

*From Windrush to uplifting grime**

Kwaku

I want to pay respect to the Screen Nation Awards organisers for not using their magazine just to “sell” film, but also remind us of our global African history. Last year, the magazine highlighted the 50th anniversary of Ghana’s independence, and in this issue, it highlights on the 60th anniversary of Windrush, which brought nearly 500 African Caribbeans to Britain, and thus marked a seminal point in Britain’s multi-cultural history.

Although I studied film-making, I have spent much of my adult life working within the music industry, particularly within the black music sector, music journalism, and music industry education. Recently, as a matter of necessity in awaking the African family – I’ve had to learn some African history in order to disseminate it in what I believe are innovative and accessible forms.

For example, as part of this year’s Black History Month (BHM), I delivered talks to school assemblies and Home Office staff, a talks and live music programme for Kingston Council staff, made a short film on pre-trans-Atlantic enslavement African empires, culture and learning with school children, and helped organise the Portal To African History/African History Speaks discussion programme for Harrow Council, and facilitated BTWSC/Roots To Branches’ free Arts Council funded Songs Of Life, Survival & Empowerment Concert.

The last open day of the Brent Black Music History Photographic Exhibition I curated at the Brent Museum focused on the influence of reggae and Jamaicans in Brent, the north-west London area where a good proportion of the Windrush arrivals and subsequent immigrants from the Caribbean settled. One was Sonny Roberts, who in 1962 built Planitone, the first African-owned recording studio and record label.

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Although I love music – I’m the editor of BritishBlackMusic.com, and founder of the Black Music Congress, I believe BHM should be essentially about history, and that the usual singing and dancing events leave attendees without any improvement in their knowledge of African history.

Hence, when I programme music, it cannot be for mere light relief. For example, the theme I delivered for the Kingston staff was based

on African resistance and revolution, because on August 23 2008, Britain officially marked its first International Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition. However conscious Africans choose to call it International Day Of African Resistance Against Enslavement and focus on it as the start of the successful Haitian revolution of 1791. I had members of the Ruff Cutt band play reggae dub tunes such as Dennis Brown's 'Revolution', Aswad's 'Three Babylon', Steel Pulse's 'Ku Klux Klan' and Burning Spear's 'Old Marcus Garvey' to under-score the point.

The strapline for the Life... concert read: 'From Lord Kitchner's 'London Is The Place For Me' (1948) to Bashy's 'Black Boys' (2008) to mark the other British music experience'. Hence, between those seminal songs, I programmed songs that covered varying periods and genres in order to tell some of the African British experiences of the last 60 years. In addition to songs from calypso and the grime canon, there was jazz, gospel, lovers rock, reggae and African-fusion.

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One feedback from a parent was that her child did not enjoy the songs. However the positive point of that was that she promised to expose her children to a wider selection of black music. Which is great. Whilst I deliberately aimed for an inter-generational audience and delivered an inter-linking sketch that told some of the stories and histories, it's incumbent upon parents and adults to show the youth the relevance of, say calypso, and the similarities with a modern style like grime. Then they'll realise music does not begin and end with R&B, hip-hop or bashment!

In our press release for the Life... concert, I highlighted the fact that we were dealing with the 'other' British history. I was proved right, when a journalist from a mainstream medium covering the story asked me what was Windrush?

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I did not have the time to explain that without those that came sixty years ago, Britain would not be so colourful, soulful, groovy, there would be no Notting Hill Carnival, nor the variety of foods we now take for granted. Reggae, or its precursor, ska, would not have been an international music, if not for the Caribbean communities heralded by the arrival of the Windrush. Genres such as lovers rock,

drum & bass, or grime would not have been created by the descendants of the Windrush Generation.

We salute the Windrush Generation for their fortitude, work ethic and discipline. These are virtues that many of us need to re-visit, at a time when we're facing failures in the home, school, and on the streets. The Ghanaian term "sankofa" springs to mind.

Some of the failures of African boys have been linked with lack of fathers or male figures in the homes, and the need for positive role models from a wide field of endeavour. My organisation BTWSC is developing a Heritage Lottery Funded role model project, NARM, which will highlight notable, aspirational role models of African descent from 1907 to 2007.

Our aim is not to necessarily highlight celebrities or people who are noted merely because they were the first Africans to succeed in a particular endeavour. We are very much interested in unsung people "doing something", particularly for the upliftment of the African community.

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I'd admit that providing positive role models for our boys is useful, but it's only a small part of what's needed to reverse the social decay that's threatening our community. One needs to ask what happened to the "glue" that kept our community together during the early part of the Windrush generation? Sankofa spings to mind again.

However, if one African boy is going to look at an African man, perhaps in a field outside of the usual entertainment and sports, and feel inspired to work hard to achieve similar goals, then I believe the NARM project would have served its purpose.

Like the Brent Black Music History Project, which BTWSC launched in 2007, the NARM project will be launched with a free DVD and booklet, in early 2009 followed by a photographic exhibition in the summer in the Brent Museum. For more information: info@btwsc.com/NARM.

* This article was initially commissioned for the Screen Nation Awards 2008 magazine. It was meant to provide a summary of work by a community organisation. When the awards was postponed and downsized, the magazine was cut down, and the article was spiked. Kwaku is the editor of BritishBlackMusic.com and founder of Black Music Congress, and project facilitator for voluntary organisation BTWSC. He's passionate about black music, particularly from Britain. He also spends his time teaching about the music industry, as artists need to know, it's not just about music, but also industry and an infrastructure, that makes it happen. He writes and broadcasts occasionally, and delivers programmes on African history and its relevance to the present.