



Emanuel School

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

MONDAY 9TH OCTOBER 2023

JIMI HENDRIX

Freddie (U6JEH)

Described as “arguably the greatest instrumentalist in the history of rock music” by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Jimi Hendrix vastly expanded the vocabulary of the electric guitar and revolutionised rock music in his brief four-year reign as a superstar before his tragic death in 1970 (age 27).

As a black rockstar in the 60s, Hendrix is emblematic of the racial contradictions of the time. Rock music was seen as ‘white’ music and Hendrix was an outlier; a black man playing white music. Typically, black artists had developed styles of playing in jazz and R&B that emphasised the distinctive timbre of the guitar set against the other instruments. White artists took this a step further and perfected the art of guitar soloing. Hendrix became a master of rock guitar soloing and

with that came a previously unheard situation where a black man was worshipped by young white males for mastery of what was previously their domain.

Unbeknownst to these fans, much of Hendrix’s life had been dominated by racism. As a teenager, he was given the choice of jail time or enlisting in the army after being arrested on dubious charges of driving stolen cars. Hendrix chose to become a paratrooper. Yet Hendrix’s skin colour was one of his major selling points when he burst onto the scene in 1967. At a time when a black man could be killed for just being with a white woman, Hendrix was surrounded by white groupies. He became the first black sex symbol American white people unabashedly embraced.

Nonetheless, Hendrix continued to experience racism as a musician. During his tour of the Chitlin’ Circuit (venues across the south of America) he



was not allowed to use the bathrooms at gas stations because they closed their doors to black people. Even when he travelled to London in 1966 for his big break, his reception was still tinged with racism. Various biographies of Hendrix noted that many of the white musicians he encountered had little exposure to black people and had difficulty accepting Hendrix as a superior musician. Some of their resistance to him was rooted in ego as well as race.

However, Jimi Hendrix wasn’t accepted by his own race either. During the early days of his career, Hendrix attempted to encourage African American radio stations to play his music but to no avail. In 1969, two weeks after closing Woodstock with his legendary reinvention of “Star Spangled Banner”, the pinnacle of his short but momentous career, Hendrix put on a show for a demographic he called “my people” in Harlem. This gig, however, was ruined almost as soon as he stepped onstage. He was heckled and jeered throughout. Someone threw a bottle at him that shattered against a speaker; eggs splattered on the stage. Hendrix gamely played on while much of the crowd melted away.

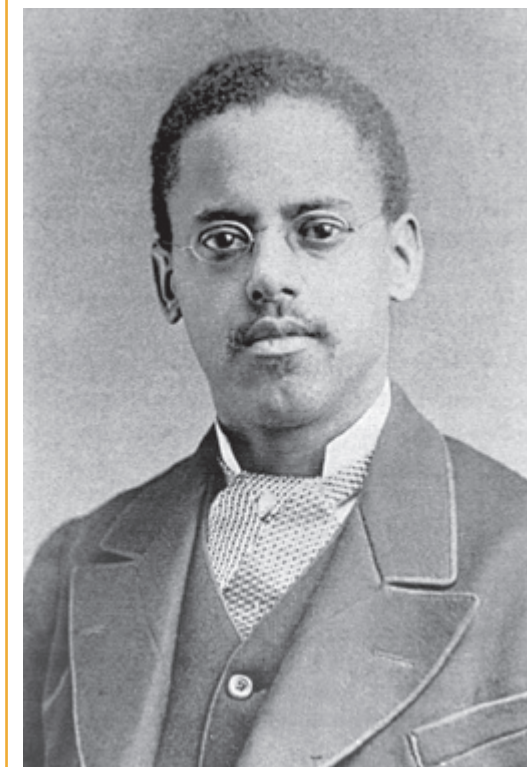
At the time, Hendrix was mistakenly regarded as an Uncle Tom, a black apologist kicking up to white America by playing white music. This was deeply ironic, of course, as race had deeply frustrated Hendrix since he first broke onto the music scene. He hated that he was reduced to a stereotype by many white fans, who saw him as a sexualised black man instead of what he really was: a musician, and a genius one at that.

Before he held his ill-fated Harlem concert, Hendrix told a New York Times reporter why he returned to his old neighbourhood, “Sometimes when I come up here, people say, ‘He plays white rock for white people; what’s he doing up here?’ Well, I want to show them that music is universal – that there is no white rock or black rock.”

INVENTION OF THE LIGHT BULB

Keza (U6JEH)

When we think about the invention of the light bulb, we think about Thomas Edison, Joseph Swan, and Alessandro Cruto. We do not think about Lewis Latimer, the inventor of the Carbon Filament, a vital key to the light bulb invention. Born in 1848 he taught himself the art of invention and by his death in 1928 he had procured eight Patents (exclusive rights for an invention meaning they have complete say over who can make their product). Having worked in the Edison Pioneers group and written a book on ‘*Incandescent Lighting: A Practical Description of the Edison System*’, Latimer then went into the Telephone invention. He drew up patent ideas for Alexander Graham Bell’s application. Black History Month is a perfect opportunity to showcase the work of such unsung heroes.



THE POOL PLAYERS

SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL

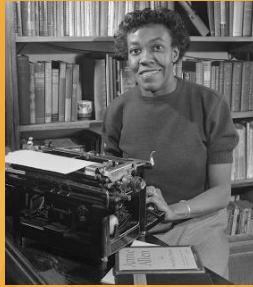
Mr E Elliot

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.



The first time I heard 'We Real Cool' I was in my early University years. I had been studying poetry and, much to my delight, found a collection called Poetry Speaks. It was a two CD collection (the fact that CDs have become an anachronism is still hard to believe) that featured a plethora of great poets reading their own work. Going back as far as Whitman and ranging through Elliot, Thomas, Hughes, Ginsberg, Plath and many more, it was an exciting moment for a student with a nascent love for poetry. When I got to Brooks, everything changed.

First, there was her voice: it was rich and sonorous and spoke of experience and wisdom. In her preamble to the poem, she spoke of how she wrote it. One day in 1959, she had been passing by a pool hall during the day and saw a crowd of young black boys hanging out. This was during school time and her first reaction had been tinged with anger and judgement - those boys should be in school. As the experience percolated in her mind, a nagging question appeared to her - instead of condemning these boys, should she not try and understand them? Should she not try to walk a mile in their shoes instead of writing them off as juvenile delinquents? And so, she went and wrote one of the most important and recognisable poems of the 20th century.

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in 1917 in Topeka, Kansas and was raised on the south side of Chicago. This article is not a biography, but a few salient points will be addressed. Growing up in the 1920s, even in the Midwest of the United States, was a harrowing experience for young black people. Brooks' early

experiences around Chicago instilled in her a sense of the discrimination faced by millions of black men and women around the country. Her parents were involved in the arts, and at the tender age of seven she brought her mother a page of rhymes and what she called 'meditations'. In a moment that she would remember until her 90s, her mother told her that one day, she would be 'the lady poet'.

Another important experience happened when Brooks was 17. Langston Hughes, arguably the most important black poet in the world in the 1930s, visited her church and read some of his work. By this point, she had written collections of poems reflecting her experiences, won a national poetry competition and was a regular contributor to newspapers around Chicago. Her mother urged her to bring her poems to Hughes. He read them, smiled, and told her to keep writing. That one day, she would have a book of poems. How right he was. Although she did not attend college and instead opted for a two-year junior college programme, Brooks had a keen sense of intuition when it came to seeing the world and the powers that made it run; she referred to herself as a 'people poet'. As she wrote more and more, her reputation grew, though it wouldn't be until 1959 that she would become a household name with 'We Real Cool'.

Brooks once said that writing poetry was a 'friend to whom you can say too much' and this was nowhere more apparent than 'We Real Cool'. On the surface, it is a relatively straightforward poem. The lines are short, and it doesn't employ any flashy poetic techniques. And yet, there is something in the rhythm of it, even on the page, that speaks of its power. To start with, the collective pronoun 'we' immediately thrusts the listener into the perspective of the boys. There is no external judgement, no derision or satire, but simply a fleeting moment where the lives of these boys flashes bright, like a bolt of lightning, in the ears and eyes of those who are experiencing it. I promised myself not to go 'English-teacher-mode', so I won't force our dear readers to withstand a line-by-line analysis, but a few notes will suffice.

The way the poem is constructed is incredibly important. Note the placement of 'we', falling at the end of the line. This results in an unpredictable rhythm, perhaps indicating how a life so unfair for these boys seemed so hard to fathom. The words she emphasises

most- 'real', 'left', 'strike', 'lurk', 'sing', 'thin', 'jazz', and 'die' become the ebbs in the flow of the poem. Each word is its own piece of the puzzle to construct the existence of these boys.

In the 1950s, the idea of a 'teenager' was a relatively new concept. Thanks in large part to the birth of rock and roll with artists like Little Richard and Chuck Berry, teenagers began to really see themselves, being able to carve out a rebellion that would eventually become a counterculture in the 60s that was rooted in rebellion against their parents and established cultural values.

Brooks represents this in her poem with the aforementioned words: we see students who are lurking about out of school, drinking alcohol and frequenting pool parlors which were notorious for morally questionable behaviour. Interestingly, when 'We Real Cool' was first released, it was banned in several more conservative states. This wasn't anything explicitly racist, but a reaction to the word 'jazz'. Born in the melting pot of New Orleans, jazz was a predominantly black music that was viewed as far too sexual - music that encouraged people to dance too close together, not leaving enough room for Jesus between their bodies.

But it is too simplistic to just consider how rebellious the boys in this poem would have seemed to 'White America' - the truth is that the majority of white America in the 1950s viewed black youth as troublesome, even if they were in school and angelic. The true complexity of this poem comes from its ability to consider how black society might view these boys. Rooted in spirituality and worship, black Americans had long tried to live clean and simple lives and a strict code of respect and hard work was commonplace in black households around America. For many, the idea was to give white folks as few reasons as possible to single them out.

So, what was Brooks trying to say? The iconic final line of 'we die soon' might imply that if these boys are to continue on living this way, they will end up dead. And fast. But that doesn't factor in the lived experience of these young men. Perhaps it was the inequality in the world that had put this fatalistic drive towards reckless abandon into their hearts, seeing the world as not caring for them and filling them with a deep sense of apathy. In reality, the answer is that Brooks didn't have a message for these boys; she just wanted to explore

the truth of their experience. For all great writing must be truthful, and if it is truthful, the message is just that - truth. It was then up to the reader or listener to decide what meaning to ascribe to the poem; how to 'peel the onion', if you will. To me, even if Brooks wasn't outright condemning the society that could create a world that would have these boys feeling and acting the way they were in her poem, it didn't happen by accident. If they had been treated as equals and given the same opportunities as other children, things might have turned out differently for them.

A great poet is not just one poem. To distil Gwendolyn Brooks' contributions down to this one poem is a gross mistreatment of a woman who accomplished more in her lifetime than many could dream of. Her list of achievements could fill an article of its own, but the most notable is, of course, her becoming the first Black Poet Laureate in Illinois and eventually for the United States.

But more important than her contributions to the literary world is her dedication to education and community. It is often said that people should start 'giving back' to their communities once they hit it big. Brooks did more than this; she pledged her time, effort, and finances to people around her home state, visiting schools, prisons, hospitals and churches and sharing her love for the written word. She sponsored several scholarships, writing awards and programmes to fund educational opportunities for disadvantaged young people around the United States. To this day, 23 years after her death, there are young people around America who are being given opportunities they would never have had, were it not for this incredible woman. For the work she started is not, and may never be, truly over.

One of my favourite quotes from Brooks about writing poetry is that it's a 'delicious agony'. Writing poetry shouldn't be easy, it shouldn't come quickly, it shouldn't be neat or pretty. It should uncover the dark parts of society and imperfect people, holding them up to the light, warts and all. Thanks for reading and if you enjoy this poem, please check out some of her other incredible work. 'We Real Cool' is but a drop in an ocean of the timeless work Gwendolyn Brooks left the world. (Note: the same reading I mentioned at the beginning of the article is now on YouTube and is certainly worth listening to!).