

R.I.P. Greg Tate

Journalist, author, musician, band leader and co-founder of the Black Rock Coalition Greg Tate has died at age 64. Tate is recognized as the godfather of hip-hop journalism for his writing in the pages of the *Village Voice* that started in 1981. His articles were some of the earliest serious writings about the genre that was considered a fad during its commercial beginnings. Tate's prose was intellectually sophisticated and poetic but grounded by his insight into the people's cultural expression and political needs. He famously stated that "There is no such thing as alternative hip-hop because the only alternative to hip-hop is is dead silence and we all know such silence signifies a lack of breath." When the music industry establishment propped Eminem up as the savior of rap, something the Detroit rapper never said or believed himself, Tate chided the notion by explaining how silly it was because "The poor beleaguered masses needed to hear it from Malcolm X, not Howdy Doody." He could be comical in his criticism but the observations were dead-on and serious. He always eloquently summarized the pleasure and the problems of marketing Black music through the lense of an industry riddled with America's lasting racial, economic and social problems.

In 1985 he responded to the issue of African-Americans being musically pigeonholed by the industry and formed the Black Rock Coalition with Vernon Reid and Konda Mason. Their goal was to create community for Black artists who wanted to create and support rock music. The coalition became a place for artists to share ideas and express themselves outside of the rigidity of mainstream music that had little room for Black rockers. Reid's Living Colour would have success in the '80s with their hit "Cult Of Personality." The BRC was and still is a nurturing ground for many artists and they celebrated their 35th anniversary in 2020 with a four-day celebration of

concerts, panels and discussions.Â Tate's first book of essays *Flyboy In The Buttermilk: Essays On Contemporary America* came out in 1992 and is a classic work on African-American politics and art. He authored two more books including one on whites' debt to Black creativity and a verbally dense tome about Jimi Hendrix. When he wasn't scribing for the *Village Voice* he shared his thoughts on a wide range of Black art for publications like *Vibe* and *The New York Times*.Â

The self-proclaimed 'Mayor of Bohemia' started his own band Burnt Sugar in 1999. The group of ragtag artists and musicians formed a funky noise machine inspired by Miles Davis, Butch Morris, Sun Ra, A Band Of Gypsies and Bad Brains. Tate was also a guitarist and he was a member of the band and he directed them using Morris's conduction to give the band its cues. Their more than one dozen albums of eclectic post soul power comes with electrifying live shows that would sometimes be performed by Burnt Sugar's caramelized nucleus Rebellum.Â Their [Angels Over Oakanda](#) was released this past fall. Burnt Sugar presented their version of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* soundtrack in Brooklyn and the film's legendary director Melvin Van Peebles, who also passed this year, was in attendance. Greg Tate most recently appeared in Questlove's award-winning documentary *Summer Of Soul* released this past summer. He also gave possibly his last interview to [NPR](#) about defunct jazz label Strata-East.Â

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Black Rock Coalition Formative Years

[Vox Verite – “Black Rock Coalition: Formative Years”](#) from [LiveWired](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Greg Tate, Angelo Moore and others speak about the early days of the Black Rock Coalition and the conundrum of Black people and the rock music industry.