

Jazzonia and the Harlem Diaspora



***Jazzonia* and the Harlem Diaspora**

curated by Diana Rodriguez and Judith Waring

CHELSEA space
1 July – 1 August 2009

JAZZONIA

LANGSTON HUGHES

Oh, silver tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

In a Harlem cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold.

Oh, singing tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

Were Eve's eyes
In the first garden
Just a bit too bold?
Was Cleopatra gorgeous
In a gown of gold?

Oh, shining tree!
Oh, silver rivers of the soul!

In a whirling cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.

Riverside Studios 1980s

With the release of Peter Gill's departure from Riverside Studios, with that studio of actors becoming the foundations for the National Theatre Studio, as the upgraded artistic director, I was keen to up the danger of inviting artists less immediately famous than from the Kantor, Miró, Tereyama, Athol Fugard early season. As ever I wanted to win but maybe go down for introducing the new and unknown but still exercising my unqualified belief in their quality. In those few years, at the cutting edge of performance, Merce Cunningham and John Cage, having their precedent with the Black Mountain College early in their careers, begat the Judson group of Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton and Douglas Dunn; all setting the tone for the early years of Riverside with their respective classes and master classes as well as performances. The visual colleagues were the likes of Robert Rauschenberg and Sol LeWitt.

The new generation at Riverside from America were Arnie Zane with Keith Haring, Molissa Fenley with Francesco Clemente and Dan Graham but the explosion needed to be British too to be working and this is where the real provocation and courage was needed. Happily Michael Clark being given a residency in these years, joining Rosemary Butcher, whose nightly teaching influences stemming from Merce, contact improvisation and collaboration with a new generation of visual artists from the Royal College of Art and from Chelsea College of Art and Design, brought breathless admiration, a touch of genius, originality and colour that was to fill the gap. Leigh Bowery, Bodymap, the Fall and Laibach, to name a few, all became part of his taking to the role of Diaghilev (when not Nijinsky) like a duck to water.

In the middle of this I was awarded a Fellowship to America by its Embassy where I attended the seminal New Music jamboree that took over much of Minneapolis and the Walker Art Centre and pushed the development of new music at Riverside begun by Paul Burwell and David Toop, Gavin Bryars and Michael Nyman. The likes of Laurie Anderson, still of minority interest, Glenn Branca and Sonic Youth were to follow. As Laurie flew in, John Peel at midnight pushed *O Superman* up the charts and typically of Riverside, what could have been a financial disaster became a demand for extra performances.

It has to be understood that these artists were performing in London for the first time. As were the dancers covered in this exhibition, in their seventies and eighties.

Next in New York was my introduction to George T. Nierenberg, a student whose thesis film had me inventing the London launch over oysters in Grand Central Station. (As a brilliant graduate producer he must have wanted to impress me). His elegiac but wondrous film, plotted the end of the road for the great jazz tap dancers, taught by the legendary BoJangles in a neglected art form that needed to claim its rightful place in our understanding of the Harlem Renaissance. Not only did we launch the film but after an interval, the four dancers would stun audiences by jazz tapping with deep subtlety on the pristine wooden dance floor, flying in the old film studio space, gleaming in the white light created by Rory Dempster and David Richardson.

In short, they flew to become part of the character and creative wavelength of dance and performance there. To the contemporary art historian, David Sylvester, the greatest of the bunch, Chuck Green, who earlier had given himself up to care in his mourning for his lost world, could be compared to the likes of the greatest of Riverside's greatest participants. He wept at the beauty of Chuck's art, night after night as I squeezed him into the lighting box at the back of a packed studio.

In the wake of this and over more visits and master classes, especially with Honi Coles, two of the greatest singers of the twentieth century were introduced at a curtain call. Honi made sure that I got the point, that Adelaide Hall is jazz history, from her relationship with the invention of scat and the *Creole Love Song*, her recording with Duke Ellington in the twenties through a Paris of the thirties where she was second in popularity to Josephine Baker. Adelaide was now living down the road from my friend and Riverside colleague, Hanif Kureishi, in Barons Court.

The next miracle, Elisabeth Welch, had given the 'Charleston' to Broadway, *Stormy Weather* from Broadway to Derek Jarman and was later to return to New York to win awards in her eighties because an enthusiastic producer had secretly recorded her singing at her own concert at Riverside.

That decade of exploration and the attempt to restore accuracy and balance in what was then a parochial London in the performance and art worlds drew to an end as I had each get their documentary made for British television by the talented likes of David Mingay, David Robinson and Stephen Garrett such that the evidence is now forever there. That was what Honi knew I had to achieve.

If you want to understand Godot, then check how Chuck danced. In such code is modernism handled and enjoyed.

David Gothard

'Stay on The Cargoe'

Judith Waring

/Samuel Christopher/Chuck Green wrote and lived like he danced Jazz Tap, with an idiosyncratic lyricism. He laid down some iron/expressed his artistry/ as his (large) feet dissected the music of Duke Ellington's band, his favourite. Often laconic, Chuck hit/expressed himself/ in language as he hit when hoofing/ tapping/ out a jazz phrase. Syntax, once learned, is there to be improvised:

**This Is Amidst Tea
Frontiere Fret, s. Adonis**

**Hip Hip Legend
ANGOS**

**Come to
Antwerpe
Better Half
Sincerest
Suitor
Chuck Green**

PS/ THE BEST Sweetie Tangents

Chuck's comment that there were 'No Maps on My Taps' became the title of George T. Nierenberg's classic documentary film on Jazz Tap (1979). 'No Maps' also starred legends Bunny Briggs and Sandman Sims with its UK première at Riverside Studios.

The footage isn't Jazz Tap: it is a residue of performance.

After the screening the stars danced on stage live.

Jazz Tap Happenings 6 February 1980 @ 9pm

**Maps are full of roads and signs and detours. They limit you and steer you. But
when I tap I can get lost dancing.
I don't have no maps then.**

Dance the dérive. Chuck was a 'hooper'. He tapped not only with the heel and toe but used the whole foot. It was never about counting.

While Jazz uses the mathematical equations of rhythm, mastering the technique frees the talented to self-expression.

We listen.

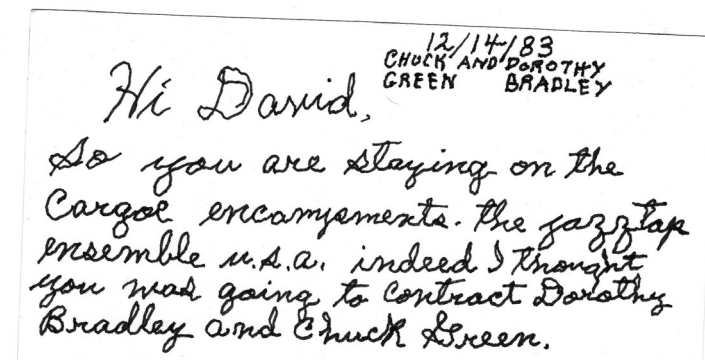
It's a monologue.

Some get left behind.

Chuck tended not to look at his audience. He fixed on the floor. Large, almost ungainly when static, Chuck occupied his space when he tapped, with elegance and sublime artistry.

Jazz Tappingly

So you are staying on the Cargoe encampments. the jazztap ensemble u.s.a.



12/14/83
CHUCK AND DOROTHY
GREEN BRADLEY

Hi David,

So you are staying on the Cargoe encampments. the jazztap ensemble u.s.a. indeed I thought you was going to contract Dorothy Bradley and Chuck Green.



Jazz Tap hits like a drum solo. It is aural and not the visual hand-waving, fixed smile of the entertainer.

The hooper is a hero. The legacy of black history, the not looking at your audience has been taken as a political stand by contemporary hooper Savion Glover.

"Bring In 'Da Noise, Bring In 'Da Funk" (1995)

honours C. Green.

Glover hits hard. The metal taps, the slave chains. The drum beat of defiance and liberation.

'No Maps on My Taps' is more than Jazz Tap. It's Harlem. Percussive dance is the art of the oppressed. Freedom is sounded by the feet. It happens below the waist. The chthonic connection of body with earth.

ONOMATOPOIESIS

ClickityClickityClickity-Click Clackety-
clackety-clacketyClack
Shaff-da-boom

Clearly, audibly, intensely, wittily.

Life imitates art and Chuck gained a pared-down-ness to his hoofing perhaps a distillation of periods of 'institutionalisation' and catching the beats in his head.

The enigma of staying on the cargo.

Personal heroism and the laying bare of the lone hooper.

Introspection and meditative thoughts are syncopated.

But improvisation is the dynamic emerging from the agonistic tension between soloists.

It is of the sidewalk.

Animated conversation. Non-contact duelling.

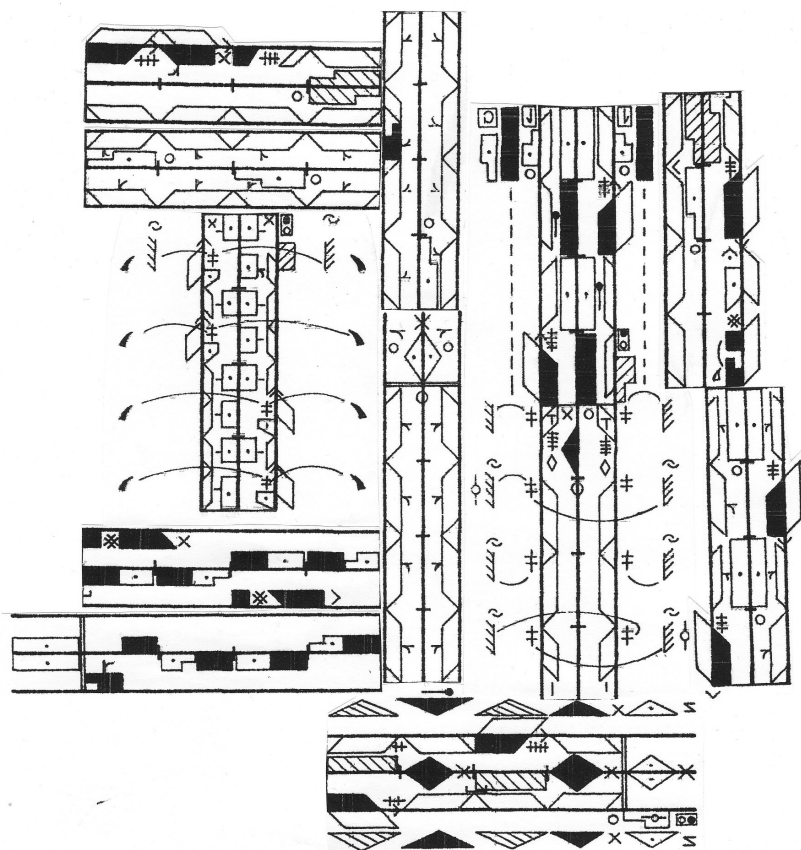
Urban art.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ:

Chuck Green

sunrise November 6, 1918

sunset March 6, 1997



LABANOTATION

Charleston (2009)



Adelaide Hall during rehearsals for the concert at the Leicester Haymarket, 1989.
(Image courtesy of Gavin Bryars)

Composer Gavin Bryars in conversation about Adelaide Hall's concert at the Studio Theatre, Haymarket, Leicester, 30 January 1988

David [Gothard, Associate Director at the Haymarket] had the idea of getting Adelaide Hall to perform and for me to put together the band. I had a lot of good students at the time [GB was Professor of Music at De Montfort University (1986 – 1994) and an Associate Director of Music at the Haymarket] – there was a good feel for written-out Jazz.

First I had to meet Adelaide. David put me in touch with her. She was playing at Pizza on the Park and we met at the interval. I went to Barons Court. She was always game to try something new but was most comfortable with the repertoire she knew. Some we would use the existing arrangements, some I would write new arrangements for

the student band. I also decided not to use her regular pianist... because he was pretty frail. But she had worked with another pianist, Mick Pyne, whom I knew. He and his brother came from Bridlington where I was playing Jazz in the 60s.

I added a group of student players. I explained to Adelaide what I was going to do and she was full of it, completely game. She came out, we rehearsed, we did the concert. The concert was a huge success. The minute people knew Adelaide was in town, it sold out. And the Studio [Theatre] was a place where a lot of sometimes quite experimental, or small scale but often incredibly interesting things [happened]. The Studio had a sort of innovative aspect to it.

[Adelaide] couldn't move about a lot. A lot of the time she'd sit down but then occasionally she'd... the spirit of the music would get her to get up and she'd start sort of like dancing on the spot. She was really full of life; she was absolutely incredible. I've got a recording of the whole thing. I'll make a copy of it if you like. In fact I was listening to it last night and the spirit in her performance is just stunning – there's a kind of bubble in her life, she was absolutely fantastic.



Adelaide Hall performing at the Leicester Haymarket with Gavin Bryars on double-bass. (Image courtesy of Gavin Bryars)

She loved also working with these students, these young kids. And after the performance... next door was a very good Italian restaurant... and we were there until three or four o'clock in the morning. Adelaide was sitting next to me. She had her hand on my knee, she was excited and said we should get married and so on. She was really all go and it gave her a huge kick to do this show.

She came on stage. The show started by us playing a Duke Ellington piece *Take The A Train* just a piano, bass, drums piece. And then the moment we stopped, the band went into *Creole Love Call*. And everyone knows this three clarinet way it starts. And Adelaide had a mic off stage and you could hear her and she walked on singing. And the moment the sound of her started, the audience just started clapping. They were with her, right from the beginning.

I'd a sense she really came alive in that show. In this show she was right spot-on, she was really on the boil the whole way through.

There are all sorts of great things happened in the performance. There's one bit I remember where Mick and I play the intro to a song... I think we played the intro to *I Can't Give You Anything But Love*... and she started singing *A Foggy Day* instead, which actually has the same sequence at the beginning. Then in the second half, she had *Foggy Day*; [it] was the second half of a medley of tunes. So there's a sequence where she sings *Almost Like Being In Love* and then goes into *A Foggy Day*. And the moment she started singing *A Foggy Day* she suddenly realised she'd already sung it in the first half. She looked round and gave us a big grin because she knew she'd sung the wrong song. So we then put *I Can't Give You Anything But Love* towards the end of the second half.

What you'll hear in the recording is she has the audience eating out of her hand. Right at the end the audience is singing along with her. She knew exactly how to work it. It was completely genuine. You can hear that in her voice. And she's telling these little stories. You can tell at the beginning she's quite nervous. She tells the same story twice. She suddenly realises. And it's about this song that she sang by this Jazz pianist Eubie Blake. The famous thing that he said, he lived to be 100, 'if I'd known I'd live to be 100 I'd have taken better care of myself.'

It's not a perfect recording. She's on the mic and quite far forward in terms of the mix.

There's a narrative [*Getting To Know You*] – I'm introducing myself. Later on she sings *The More I See You* – in the second half.

She never ever stumbled on her words. She sang the whole show, knew all the words completely.

[*Prelude To A Kiss*] it's quite a complicated song to sing, the melody's really quite awkward, it moves round the chords, changes a lot and you can hear that she actually has worked with Ellington because she's got exactly that idiom.

We had to double the length of the play-out; [applause] it went on for ages. She's so close on mic you can hear all her little asides and you can hear her little anxieties from time to time where she's not sure about something or she's just not clear about something, you know.

Listening through this last night, I can really still feel the occasion. I think even for someone who wasn't there you have a sense that something is going on, it's quite special ...

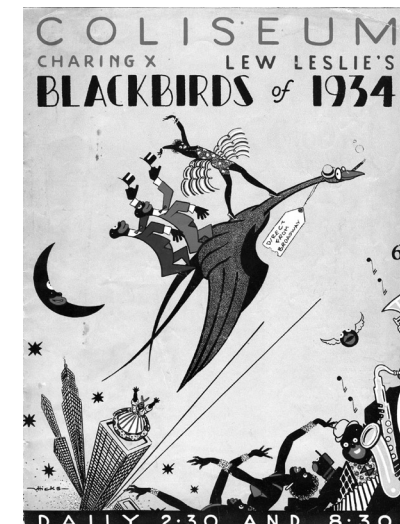
Thursday 6th March 2009

Emily Bernard, Associate Professor of English and ALANA U. S. Ethnic Studies at the University of Vermont, discusses the Harlem Renaissance and its legacies with Diana Rodriguez

Adelaide Hall, Elisabeth Welch and Chuck Green – featured in this show – are sometimes described as forming part of the Harlem Renaissance. Could you define the Harlem Renaissance?

The Harlem Renaissance was the first serious cultural movement in African American history. It was made possible by the Great Migration, which saw more than one million African Americans fleeing southern poverty and racial violence in the early twentieth century.

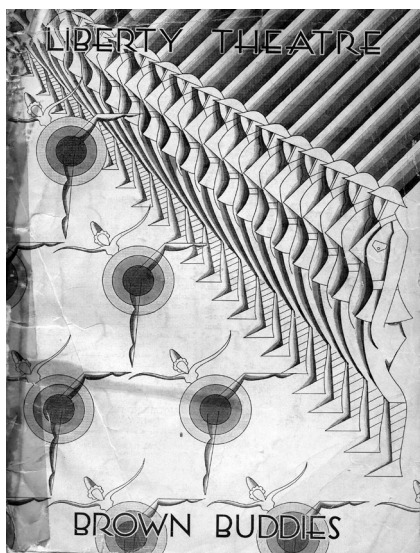
'I was in love with Harlem long before I got there,' poet Langston Hughes wrote in 1963. When Hughes wrote of Harlem, he referred often to the romantic spell cast by the city within a city. During its heyday, Harlem was always in motion; inside cabarets, buffet flats, speakeasies, and ballrooms, each dancer, singer, and musician seemed more ingenious than the one who came before her.



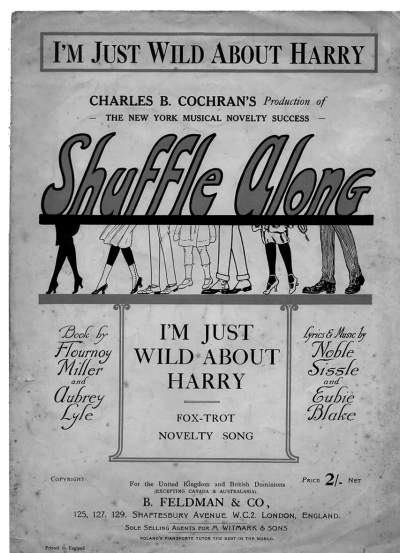
Programme for the 1934 performance of *Blackbirds* at the London based Coliseum. (Courtesy of the Adelaide Hall Archive)



Sheet music of *Don't Worry 'Bout Me*, published for the Cotton Club, Harlem in 1934. (Courtesy of the Adelaide Hall Archive)



Programme for *Brown Buddies* at the Liberty Theatre, New York, 1930.
(Courtesy of the Adelaide Hall Archive)



Sheet music from *Shuffle Along*, published in London 1921.
(Courtesy of the Adelaide Hall Archive)

You talk about a surge in African American politics that accompanied the cultural movement. How political was the Harlem Renaissance?

It had so many different components, cultural, social and ideological, as well as the political. They were all wrapped up together and were inextricably intertwined. I think the movement was larger than the Harlem Renaissance – the New Negro movement is in some ways a better descriptive because the movement was about really revamping in every single way African American identity. The New Negro proceeds from the Old Negro – the figure of servility, the Uncle Tom figure, blackness as absence, absence of character, of intelligence, of humanity – and was devoted to replacing those images of absence with presence. The Old Negro was bent, servile, scraping, while the New Negro stands upright, looks directly into the camera and is taking the world on and literally reshaping himself in every single way. If you walked around at the time on every broadside, every advertisement, there were no positive images of black people, no black newscasters, no Barak Obama. It was important to put forward for the American public images of black presence, the presence of intelligence, of humanity, of all of those factors that had been written out of the story of the African American. Du Bois, editor of *Crisis* magazine, published images of black graduates, for example, which were important not only for white people but for black people too because these images worked on black psychology.

How does Jazz fit into this? Some of the singers and dancers we are focusing on were pioneers in music and the arts and formed part of the Harlem Renaissance, but at least in the 20s and 30s they seemed to be participating in shows that in some ways offered parodies of black culture, in segregated venues with names such as the Cotton Club and the Plantation Café.

There are a lot of negative associations with primitivism. For many whites who came to Harlem in the period, Harlem was a place you ventured in and out of to experience exotic blackness without having to leave the comfort of your living room. And it was complicated for black people in that period because on one hand primitivism was the language of modernism, it was about breaking free, which obviously Jazz fits in with, and it was cognisant of a new era. So primitivism was a vocabulary that provided an opportunity for liberation, for a new way of thinking, because it was a celebration in some way of the blackness that had been denigrated. It is important to distinguish between racism and primitivism – primitivists celebrate the very differences that the racists disdain. It did present a catch 22 for African Americans, though, because it was a certain kind of blackness that was being celebrated.

Many African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance also celebrated primitivism. Langston Hughes romanticised the Tom Tom and there are a lot of primitivist elements in his poetry. So primitivism was a common vocabulary to both black and white modernists. But it was a paradox in this movement that it sought progress in venues that weren't very progressive at all, where you had to be this kind of black and say this kind of thing.

Did the exposure of talented black artists have an impact on race relations?

Many audience members would look at black people but not see them, enjoying a spectacle of blackness that was very carefully manipulated. Someone I'm very interested in is Carl Van Vechten who was celebrated and also vilified for his involvement in black arts at the time. He was one of the first people writing in *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* to say black music is American music; spiritual music and Jazz are the only indigenous art forms; American culture is black culture. Black people weren't saying this at the time, because of their anxieties about representation, about a presentation of blackness, brought out by white racism. There's a lot of internalised racism that makes people anxious about being identified with Jazz and spirituals. Many conservative cultural thinkers and brokers – including Du Bois – were pushing to the foreground our ability to play European classical music in order to demonstrate parity.

Carl Van Vechten became excited about blackness in the theatres of Chicago where he saw a black drama that was exciting, transgressive, and changed his life. He became committed to racial equality in his own way, introducing black artists and white artists who came to America. When he brought Gertrude Stein to the United

States she met black writers and this changed her own work. This was the kind of thing that was made possible because of the Harlem Renaissance.

Elisabeth Welch and Adelaide Hall became incredibly successful financially as well as in terms of their reputations. I wonder about the additional obstacle of gender that black women performers faced at the time?

Many women from the Harlem Renaissance are celebrated now, but it was really a male movement, a homosocial movement of men helping men, and many of the leading figures were gay men. It wasn't a coincidence that Langston Hughes dies internationally celebrated in 1967 while when Zora Neale Hurston dies it was in poverty, of malnutrition. The New Negro movement was also the era of liberation of the lives of middle class white women. But black women had a double edged problem: race and gender. When we think about the history of African American culture, every evolution and every crisis that marks every generation and has to be resolved is around black heterosexual masculinity. Of course there's a real historical context to that, which is to do with violence against the black male body, which has been so denigrated through slavery. It made it very difficult for black women to assert themselves as priorities.

What about the female Jazz artists Josephine Baker, Adelaide Hall? They were able to transcend these problems, perhaps in Josephine's case at least by following the well-trodden path of the sexualised young female performer?

There are always exceptions and there is great ambivalence about Josephine Baker despite all the work being done now on recuperating and celebrating her. She had a complicated place in African American social history as a person who would kowtow to white ideals about black female bodies in order to get ahead. Now we talk about her as a trickster, playing on these fantasies but always with a wink. Du Bois said in 1926 that since black people face such negative portrayals, we can't afford to offer ourselves as sexual beings and need to manage our images. Then someone like Langston Hughes in his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* says 'I'm tired of looking over my shoulder. I can't control what this white person thinks or what this black person thinks, I have to make art that's real to me.' This tension still exists today.

Could you comment on the link between Harlem and Paris? A lot of artists – including those featured in this show – travelled there in the 20s and 30s.

Harlem was a metaphor for so many things but in terms of an actual physical thing it had only a partial claim on the lives of black artists and writers. So many biographies of black artists in the period talk of them stepping abroad to Europe and discovering themselves as artists, and not just black artists pleading white audiences for acceptance. Which is not to say that Paris was free of any racial problems, but it didn't have the specific history of American slavery so it was possible to be a black

artist and tell a different story. In the United States the story has always been written whether you like it or not and the question still now is how are you going to contend, literally and figuratively, with this story that's been written for you? In Paris it was a blank page. You could imagine yourself differently and be imagined differently which was liberating. Langston Hughes was accepted at Columbia but wasn't allowed to live in the dorm. There are so many stories like that. In Paris you could walk down the street and be greeted with smiles, without fear, with excitement.

You've mentioned quite a lot about the legacy of the movement and the element of Jazz within the movement. It sounds like many of the issues that were being worked through are still around?

In terms of Jazz, Duke Ellington is a fascinating figure because he embodied that high/low thing: he wore the tuxedo and had a very prominent profile as someone who has trained in classical music but was also comfortable in the pool hall. This syncretism is central to Jazz.

To me the Harlem Renaissance is alive because the questions it introduced are still with us. It was a moment when black artists were engaged deliberately, explicitly, in an ongoing and everyday kind of way in the question: what is a black artist? Who does a black artist produce for? What is black art? Who has the authority to produce black art? Can a white person produce black art? Can a black person produce white art? To what degree is the term black art limiting or liberating. The question is at what cost do we aspire to the universal? Can a person be black and universal at once? Du Bois says if we aspire to this thing that is universal – I am a poet rather than a black poet – then that comes at a cost.



Chuck Green, Adelaide and Honi Coles at Riverside Studios.

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Published to coincide with the exhibition *Jazzonia and the Harlem Diaspora*, at **CHELSEA space**, London, 01.07.09 – 01.08.09.

Texts © Emily Bernard, Gavin Bryars, David Gothard, Diana Rodriguez, Judith Waring. *Charleston (2009)* © Judith Waring.

With thanks to: Dave Bennett, Emily Bernard, Stephen Bourne, Gavin Bryars, Nigel Colgate, Tunji Falana, Stephen Garrett, David Gothard, Kate Greer, Junior Laniyan, Sarah-Jane Mayhew, David Mingay, Jan Murray, George T. Nierenberg, Gisèle Nzolameso, Rebecca O'Brien, Donald Smith, Carol Tulloch, Annette Walker, Anthony Wall and Iain Cameron Williams.

CHELSEA space assistants: Charlotte Bannayi, Charlie Franklin, Susan Forsyth, Sue Jin Lee, Clare Lewis, Shoko Maeda, Gyeyeon Park, Sophy Smith and Debra Welch.

ISBN 978-1-906203-32-0

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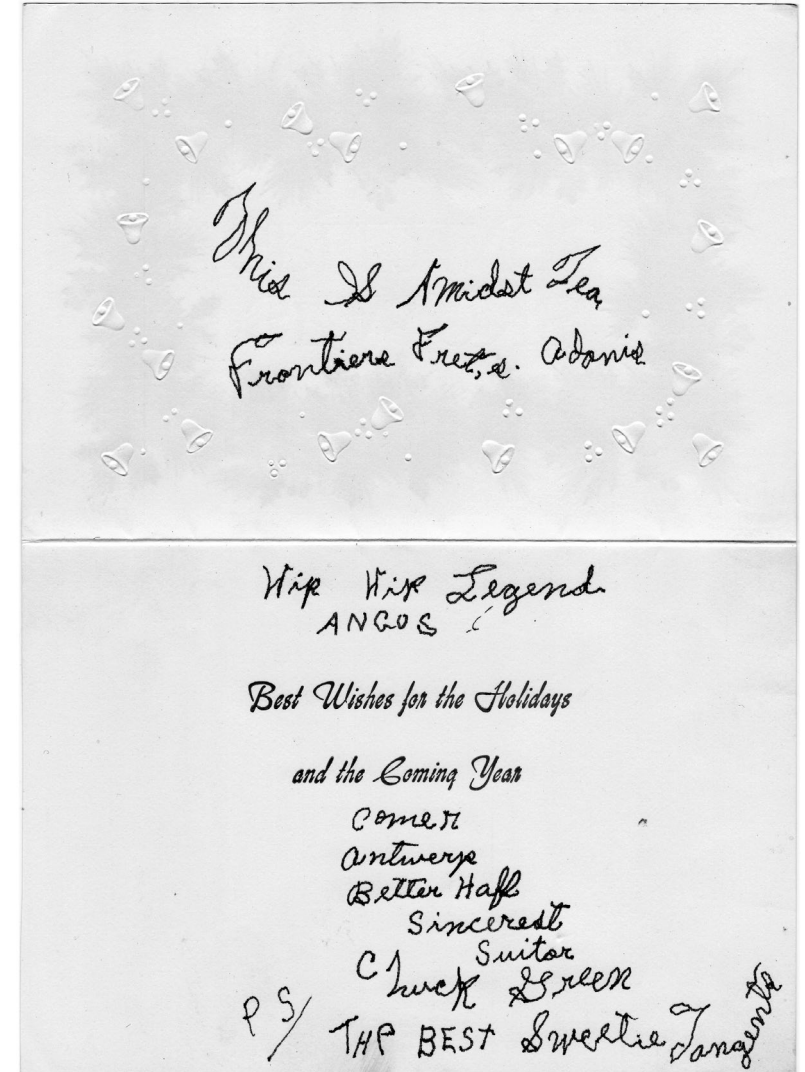
Catalogue design: Diana Rodriguez, Judith Waring and Dennis Mariner.
Printed in London by PMS Printers Limited, June 2009.

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