CELEBRATING BLACK BRITAIN

An online programme of music, film & literature

LITERATURE

New poems from today's Black British writers

The History of Black British publishing

the Focas Lit Fest
MORE THAN A LITERARY FESTIVAL

YOUR LOCAL Arena

Penguin Random House UK

Let Them Say

Hannah Lowe

So let them say I'm mad / They don't know how it feels to be sad
I don't know who could be glad. /In a situation like this –
Bob Andy 'Let them Say'

England had been shouting
in my face so long, I started shouting
back. But even my shouting

became a song. Mondays, I sang
Marley. All day Tuesday singing
Bitty McLean. Weekends were for songs

of glory. *Oh Lord, show me the way.*
Give me hope in my heart, I pray.
I liked my singing loud — all day,

all through the night. The neighbours banged
the floor. I locked my door and sang.
In Asda, I sang.

On a five–mile walk from Oxford Street
to Peckham, until I couldn't feel my feet,
I sang my songs in a chorus of sleet.

I wore my violet summer dress
and never gave the air a rest.
Even riding police cars back across

the river, I sang the sour officer
a line or two of Smiley Culture
or *Moonlight Lover* or *Freedom Fighter.*

On this cold white ward, I hold my pain
with *Singing in the Rain,*
I Don't Want to Wait in Vain.

Songs rise like smugglers from the telly
and cup my ears — *A Message to You, Rudy*
sails me home, our pink house by the sea,

my sister’s hair-brush microphone.
Funny what comes around again.
In the doctor’s cold white office, I stand to sing

a little Soul II Soul. *Back to life. Back to reality.*
When he tries to diagnose —
however do you want me, however do you need me
I turn away and harmonise.

Tone

Keith Jarrett

i (*Without Prejudice, 1997*)

nineteen cigarettes
into someone else's day
sis vaselines knuckles
for court

summons a smile —
when she's mispronounced
as defendant

she steupses
the predictability
but holds her wig
aloft anyhow

twenty-odd years
later now

this scene rings
identical twin
to this season's news
apologies exhibited

…and certainly
does not reflect
our values

she remains
unperturbed
by another trial
twirls her gown

so the plot goes.

ii (*Rudies Come Back, 1980*)

Sinting met *somefink* and man flung
a heap of words and vibes two-side

our mouths became full suitcases bussin
with tea, thrown together with safety pins

bwoy, how we roamed imagination's ring roads
tooting new beats, rattling punk tambourines

we constructed a home from the rubble
of Empire's gutted cathedrals and were

labelled riots. we trendset, transcended,
you know. stretched two arms out
from this island's midriff

etching our names in this stone and concrete
land our mothers threw pardners to fly from

when night reach, man watered down the overproof
rum cupboard. you clocked how our fathers did too?

we mixed ours with fizz from the same corner shop
where we'd learned to moan the price of ackee tins

barely glancing up from their cartoons
our younger brothers heard us stumble in

don't be bait we shushed, dripping Caribbean
seawater from our only Sunday shoes
we wrung ourselves right.

Always The Mix and Blend By Malika Booker

It was a time when the clawed hands of politicians raked the land
into tunnels where seeds could not bloom.
A time when youths strained against these snapping crocodile jaws.
It was a time when hate fires raged in New Cross and sirens preyed on
black boys as these rugged youths whose shoe back ah bruk down,
rocked back to the sounds of two tone in black and white suits
bopping trilby and pork pie hats to the sounds of two tone.
At home Nephew Earl punched fifty pence into the electric meter,
tuned into, *Message to you Rudie,* on Top of The Pops
swigging cans of Special Brew while Uncle Tommy kissed his teeth,
swearing, *old time music come back again. How de dotish pickney them*
ah spoil up good ole Jamaican tunes with this foolish mix and blend.

History Swirls

Maureen Roberts

History swirls
It's in a curl, an upper lip
a deeply furrowed brow

Our wind-whipped parents
Braved ocean liners to reach these shores
Tailored suits, seamstress sewn dresses

Theirs the music of nostalgia and romance
Jim Reeves and Nat King Cole
Roses are still red my love

History swirls
'Put your sweet lips a little closer to the phone'
Gave way to Milly's 'my boy lollipop'

Jumping, joyous soundtracks of their lives
Cugano, Equiano, Sancho and Prince
What songs did you sing?

Do your rhythms jump in our bones
Echoes of lives we did not know
Cugano, Equiano, Prince and Sancho

History swirls
Around cans of Red Stripe beer
Around rugged, ruffian Rude Boys

Youth energy fuelled by Saturday soup
Singing down the rhythms of our lives
Mixing punk, reggae, kaiso lyrics

History swirls
We're alienated, excluded, cast aside
Still one tribe, one tribe, one tribe.

In Your Young Days

for The Specials

Richard Georges

the vocalist holds the microphone like
a silver chalice to his parted lips;
his voice a booming and unbodied light

blowing through the dancehall. His silhouette slips,
like his notes, a warm blurring vibrato,
the stage swimming in a cardinal light,

Neville's head thrown back, the stage in two tones,
his eyes closed, the lush bass skipping inside
him, his shining skin and the giddy horns

and the skinny man bouncing on the keys
above the writhing crowd the guitar's song
and the dancing streamers — a Grecian frieze.

we are all wondering, wondering now,
what to do now we know this is the end.

a galaxy lies beyond the hot stage
and in the shaking, writhing crowd, each face

a pock-marked moon, a shroud of pale flowers
the band lurching towards its apogee
in the midland citadel, these lost hours,

these children losing their fears of lonely
futures, finding something pure to follow
the quiet fire that awakens us

our slick midnight skin, the body hollow
something aching and hungry – the touch
an urgent kiss in the dark discotheque

turns the whole place into a fantasy –
a limbo, a border, a land of rest,
to witness this moment of alchemy.

The Rudeboy Returns

Roger Robinson

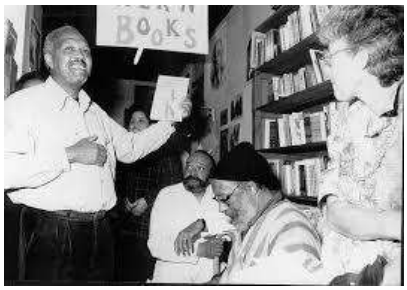
Like some gunslinger. Slowly emerging
from the shadow of the underpass
the Rudeboy returns to reclaim his style.
He's come to take ska back from the name they've called it.
First he takes his unpaid image off any records,
and has his loafers, polished, shined and returned.
He retrieves the accurate tilt of his pork pie hat
and the exact width and length of his side part.
See him now ripping the scarlet silk lining out of the mohair overcoats in the mod boutique.
Rudeboy is not someone to mess with, you can't
friend him. He'd rather you not watch 'pon him.
He don't beg friend and his switchblade is heavy
and warm in the crease of his pocket, so be warned.
What do they know 'bout his hurts and hungry bellies?
What do they know 'bout death and games of cards?
They know nothing of the scars these clothes have covered.
They only know 'bout the flower but not the twisted matted roots.

The Roots of Independent Black British Publishing

Roxy Harris & Sarah White

The 1960s saw the first small independent specialist black publishing houses — New Beacon Books (founded by John La Rose and Sarah White) in 1966, and Bogle L'Ouverture Publications (Eric and Jessica Huntley) in 1968.

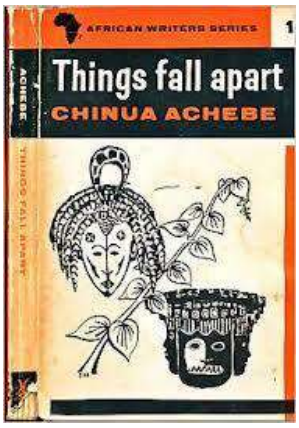
Significantly 1966 was not only when New Beacon was founded, but also when the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) burst on the scene. Many West Indian postgraduate students were in London continuing their studies after doing their first degrees in the newly formed University of the West Indies. There was an active students' centre in Earls Court where CAM held its regular monthly meetings. Adjacent was Nkrumah's Africa Unity House, forming a similar base for African students, but also hosting liberation movements from Southern and Portuguese Africa. And in the USA there was the burgeoning development of the black power movement. It was a very special time, a concentrated cauldron of ideas.



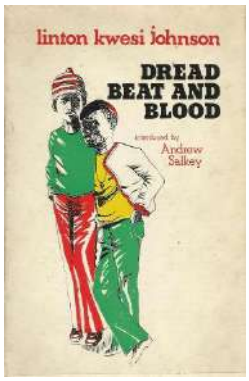
CAM founders with author Anne Walmsley © GPI

CAM had an intense and vibrant six years of talks, discussions, 'warishi' nights. Ideas explored lived on through friendships and shared interests, and also in the everyday experience of later generations of West Indians who were beginning to put down roots in the UK and form a distinct Black British experience.

This did not mean that no publishing went on at all before 1966. *Minty Alley* by CLR James was first published in 1936 by Secker and Warburg. New Beacon republished it in 1971, part of John La Rose's vision to make out-of-print classic texts accessible to a new generation of readers. A considerable number of authors, born in the Caribbean, but with writing that reflected their experience both in the Caribbean and in the UK, began to appear, published by established UK publishers. These included George Lamming, VS Naipaul, Andrew Salkey and Sam Selvon. Henry Swanzy, working for the BBC's *Caribbean Voices*, provided a space for many Caribbean–based writers to hone their craft.



James Currey's pioneering Heinemann African Writers series provided a rich door to African creative writing. There were also new secondary school texts beginning to reflect the changing attitudes of the newly independent countries.



During the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the publishing of specifically Black British writing or writing addressing the specific Black British experience developed slowly. Bogle L'Ouverture published *Getting to Know Ourselves*, and *Dread Beat and Blood by* Linton Kwesi Johnson, Allison & Busby published Buchi Emecheta's fiction, as well as non-fiction and children's books. In 1971 New Beacon published the campaigning booklet *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System* for the Caribbean Education and Community Workers Association, one of the early black education movement's campaigning groups. Other start–up publishers included Blackbird Books (Rudolf Kizerman), Karnak House (Amon Sabaar Sakana) and Karia Press (Buzz Johnson). They all struggled, often operating from cramped quarters in their own homes and providing their own funds. They all had to have an activist approach to the works they were publishing — promoting them at public meetings, readings and through direct sales. They shared this activist orientation with the pioneering New Beacon and Bogle L'Ouverture.

The 1980s saw a qualitative shift in the Black British publishing world. For one thing, government money became available. The British state was faced with the protest movements that had led to the New Cross Massacre Black Peoples Day of Action in 1981 and the uprisings in cities all over the UK that had followed. They needed to absorb or neutralise the protest**.** Suddenly grants were available, many in London through the Greater London Council and Inner London Education Authority. They helped to provide sustenance and funds for numerous community writing and publishing groups which had started to emerge in 1970s: Akira, the Black Ink Collective, Centerprise, Commonplace Workshop, Out of Many Creative Arts Group, Peckham Publishing Project and so on. Many individual schools around the country were encouraging their pupils to write about their own experiences. The publishing of poetry, stories and autobiographies all flourished, creating a generation whose own Black British experience was being validated as something worth writing about.

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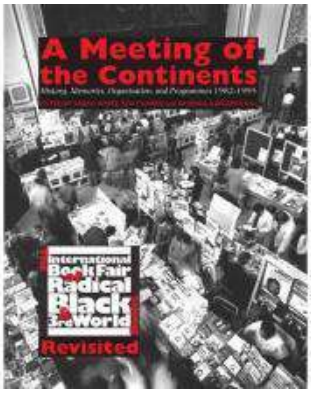
In 1982, the First International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books took place. By 1981 New Beacon was working closely, politically and culturally, with Bogle L'Ouverture Publications and Race Today Publications through the Alliance of the Black Parents Movement, the Black Youth Movement and the Race Today Collective. The Alliance, which also had branches in Manchester and Bradford/Leeds, had provided the core organisational structure for the successful Black Peoples Day of Action march. In the autumn of 1981 New Beacon and Bogle, both publishing houses and bookshops, and Race Today Publications, publishing its journal but by now books as well, discussed and acted upon an idea they had for an international book fair. A Call to the Book Fair was sent out in the autumn of 1981 by the two directors, Jessica Huntley and John La Rose:

The aim of the Book Fair is to mark the new phase in the growth of radical ideas and concepts and their expression in literature, politics, music, art and social life. It will be a meeting place for writers, publishers, distributors, booksellers, artists, musicians, film makers and the people who inspire and consume their creative productions.

The first Book Fair was held in Islington, the second in Lambeth and the third in Acton, reflecting the three areas of London where the organisers were based. In 1985 it moved to the Camden Centre, remaining there until the final Book Fair in 1995.



The Book Fairs were a great inspiration and helped to nurture many independent black British publishing initiatives at the time. Some fell by the wayside, but a look at the Book Fair brochure published each year with its list of participants and publishers shows the same names coming and growing year after year: Tamarind Press, Verna Wilkins' pioneering children's book publisher; Peepal Tree Press started by Jeremy Poynting with work from East Indian Caribbean writers but later widening its net to Caribbean, African and Black British writers. This history is comprehensively documented in the book *A Meeting of the Continents* (2005).

People and publishers came from all over the world to participate. The Book Fairs and their Festivals provided a platform for discussion around ideas, politics and culture. They built networks and alliances. They carved out a space for independent publishing initiatives. They helped small publishers, who met each other, shared experiences, methods, contacts and skills. They provided an important space to grow and gain confidence. They grew the readership for the wide, varied and distinctive Black British writing which we see today — as well as providing inspiration for those who would go on to become those authors.

NOTE

For further information on International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, please visit the George Padmore Institute website at www.georgepadmoreinsitute.org where you can also purchase *A Meeting of the Continents: The International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books (1982-199) — Revisited* ed. by Sarah White, Roxy Harris and Sharmilla Beezmohun