to *Everything But the Burden* where you address commodification, as I hear you talk about this desire to create something so individual. Is this still a concern?

TATE: I think hip hop has really become a zone, in terms of the music, not in terms of the rapping, because that's been at a standstill for about ten years now. Nicki Minaj is about the most interesting person in terms of a new style, a new sound. Everybody else who's interesting is really somebody from the 1990s or the early 2000s. But in terms of someone who is really interesting, just in sound and style, she's kind of the first MC who has come along in the last ten years where you can say, yeah, she got her own thing. But in terms of music though, the thing is, other than having beats, literally having a steady beat, and even that can be violated or flipped in interesting ways, there're no boundaries to hip hop composition in terms of what kinds of things you can put together, and some of them that's just because of ignorance----or what I like to call ign'ance. It's not just ignorance, but then it is also kind of knowingly manipulating, or forcing some things to go together in a way that just sounds wrong, but just feels so right, and

when you get to somebody who's really creatively in a zone, like J Dilla, where they're just working without boundaries, with what kind of sounds and what kind of vibe goes together, you get something that's really orchestral.

You were talking about influences. Probably for Burnt Sugar, my biggest influence is really some of the best DJs I've heard since I've been in New York. People who can really mix, people who really have that skill where you could just randomly give them like thirty records for a day, and you give the same thirty records to somebody else and they're going to give you a symphony. When they get up in the club, and you might only hear like two seconds of something, and they're going to move. When you hear people like DJ Premier and Bambaataa, some of the house DJs I used to hear in New York in the 1990s--in some ways, the measure of a truly great DJ is somebody who can rock a party without playing a familiar record. Keep people on the floor without playing a familiar record, and that's just the pure mixology. But that's a big influence in terms of just trying to use conduction to create an evening, or a concert of a set of music that completely flows under its own initiative or energy, or a kind of will, like the music itself is pushing further and further out.

GOODISON: You still have faith in hip hop?

TATE: You can go anywhere in the world and people are developing a form of hip hop that speaks to their condition, where the youth is. It is still the voice of youth culture around the world. I was a youth when it started. I'm no longer a youth. The music's evolved. It's no longer something that is a constant in my life anymore, and I don't necessarily need to listen to everything. I mean, I no longer even have professional reasons to just stay on top of things, but I hear things as they come to me and there's still vital music being made. I think one of the things that people find it difficult to process--people who were there from the beginning whether it's a particular movement, a music genre, or an art form--is that there is a point in time when you really know everybody who is really doing anything in the thing, and those are the only people in the world who are really interested as a craft or an art form. You kind of have it to yourself for a while. And that might be less than a hundred people at one point, and then, as we saw with hip hop once it goes national, once it goes international, goes viral, goes global, once the technology changes it's like you kind of move from that hundred people to a hundred million people who are following it.

Maybe a quarter of those or a sixth of those, I don't know, or an eight of those are trying to do it in some kind of way, and that takes you down the path of diminishing returns because with anything there's a general rule

that five percent of the stuff is going to be good and the rest, the other ninety-five, is going to be crap. So, we just got inundated, and definitely with the media the mediocre stuff is going to dominate and that's in the interest of the music industry for the mediocre stuff to dominate because they would rather sell the mediocre version of a sound than have to go out and find great artists. When hip hop was really exceptional in terms of the artistry, the artists were the ones really defining what it was week-to-week, record-to-record, vibe-to-vibe. Then once the business figured out formulas in it, then they do what they do with everything. They make it monochromatic. They reduce things to stereotypes and faint echoes of something that was once great.

GOODISON: So, do you think with Burnt Sugar you've been able to successfully get that digitalized effect you like?

TATE: I wouldn't say it's the digital effect. I would say, it's more turntablism, which is really about being able to ... It's like the great DJs, like Barn or Flash or Theodore, they really kind of predicted the way break beats and loops and things would become such a dominant sound. They were doing that with their hands. Turntablists are instrumentalists too. Hip hop has introduced three new kinds of instrumentalists into music: turntablists, beat boxers, and MCs.

GOODISON: In your earlier music I saw the influence of Hendrix. Does his legacy still live in your work or in that of your contemporaries?

TATE: I think people think about Hendrix as just being an influence on guitar players, but he really changed the way that music sounded in general. If you go into the studio now, in some ways, what's gonna come out is going to bear the stamp, or the imprint, of James Brown and Jimi Hendrix. I think they are the two most dominant influences in terms of the way music sounds. Because anybody who is doing anything with a break beat, you're clearly following in their footsteps. So, anyone who is changing the sound of something that came in a signal change, it sounded like one thing ... and anyone who is doing post-production on the sound of their music, echo, reverb, flange, wah-wah, whatever, like anything that's between the instrument and the take, the file--Jimi Hendrix is up in your thing. There's that aspect of his influence, and then there is influence in terms of just being someone who worked in sonic extremes. He's just part of that generation of people. Like all the horn players who were around in Sun Ra's band--Coltrane and Farrell Sanders. [Hendrix] kind of took that because he was in the East Village at the same time. So, I'm sure he heard and took that. And he was always interested in recreating these huge industrial sounds. Like the sound he heard the wind make when he jumped out of airplanes. The sound those jet engines made. And, I'm sure, the

sound you hear of your own body dropping through space when you're parachuting. He was a paratrooper. He did like twenty-six jumps in the army.

GOODISON: Hendrix?

TATE: Yeah. He was in the army in Kentucky when he left Seattle. So that was always in his head. And, then, he also wanted to recreate what he imagined to be the sounds of spaceships and water sounds--all these kind of huge, roaring, environmental sounds. He wanted those in the music too. And a lot of music we listen to has just been treated in that way, and he was so much the instigator of that.

GOODISON: That futuristic thing again.

TATE: Yeah, then there's that. The obsession with imagining yourself as, like, a starship captain, alien, underwater, all that kind of stuff. That's the interesting thing too. It's like the three main people who we think in terms of a futurology in black music--Sun Ra, Hendrix, and George Clinton--they all had these mythologies. One set of mythologies that dealt with space, and another one that dealt with underwater, kind of as the other notion of space, or interspace, or outer space on earth.

GOODISON: As a music critic, what's your relationship with Amiri Baraka?

TATE: It all starts with him for me. I read his book *Black Music* when I was about fourteen, and that's what set me off in terms of reading criticism and writing criticism, and then being a serious jazz head. Every writer can talk about the book that changed their life. That's the one for me. And, then, I'm just such a huge fan of his poetry too. He's my favorite American poet of all time. My favorite black poet. One of my favorite twentieth-century poets. And he's another science fiction comic book fan, because that's all in his work too.

GOODISON: Are you writing any songs now?

TATE: The next record is going to have beaucoup lyrics because I really stopped writing lyrics pretty seriously around the 1990s, and just went into more of an instrumental direction. But now I find them coming back. Some of it is because we have such great singers in the band. Because the band is going through these interesting permutations where you started out with three guitar players and no horns. And then, at a certain point, we looked up and we had eight horn players on stage. Generally, since we did the James Brown show, and the thing with Melvin [Van Peebles], we now have about

five or six singers associated with the band. Three horn players. One or two guitar players. The band part has gotten kind of more basic, but the singer part has become more heavily populated, which for me meant that I had to think about doing some other things in terms of presentation, in terms of repertoire. I like hearing vocalists do wordless kinds of things, but I really find, for me, vocalists are more interesting when they're working with lyrics, when they're interpreting lyrics. I think lyrics are for singers, what scales or harmonies are for instrumentalists. Their place is to really kind of dig in and do something really creative from an interpretive standpoint. This year you're going to hear us do less repertory music, less covers, and more original stuff. I'm really committed to us doing more of our own music when you see us live in the next year. That's definitely on the agenda.

GOODISON: What's your songwriting practice like? I notice some words come back. For example, "chains and water" from the song "Blacker Than That" from your previous band, *Women in Love*. The words reappear on *Negrocit*y, your last album with *Burnt Sugar*.

TATE: *Women in Love*, that band had a theme, so it was easy for me to write all these songs that were either about women, or they were sung from a woman's point of view. And when I had Helga [Davis] in, it became pronounced and a lot easier to write from the point of view aspect, because she's just so strong as a personality, and she's one of those people who just has so many emotions and characters, personas. You could give her five songs, and really have five different kinds of women's points of view, or characters, and she could play them, enact them, dramatize them all. Now the process is just a little more random. It's a little more amorphous. I just listen to the tracks and see what comes up. But I don't find myself thinking so much about whether it's a man or woman. Because I write so much stuff on computer now, too, the process is a little different. Whereas I used to develop things on the guitar, and then I kind of figured out what the lyrics were that worked for that particular set of changes or riffs, and then it would be kind of interesting. Maybe the first half of the year, like all these different instrumental ideas will come together on guitar. The best ones will stick. And then the second half of the year I'll just figure out what the lyrics are. You just sit with these pieces of music for a while, and then sit and say, okay, what's the lyric, and just kind of get fixated on that. I could be anywhere out walking and I'll have a riff in my head, and then some lyrics will come together for it. Now it's kind of the same thing, free association really. I'll be walking around with the iPod, and I'll be listening to these different instrumental tracks, and one will just start to mesmerize me. Then I'll get an idea for something and develop it. It happens fairly quickly. Once I figure it out, like a lot of poets will tell

you, the first line is like a gift, and then once you have that, then it already has an identity to it. It's already going in a certain direction.

GOODISON: Is there a singer-songwriter you really admire?

TATE: I would say Nona Hendryx, and then Chocolate Genius. I say that because those are two people who, as literate black thinkers and lyricists, I think we share a certain way of processing music, and the things we read, and politics. So, they are real inspirations for how to blend your literacy with music making. If you're a reader, you can't *not* be that when you write. You're not going to necessarily write or think about a song in the same way as someone who is trying to write an R&B hit. Maybe not an R&B writer today, but definitely a lot of the Motown writers were just so immaculately literate: Smokey Robinson and Holland-Dozier-Holland. People don't think about it. Except for P-Funk. Probably, when you think of R&B in the last twenty-five years, you don't necessarily think about great lyrics. You think about it in terms of hip hop, but not in terms of traditional songs. So, in terms of just contemporaries of mine who definitely have all this, and I also had this influence from Motown, from Dylan. People like George Clinton, Terry Callier, and Curtis Mayfield are great poetic writers. Sly, Nona, and Mark Anthony. And Chocolate Genius is high up there.

GOODISON: I know writers who envy what the musicians are able to do.

TATE: The writers who came [up] in the post bebop era, from the mid-1940s to the present, really envy, they aspire to, the condition of jazz in their writing and they wanted to have that kind of control over form and technique and narrative. Musicians who were the models seemed the most developed as artists, and the most liberated too. Kind of limitless, and magical, and capable of beauty, extreme beauty, in any given moment, and I think that prevailed all the way up until the hip hop era. Because I think that the best hip hop lyrics really got to all these things that the writers were trying to get to, in terms of using language in a way that was as elegant and free as musicians. As creative, as concise, and emotive. The lyrics in great hip hop really are the melody, the harmony, the drum solo. But I think that's changed now. I think now my guess would be that the visual would be more dominant in terms of black writing to come. The most evolved, more revolutionary, or innovative writing to come, will be inspired by visual information.

GOODISON: What do you mean by visual information?

TATE: Paintings, sculptures, installations, film, television, *YouTube*. And because hip hop is such a dominant influence, because the writing is so visual and so pop culture savvy, too, its ability to really speak to the moment with just a phrase or line tells you this is clearly living in the modern world. Nobody would have said that that way five years ago, ten years ago, or twenty years ago. I was listening to this freestyle battle between these two Asian kids on *YouTube*, and like half their references were from Kung Fu movies and the other half were from video games. That is so indicative of a modern consciousness, like a modern sensibility, and so it is going to be interesting to see what happens when people emerge who are novelists and they are able to translate that kind of media savvy. It's already happening, actually. Someone like Junot Diaz does that. Paul Beatty does that. Colson Whitehead is doing that. When I think about them, well, Paul to some extent, he's kind of in-between the visual and musical generation, but I think the writers who follow in the footsteps of Junot (who is obsessed with comic books and video games) and Colson (who based his latest novel on zombie movies) are definitely going to be more media and visual inspired.

Baraka was someone who was incredibly inspired by music, but who definitely created his own form in response to it. I don't think he was someone who felt inadequate as a writer, next to the kind of musicians he was inspired by. He definitely didn't feel like the musicians were more potent than him. But it's not a lot of people who have that kind of fluidity in their craft, in their vision, in feeling where they feel they could be that in control of the nuances of their writing. I think a lot of writers struggle, and I think this is true of a lot of artists too. I think a lot of artists struggle to be coherent; whereas I feel our best people, like the De La Soul cats, and Basquiat, Jimi, and Miles Davis, they don't mind going outside the realm of the senses. They don't mind going into the realm of the senseless to get at something that just speaks to them in an expressive way, in the same way that a painter like de Kooning, Jackson Pollack, or Basquiat would. They're not obsessed with this whole notion of everything making sense, but it makes for more interesting work, because for you as a listener or viewer, you get to enter into this chaos and try to make your own sense of it. I think a lot of people just feel tight when they're doing their thing. They don't feel they have that much latitude or license that they can get away with that. I mean, they are inspired by it, but when I look at a lot of people's visual art, I can see they're just taming the madness. Wangechi Mutu is definitely an exception to that. I think Nicolene Thomas is an exception to that. Not to the same degree, because Wangechi--she just doesn't have any boundaries to her thing. But it's kind of rare to find an artist, a black artist, who will not be afraid to be that psychedelic in their expression.

GOODISON: Are there writers who intrigue you?

TATE: Samuel Delany, and then all these Latin American writers from what they called the Latin American boom, from the 1970s and 1980s.

GOODISON: The magic realists?

TATE: Definitely. There's a whole new generation of folks who are doing more realist magic. I think of people like Roberto Bolano from Chile. He writes in a way that's really about social observation in life, in a nineteenth century French literature kind of way. It's also got this alternate reality kicking up inside of it. There's something still really spooky about the way he tells a story, or creates characters, or creates situations. But the thing is, for an artist, poetry is in some ways the most liberated art form. You can do whatever you want to do in a poem, with no pressure. People feel a lot more pressure in other art forms to do things that are more coherent, things that are more marketable. There's probably some of that in poetry, but at the same time, there are so many people doing really different, creative things in poetry, where the form itself just doesn't feel handicapped, or hand tied. When I go into galleries, go to concerts, you can definitely tell everyone is bringing what they think is their A game, and I'm more interested in folks willing to show the animals that died on the table. Don't bring in the cure; bring in the vivisection. Bring in the one that went mad after you injected him, not the one that was healed.

GOODISON: Too polished or clean.

TATE: Just too overworked. I feel like a lot of people's stuff is one joke. What they call one joke art. Once you see it, you don't need to really see it again. OK, I see.

GOODISON: You've exhibited artwork. Are you working on anything?

TATE: No. Not visual stuff. I think I'll make another film this year. Later in the year, because I don't feel driven by music. Well, it's more like, I have so much music that no one's ever heard at this point, that we kind of spent three years being this great cover band, but in that time, I've been developing all these things that will define the next sound of Burnt Sugar. But it's already sitting there, waiting to be activated, so I don't really have to think about coming up with any more interesting new music.

GOODISON: Do you know what the film will be about?

TATE: I started developing a couple of things. Sometimes, for me, things come from titles first. So, I was walking in my neighborhood uptown [Harlem]. People will write some manifesto and just post it on the wall. So,

someone made this acronym out of USA, but then changed it to Under Satan's Authority. I was like, I'm gonna use that for a title. I started writing that, and it's in the vein of an X-File. There's a woman who is a psychic investigator. There's a shadowy demonic force that's trying to move from one dimension into ours, and her husband actually gets kind of caught up into it, and she has to try and retrieve him. That's the backbone of the thing, but I've only gotten a couple of pages in on that.

GOODISON: You did one before.

TATE: Yeah, that's called *Black Body Radiation*. I kind of imagined a futuristic thing. You can see a trailer on *YouTube*. It's a thirty-minute piece. It looks at this post-apocalyptic New York where there's this kind of nomadic faction, and there's this fundamentalist Muslim faction who are uptown, and it's about the conflict between them. It was my first film, so a lot of it is kind of janky to me. I was more interested in the process of making the film than in the story itself. I just wanted to go through that and learn whatever I could about the process. So, I did. I feel like I'm ready now to really do a painstaking film, where you get all the shots to tell the story in the way you want to. Get the right actors, and cast it. All of that stuff. I just wanted to go through that guerilla experience the first time. And there are places where it did come together. Now I want to do something where the result looked as serious as the effort that went into making it.