

Mural Artist Packs Passion into Work

continued ▲ from Front

historical figures as pioneer Moses Harris, cowboy Bill Pickett of Centralia, Wash., founder George Washington, and early woman lawyer Beatrice Cannaday.

A mural on Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, on property owned by Irvington Covenant Church, was nearly lost when the late pastor Henry Greenidge wanted to tear down the structure it was painted on. "The only thing he liked about it was the portrait of Dr. King," Shamsud-Din recalls. That part of the mural was added by another artist.

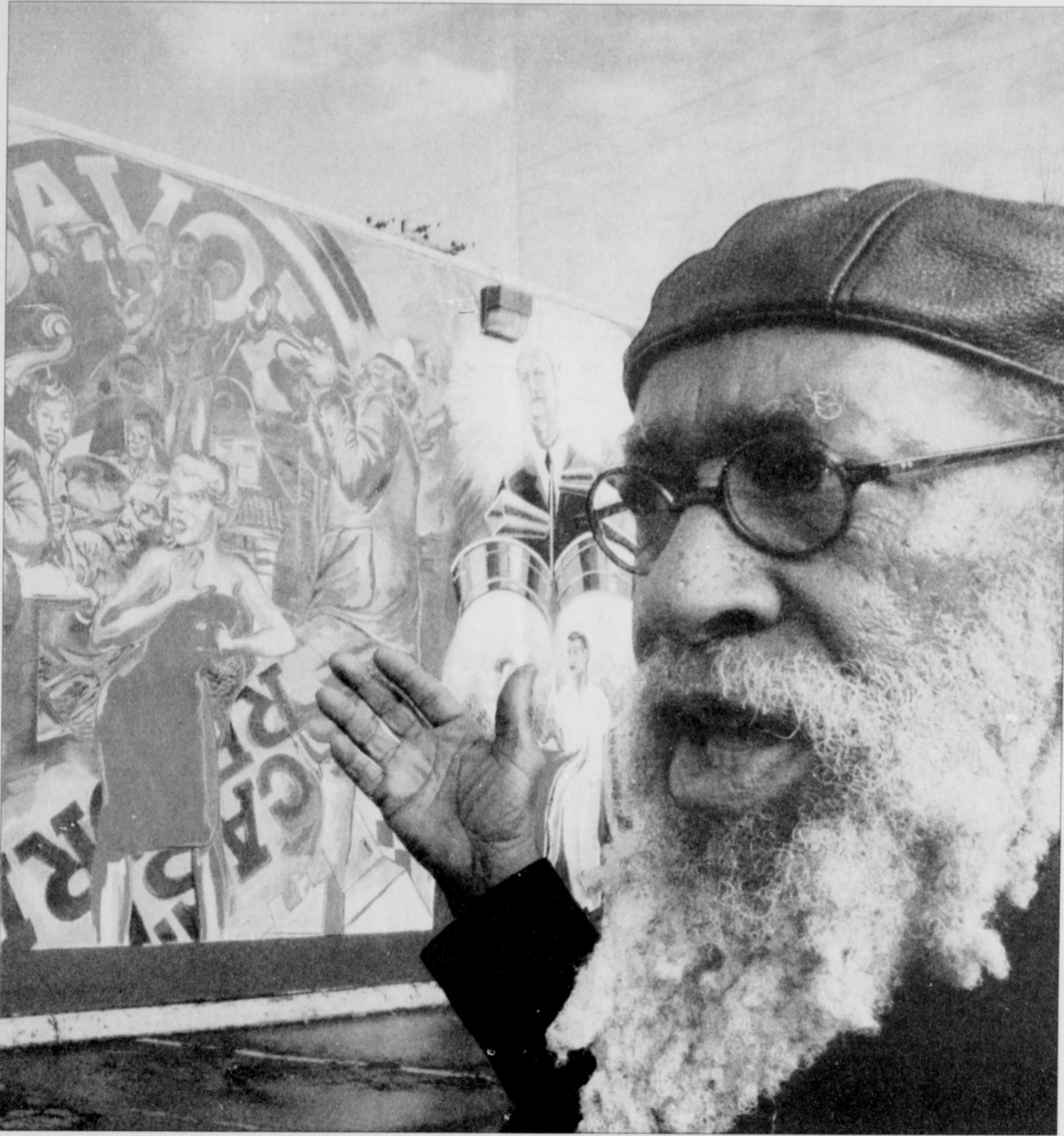
Shamsud-Din's latest work is a powerful mural with brilliant colors on the south wall of the Portland Musician's Union Hall at 325 N.E. 20th Ave. For him, it sends a message of another sort of injustice: inadequate funding for the arts.

The musician's union partnered with the Mural Project, which is seeking to promote public art, for the commission. The Regional Arts and Culture Council awarded a grant of \$15,000 for the project and selected Shamsud-Din and three other artists to carry it out.

"I love it," union president Bruce Fife says of the completed mural. "Some things jump out at you from a distance, then you see other details when you get up close." He adds, "For Isaka, not only were there challenges to draw the mural, but to come up with the money for it. That's not unlike what musicians must deal with."

"We spent \$56 per square foot on that mural for materials alone," Shamsud-Din says. "We lost money on that." RACC dispenses only \$50,000 a year for public art in the Portland metropolitan area whereas Joliet, Ill., a city of just 100,000, spends \$300,000 on public art, he says.

The team is still seeking donations for the project through their



Isaka Shamsud-Din explains the significance of the mural he recently completed on Northeast 20th Avenue at the Portland Musician's Union Hall. He has multiple works around the city that speak to issues of justice and cultural life in America.

PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

organization, Paint a Difference. They can be reached at 503-232-1671.

Shamsud-Din's own Civil

Rights heroes reflect his background. They include Stokely Carmichael, James Forman and John Lewis of the Student Non-

Violent Coordinating Committee (Shamsud-Din worked for 10 months for SNCC as a field secretary in Stuttgart, Ark.); plus A.

Phillip Randolph and the Honorable Elijah Mohammed. Of the latter he says, "I would put him right up there with King. His ideas

were in the speeches of the Black Panthers and Jesse Jackson.

Shamsud-Din was one of 10 children of a Texas sharecropper. After nearly being lynched, his father came to Portland to work in the Kaiser shipyards, and then sent for the rest of his family. His family witnessed the Vanport Flood, which Shamsud-Din believes was a conscious effort to disperse a multi-racial community that was no longer wanted. Nor was this the only example of racism he endured.

"We could only swim in the Peninsula Park pool on Sundays, and we couldn't swim at Jantzen Beach at all," he recalls. "There were no black cab or bus drivers."

His first art project was commissioned by his third grade teacher. She asked him to do 52 slides to illustrate a storybook, "Come Go With Me." He said it was his "first real sharp awareness of how all people portrayed in media are white. All the characters I was exposed to were white. On billboards you see all white people. I read National Geographic and encyclopedias cover to cover, and even their people of color are portrayed in a subservient, or happy old darky, way." The most common exception is black athletes, who are celebrated for their "instinctive" physical skills, he said.

Shamsud-Din's career received a boost at age 14 when he received a scholarship to a Midwestern music and art camp, which he attended for three summers and where he received more advanced training. It was also at this point that he felt "I could start proving to 'them' that I could measure up."

His insistence that African-Americans should not be "invisible" caused him to leave the faculty at Portland State University. "They wanted to relegate black artists to black studies," he says. "I felt it was a great disservice to all students to be exposed only to European art, and I still do."

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