

the kitchen
that gets me out of bed.
Meanwhile, this crooning voice of Jims Reeves
booms all over the house.

**MUSIC – Jim Reeves country & western tune,
'Distant Drums'**



Figure 7. Michael McMillan, *The West Indian Front Room: Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes*, 2005-2006. Display of Jim Reeves albums. Geffrye Museum, London. Courtesy of John Hammond.

CC: Rico Rodriguez was a favorite of my dad's – he loved his Blue Beat

MM & CC dance to *When You Walk, as they move downstairs to The Arrivants*.

THE ARRIVANTS

MM: Down in the basement was where they would have House parties with the radiogram. And when drinks and food were sold they became illegal Blues Parties. They where sound systems, which that at one point numbered 500, played out across Britain wherever black people had settled like Duke Reid, Count Suckle, Duke Vin, Sir Coxson, Fatman, Jah Shaka.

They created alternative racially mixed space where party goes 'ravers' could free up themselves drink a stout, a Life Long beer, or bottle of Babycham and dance with each other to music they were familiar with until daylight when the neighbours would complain and the police would come.

As one raver, Veronica Barnes, remembers 'the funniest thing is that when the police came to tell us to turn down the music the women would give them some curry goat and they would turn red because they weren't used to the pepper. Then these big fat women would take the police hat put it on their own head and wine-up with them.'

And there were Shebeens on the frontline just as they were/are in South Africa where you get a good drink play some dominoes for money smoke a spliff and attract other deviants but that's another story.

CC: THE MUSIC/DANCE/DRESS went together. There's no separation for many African-Caribbean people (across the African diaspora?) – it's all part of 'movement culture'. A way of speaking about yourself and the way you want to be seen. The challenges that others might assume about you because of the colour of your skin – an elegant act of disobedience ... defiance It individuates you it allows you to say to society 'Here I am this is me deal with it!'

Ritual of dressing is vital.

CC: Reads two extracts from her short stories: Bernice, Sir Galahad

Sir Galahad dressing for a date:
He clean his shoes until they shine, then he put on a little more Cherry Blossom and give then a extra shine, until he could see his face in the leather. Next he put on a new pair of socks – nylon splice in the heel and toe. He have to put on woollen underwear, though is summer. Then the shirt – a white Van Heusen. Which tie to wear? Galahad have so much tie that whenever he open the cupboard is only tie he seeing in front of him, and many times he just put out his hand and make a grab, and whichever one come he wear... Before he put on trousers and jacket he comb his hair. That is a big operation for Galahad, because he grow his hair real long and bushy, and it like a clump of grass on the head. First he wet the hair with some water, then he push his finger in the haircream jar and scoop out some. He rub the cream on his hands, then he rub his hands on his head. The only mirror in the room is a small one that Galahad have tie on to the electric light cord, so the way he have it, it just a little bit higher than he is, so while he combing the grass he have to sort of look up and not forward. So this comb start going through the grass, stumbling across some big knot in Galahad hair, and water flying from the head as the comb make a pass, and Galahad concentrating on the physiognomy, his forehead wrinkled and he turning his head this way and that. Then afterwards he taking the brush and touching the hair like a tonsorial specialist, here and there, and when he finish, the hair comb well.

Bernice getting dressed for her wedding:
Miss D had already begun heating up the hot comb on the stove. Soon it was ready to straighten Bernice's unruly virgin hair. The comb sizzled and hissed gently as it engaged with the tight black frizz that had been carefully primed with rose scented hair grease. A sweet burning smell surrounded the two women. Once Bernice's hair had been transformed into a series of shiny straight tufts, Miss D set about skillfully curling each section with a pair of small iron tongs that made a rattling noise each time they were taken out of Bernice's head and returned to the fire. A further layer of grease was then applied to every ringlet. After a short time Bernice's scalp was covered in row upon row of tiny coils that were crisp to the touch but glistened in the light of the open kitchen door. The metamorphosis had begun...

Next Miss D helped Bernice into her brassier and girdle. Bernice tugged at the foreign undergarments that promised to give her a sleek Maiden Form silhouette. Instead little pockets of stubborn flesh oozed their way out from beneath her bra straps and the seat of her elasticated pants. Bernice screwed up her face as Miss D rearranged her reddening cleavage inside the conical structure. Her semi-exposed breasts were then dabbed with liberal amounts of lavender talcom powder, the excess rising up to the ceiling like a perfumed smoke signal.

MM & CC dance to *Althea & Donna's Uptown Top Ranking, as they move to red couch on a raised platform made from recycled wooden pallets*.

ON THE COUCH

MM: Now returning to the radiogram as a 'youth' before I was allowed out to 'rave' (not to be confused with the 1980s warehouse scene) I would tune into Capital Radio on a Saturday night to listen to Greg Edwards's *Soul Spectrum* and later David Rodigan's *Rock, Reggae* shows. I would rock to the funk of James Brown, Parliament, Earth, Wind & Fire and the bass of Dennis Brown, Aswad and Jamaican Dancehall and dream of the clubs and parties where this music would be played.

CC: Too young, watched my sister initially ... eventually went out at 15 ... heavily made up, trying to look 18 but not always succeeding. But remembering what it was like to be amongst my own people to have black heroes and heroines, people to look up to, to emulate.

MM: There was joy and pleasure from being around people that looked like you erotically sharing something spiritual and political. As a must be place it required some ingenious schemes, sheer nerve and simple defiance against parental curfews and prohibitions, such as climbing out of windows, or as Veronica Barnes remembers, unlatching the front door during the day, going to bed in her clothes, waiting for her mum to go to sleep, then listening for a whistle from her friend to come outside. There was also coming home to find you'd been locked out.

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LOVERS ROCK

MM: I was a 'rocker' following roots/steppa's sound systems like Jah Shaka, while ravers who followed funk and soul were 'soulheads'. Then came Lovers Rock, as a British born reggae genre that brought back women and romance into the dance, which had become dominated by male, militant and violent sound 'clashes/'challenges'.

With romantic lyrics sung over a warm melodic bass, Lovers Rock from Louisa 'Markswoman' Marks' tune, *Caught you in a Lie*, to Janet Jay's *Silly Games*, female and male singers sang about love, relationships and the everyday. These tunes chimed with an aspirational generation, who had come of age and had to get rid of their locks if they wanted a job.

We wanted to dance with each other, sensually exploring every corner of each other's body in the dance hips gyrating to the rhythm of the bass leaving shadows of on the wallpaper. And so many children owe their existence to Lovers Rock.

CC: It empowered women to take ownership of the dance and the dance floor, by, with, and for themselves, forging sisterhood.

Who feels it knows it, and stepping into a sound system dance stimulates all the senses, bass thumping in the chest, the air is thick with the smell of weed, guys shanking with each other, a posse of girls rocking, a couple dancing in a rub-a-dub style. Be careful not to step on another man's shoes or dance with another man's woman. The Selector drops a righteous tune on the turntable, The crowd bawl out 'Rewind – Haul and pull up!', and the toaster/MC chants 'Jah!' and the crowd responds...

MM and CC: 'Rastafari!'

MM and CC dance to *The InCrowd's Back A Yard, with audience members encouraged to join it*.

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BACK A YARD

A performance presentation written and performed by Christine Cheinska (CC) and Michael McMillan (MM) as part *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'* and *The Arrivants* in the FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg.

THE CABINET

As the audience gather around the display cabinet, we hear Lord Kitchener's *London is the Place for Me* tune.

MM: In truth the front room was for good times

CC: and hard times

MM: sad times and fun times.
It was where the gossip and plotting took place.

CC: It was for big people talk.

MM: It was a place to make love,
and it was place to make war.
Back in the day
many children said that they couldn't get into the
front room as it was always under lock and key.
Maybe they treated it like a playroom
whereas I was a goodie goodie

CC: and I was a good girl (aside to audience).

MM: Yes I was a good boy and left it how I found it.

CC: I was a good girl and I still didn't get to go in it!

MM: I was fascinated by what was in it
particularly the photographs with people ...

MM/CC: From where I came from or so I was told.

MM removes a photo of his grandmother from the cabinet, and shares it with the audience.



Figure 1. Grandma, Emeline 'Nenen' Brewster. Courtesy of Michael McMillan.

MM: This is my maternal grandmother
Emeline 'Nenen' Brewster.
I never knew her
but I look into her eyes
to find out if what they say about her is true.
She wears a simple check pattern cotton dress
and her head tied like my Mum used to do at home
like I do now.

MM & CC tie their heads with cloth.

Life back home was hard
and country life was harder
where people aged before their time.
I don't know when this portrait was taken
but there is handsome strength in her neck and face
from working like a man
and I can see where I come from.

The patterned cloth behind her
could be a makeshift studio
somewhere in 'town',
Kingstown
the southern capital of St Vincent
or the northern George Town
near to the active volcano Mount Soufriere
that erupted in 1902.
Lava came down and people ran
and my maternal grandfather James Perriera
who Nenen had five children with,
my mother being the fourth,
was left behind as a baby.
His mother my great grandmother
rescued him in a blanket
and burnt her arms as she escaped.
And from that day he was called 'T'row wey James'

Nenen's village was South Rivers
nearby my father's village Park Hill
and surrounded by rain forest on steep slopes.
And from the cock crows
she and her children
would fetch water on their heads to wash
then 'go ah mountain'
carrying grass on on a donkey to feed live stock
moving goats to pasture
milking cows
and discovering someone had dug up their yams
or stolen their prized bull the night before.

St Vincent was not colonised until the late 18th century
because the Garifuna as original inhabitants
mixed African and Carib
fought for over two hundred years to keep
British and French imperial powers off the island
playing them off against each other
like Anancy the trickster spider
like their leader Chief Joseph Chatoyer,
St Vincent's national hero.
The British eventually broke the peace treaty
they had signed with the Garifuna
and exiled them to Honduras

from where they have since returned
back home.

CC: I never knew my grandmother.
I don't have a picture of her.
Maybe she looked just like that woman there in
your photo
– she most certainly would have worn a Madras
'tie-head'
An everyday style then.

How do you/we know that that is not her?

My paternal grandmother Aunty Doris
was a Maroon
My family lived in the Dry Harbour Mountains
in Jamaica.
In 'country'/farming communities
life was also hard, working the land
hot days, cold nights.
She was known as a medicine woman –
she knew the power of herbs/'bush tea'/cerasee,
'she deliver you baby,
clean you sore foot
an' even pull you teeth'
(So they said in her eulogy)
She was a strong woman,
a fighter, like Nanny of the Maroons.

The Maroons were descendants of Africans
who fought and escaped from slavery
and established free communities
in the mountainous interior of the island
– away from the coast/sandy beach paradises.

Nanny of the Maroons was of Ashanti heritage
Born c. 1686, died c. 1755
A Jamaican National hero,
She headed up the Windward Maroons,
founded Moore Town, near Portland.

MM: And maroon is the colour of the West Indian
Cricket team it symbolises the split blood of Jesus
and in the front room in the carpet it hides dirt well

CC removes the telegram from cabinet and reads it dated 22nd July 1972.

MM: Immigrants gather with each other for safety
and belonging and Vincentian and Pakistani migrants
had colonised the provincial town of High Wycombe
where I was born
And my family of six left
when I was nine
to Hackney of all places in London
because my dad took up a job at Fords Dagenham.
Money was short
Mum and Dad worked like horses
to get us back on our feet
though none of them could afford
to go back home and bury their parents.

MM picks up CC's dad's 7 inch vinyl record from the cabinet, and shares it with the audience.



Figure 2. Michael McMillan, *Rockers, Soulheads & Lovers: Sound Systems back in da Day*, 2015-16. Radiogram in the installation. New Art Exchange, Nottingham. Courtesy of Hesham Helmy.



Figure 3. 7in vinyl record of Mighty Sparrow's *Good Morning Mr Walker*. Courtesy of Michael McMillan.

Listening to my parent's vinyl collection
on the radiogram in the front room
I tried to visualise their lives before coming to England.

MM removes his dad's passport photo from the cabinet, and shares it with the audience as we hear Mighty Sparrow's calypso tune, *Good Morning Mr Walker*.

That is my Dad's passport photo that he took
before coming to England in 1959
in Guyana or B.G. – British Guyana as he often called it.
Dad was an adventurer
seeking his El Dorado,
and as a 'pork-knocker' prospector
he dived for diamonds in the interior.
He left a daughter here
who I have since found.



Figure 4. Godrick 'Edd' McMillan's passport photo. Courtesy of Michael McMillan.

MM removes his mum's passport photo from the cabinet, and shares it with the audience.



Figure 5. Escalita 'Letha' McMillan's passport photo. Courtesy of Michael McMillan.

This is my Mum's passport photo that she took
before coming to England in 1960
from Curacao in the Dutch Antilles,
which had an oil refinery
that threw many like her to work
like those who came to build the Panama Canal.
She spent six years working as a maid
for a Dutch family,
cultural ancestors of the Boers.
And being in South Africa
reminds me of my mum's domestic labour,
and I wonder what the 'post' means
in post-apartheid.

CC: Listening to my parent's vinyl collection
on the radiogram in the front room
I also tried to visualise their lives before coming
to England

CC removes her dad's passport photo from the cabinet, and shares it with the audience, while we hear Louise 'Miss Lou' Bennett's folk tune, *Hill and Gully Rider*.

This is the passport photo my Dad took to come
to England.
Before coming to England in 1956
he had a mento band with his brothers
he was a carpenter then.

CC removes her mum's passport photo from the cabinet, and shares it with the audience, as we hear Louise 'Miss Lou' Bennett's folk tune, *Hold Him Joe*.

Mum came in 1957
she was a seamstress
– she embroidered onto the garments
that her mum made (my grandmother was a free-
hand seamstress)
Hold Him Joe – mum sung to my sister and I.
We learnt our history that way ...
we weren't going to learn it from 'Janet and
John' books.

Oral history/myths/assumptions

White people in domestic service in England!
My aunts having black maids in Jamaica!

MM removes his mum's Vincentian immigration documents, and shares them with the audience.

MM: There was nothing back home for Mum
and many of her generation
so prospect of coming to England was an adventure
besides they had been invited
to come and rebuild the Mother Country ruined
by war.
And I see this young twenty eight woman
looking into the future
looking into the camera
as she is photographed
for medical and criminal documents
that would certify her right to travel.

When I compare my Mum's passport photo
with those of her during the 1970s
she still looks beautiful

proud in what she has achieved
though the road has been rough.

Growing up the 1970s Britain
there was the oil crisis,
power cuts
three-day week,
high youth unemployment
SUS laws
police brutality
racist attacks
and resistance.

Enoch Powell and his 'Rivers of blood' speech
had already stoked the racial fires of
immigration's story
for which 'Brexit' is the latest chapter
In the 1980s after living twenty years in England
my parents had to pay for British citizenship,
otherwise they and we their children,
would have been treated as illegal immigrants ripe
for deportation,
detention and disqualification in society
just as the children of the Windrush generation
have been treated now.

MM and CC dance to the National Ites' reggae tune, *Picture on the wall* tune as they move to into *The Front Room* 'Inna Joburg' installation, followed by the audience.

THE FRONT ROOM

CC: In the front room my experience is of a
similar aesthetic
but most of the actual living was done in the
'telly room'
or the living room.

Thursday was pay day
sitting on the rug
in front of the coal fire – Fire Jack!,
fighting with my sister for space in front of it
fish and chips from the newspaper
Corona
Ritz crackers from the red box.

MM: Friday nights were take-away nights
Chips with Maggi seasoning
or Chinese.
Saturdays was following my Mum to Ridley
Road Market
with the shopping trolley
where she'd get her
yam, green banana, sweet potato and pig tail
for the Saturday soup.

CC: Saturday soup!
Yam, green banana, sweet potato and pig tail
from Mr Weir's shop.

MM: Then it was cleaning the whole place
air freshener and furniture polish in the front room
masking the toxic smell of the paraffin heater
coming from the passage.
Then Sundays was church.

CC: But Sunday afternoon we'd gather round
the 'gram'.

MM: To hear?

CC: *Hold Him Joe* – Louise Bennett

MM: *London is the Place for Me* – Lord Kitchener

CC: *My Boy Lollipop* – Millie Small

MM: *Young, Gifted and Black* – Bob and Marcia

CC: *Monkey Man* – Toots & The Maytals

MM: *Pata Pata* – Miriam Makeba

CC: *Good Morning Mr Walker* – Mighty Sparrow

MM: *Distant Drums* – Jim Reeves

MM: You see there was this 'Colour Bar',
and black people, especially black men
were not welcome in many English pubs and clubs.
So they entertained themselves at home
in the front room with the 'Bluespot'
(after its German manufacturer Blaupunkt)
the radiogram or just the 'gram'.
And when my dad got a new Hi Fi
the radiogram was canalised
as my sound system.

For Stuart Hall the radiogram
occupied a place like a religious object
and if you didn't have one
then you weren't anybody

CC: In our house the 'gram was Dad's domain.
He bought the records
and he chose which records to place on the stack,
in what order at that.
He blew any fluff from the needle.
Sometimes my sister and I were allowed to press
the button ...
or else we would watch (almost another religious ritual).

But Mum dressed the top
crochet doilies
embroidered tablecloths
clouds of orange mesh
with various porcelain animals prowling inside

MM: Burning red eyes
In the morning after the night before
raving at All Nations club
fearing my Mum will call me
to come go church
but relieved at the waft of brewed coffee, fried 'bakes'
and pilchards with pepper sauce coming from