

APOLLO

**The Apollo Presents the World Premiere of
The Blues and Its People,
A New Commission By Trumpeter Russell Gunn Celebrating the
60th Anniversary of *Blues People* by Amiri Baraka**

Premieres February 18, 2023

**Featuring Seven New Music Works With Russell Gunn, His band The Royal
Krunk Jazz Orchestra and Special Guests**



Image: Courtesy the artist

Harlem, NY—November 16, 2022—The Apollo continues its 2022–23 season theme of The Next Movement with *The Blues and Its People*, a new commissioned work composed by Grammy-nominated trumpeter **Russell Gunn**, in celebration of the 60th anniversary of the acclaimed book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* written by writer, poet, and political activist **Amiri Baraka**. *The Blues and Its People*, premiering on **Saturday, February 18, 2023 at 8:00 pm EST**, features seven new music works and selected readings from the perennial text. Special guests include Grammy nominated jazz vocalist **Jazzmeia Horn**, Grammy award-winning vibraphonist **Stefon Harris**, trombonist **Craig Harris**, saxophonist **Oliver Lake**, West African Djembe drummer **Weedie Braimah**, Piano Prince of New Orleans **Davell Crawford**, and poet **Jessica Care Moore**. **Tickets go on sale to the general public on Friday, November 18.**

Baraka's *Blues People* explores the evolutions of African American music from slavery to Bebop, which was contemporary jazz in 1963, examining how the story of Black life in America can be traced through the evolution of Black music.

“As an organization that champions Black artists and the immense impact that these artists and their music have had and continue to have on American culture, we are excited to commission Russell Gunn to create a timeless work that celebrates the important work of Baraka and the exploration it provides of the

African American experience through music while considering the future of contemporary culture,” said **Apollo Executive Producer Kamilah Forbes**.

Commissioned by the Apollo, acclaimed jazz trumpeter **Russell Gunn** has composed and will perform seven new songs inspired by *Blues People* with his Atlanta-based, 24-member Royal Krunk Jazz Orchestra, whose sound blends traditional big band jazz music with rhythm and blues and southern hip-hop. Excerpts from the book along with other related material on Black culture and history will be woven in throughout the night, and additional narrators, poets, and musical guests will accompany the evening.

Blues People traces the music created by African Americans once they arrived in America and builds a thesis that Black culture developed alongside the music created and cultivated. Baraka examines how cultural and societal events impacted music and vice versa, such as the changes of the African American experience from slavery to emancipation, the link between African music and the music of “work songs” that were common in countries in Africa but transformed during slavery, how Euro-American Christianity merged with African religious music to form gospel music, and how emancipation merged with the struggle for economic and societal equality led to the blues, which eventually birthed jazz and bebop.

Russell Gunn is known as a pioneer in blending jazz and hip-hop genres, and for his extensive work with Grammy-award winning jazz artists and groups such as Wynton Marsalis, Buckshot Lafonque led by Branford Marsalis, Marcus Miller, D’Angelo, CeeLo Green, and Maxwell. Gunn and the Royal Krunk Jazz Orchestra will pay homage to the expanse of Black music, past, present, and future, while highlighting the basic premise of Baraka’s work.

Amiri Baraka, aka LeRoi Jones (b. New Jersey, 1934; d. New Jersey, 2014) was a prolific and polarizing writer and poet with a career spanning more than 50 years. He was recognized for his strident social criticism and works that explored themes of Black liberation and racism. Considered a founding member of the Black Arts Movement in American literature during the 1960s and 70s, his works have been described as defining texts for African American culture as one of the most respected and published Black writers of his generation. Baraka spent three years in the U.S. Air Force and studied at Rutgers University, Howard University, Columbia University, and The New School.

More information on the event can be found at apollotheater.org/event/the-blues-and-its-people.

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ABOUT THE APOLLO

The legendary Apollo—the soul of American culture—plays a vital role in cultivating emerging artists and launching legends. Since its founding, the Apollo has served as a center of innovation and a creative catalyst for Harlem, the city of New York, and the world.

With music at its core, the Apollo's programming extends to dance, theater, spoken word, and more. This includes the world premiere of the theatrical adaptation of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* and the New York premiere of the opera *We Shall Not Be Moved*; special programs such as the blockbuster concert *Bruno Mars Live at the Apollo*; *100: The Apollo Celebrates Ella*; and the annual *Africa Now!* Festival. The non-profit Apollo is a performing arts presenter, commissioner, and collaborator that also produces festivals and large-scale dance and musical works organized around a set of core initiatives that celebrate and extend the Apollo's legacy through a contemporary lens, including the *Women of the World (WOW)* Festival as well as other multidisciplinary collaborations with partner organizations.

Since introducing the first *Amateur Night* contests in 1934, the Apollo has served as a testing ground for new artists working across a variety of art forms and has ushered in the emergence of many new musical genres—including jazz, swing, bebop, R&B, gospel, blues, soul, and hip-hop. Among the countless legendary performers who launched their careers at the Apollo are James Brown, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Gladys Knight, Luther Vandross, H.E.R., D'Angelo, Lauryn Hill, Machine Gun Kelly, and Miri Ben-Ari; and the Apollo's forward-looking artistic vision continues to build on this legacy. For more information about the Apollo, visit www.ApolloTheater.org.

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