



Emanuel School

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Tuesday 15th October 2024

IF JAMES BOND HAD A CARRIBEAN TAILOR

Mr D Buxton

Andrew Ramroop, to me, is a shining example that focus and action, can overcome seemingly impossible barriers.

He grew up in a small village in the mountains of Trinidad and Tobago in the 1950s where there was no electricity, where teachers had few expectations for children and would hit them for next to nothing. His mother was paid in food rather than money and, despite his humble beginnings, he was only the second person to leave his town. By the age of 17, he had saved enough money to leave his mother and his four siblings behind to migrate to England by himself, which in his interview on BBC Island's Dessert Discs, clearly still pains him to this day.

His dream was "...to work for James Bond's tailors on the Golden Mile [Saville Row]".

In London, he worked seven days a week to fund his university course at the London College of Fashion, which he completed in 2 years with so much flair and so quickly that the University made a new category of award just for him - 'Diploma of Distinction'.

Hindered by his skin colour, he struggled to get a front of house job on Saville Row. But luckily, in 1974, he was given a break by Maurice Sedwell who was a well-travelled Naval man, and so was more open to different cultures.

Years later, Andrew Ramroop worked his way up, eventually buying the business and moving to an even larger premises on Saville Row.

He is now considered one of the best tailors in the world and his current clientele remains top secret, but previously included Princess Diana, Kelly Rowland, Mike Skinner, Samuel L Jackson and Robin Van Persie to name a few. Alongside being the first Black tailor on Saville Row, he was the first tailor to be awarded an OBE by the late Queen Elizabeth II in 2009, for launching a tailoring academy to train the next generation. He has also been awarded professorships from the London Institute and University of the Arts and gained the second highest civilian award in Trinidad and Tobago, the Chaconia Medal Gold, among many other awards and accolades.

From his humble beginnings, who would have thought that this nine-year-old boy making trousers out of pillow cases in the mountains of Trinidad and Tobago; who left school at the age of thirteen; who had never been to another country; who travelled by himself with only two suits and his pyjamas; who was disadvantaged by the colour of his skin; who had little to no support in a new country would go on to have so many 'firsts' in such a lavish and inaccessible sector and create such a legacy of awards and titles.

Andrew Ramroop, to me, is a shining example that focus and action, can overcome seemingly impossible barriers.

MEET CHARLES HARRISON – A TRUE DESIGN LEGEND

Mr N Guegan

Imagine, it's 7.00 Monday morning and the rubbish is being collected soon.

You open up your plastic bins and neatly place your rubbish bags outside your house ready for collection. In the most part, you don't really hear people take their bins out, because they are plastic. Did you know that until Charles Harrison designed the first plastic rubbish bin, they were all metal?

And that would have been one very noisy Monday morning!

Harrison was a designer, not an inventor; his mission was to refashion consumer products so they could be mass-produced, pleasing to the eye and conducive to easier living.

In 1966, Charles "Chuck" Harrison, an industrial designer at Sears, Roebuck & Company, disposed of an everyday nuisance—the early-morning clanging of metal garbage cans—by creating the first-ever plastic garbage bin. "When that can hit the market, it did so with the biggest bang you never heard," wrote

Harrison in his 2005 book, *A Life's Design*. "Everyone was using it, but few people paid close attention to it." And so it was for some 600 other household products that Harrison designed over his 32 years at Sears—everything from blenders to baby cribs, hair dryers to hedge clippers. Consumers snatched his wares from store shelves and ordered countless more from the Sears catalogue. And yet few stopped to consider their maker, who at times sketched one or two product ideas an hour, at his drafting table. Giving credit where credit is due, the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum recently honoured Harrison with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Harrison's objective to make things fit in rather than stand out mirrored his own efforts as an African-American forging a career in the industrial design field. Sears turned him down in 1956; he says a manager told him that there was an unwritten policy against hiring Black people. But he found freelance work at Sears and work at a few furniture and electronics firms. (He redesigned the popular View-Master at one job.) In 1961, Sears reconsidered, and Harrison joined its 20-person product design and testing laboratory. He eventually rose to become the company's first Black executive and design legend.



MARY JACKSON BREAKING BARRIERS AS NASA'S FIRST BLACK FEMALE ENGINEER

Mr H Barber

“I plan on being an engineer at NASA, but I can't do that without taking those classes at that all-white high school. And I can't change the color of my skin, so I have no choice but to be the first.”

Janelle Monáe as Mary Jackson in *Hidden Figures* (2016)

This powerful line captures the grit and determination of Mary Jackson, a woman who refused to let systemic racism and sexism stand in her way. As NASA's first Black female engineer, Jackson faced immense challenges but paved the way for future generations of women and people of colour in STEM fields. Her story is a testament to the importance of diversity and inclusion, not only in mathematics and aerospace engineering, but throughout every day life.

Early Life and Ambition

Born in 1921 in Hampton, Virginia, Mary Jackson grew up during the era of Jim Crow segregation. From an early age, she excelled in maths and science, despite the limited educational resources available to Black students. After graduating from Hampton Institute in 1942 with degrees in Mathematics and Physical Sciences, she began her career as a teacher, a common path for African American women at the time. However, Jackson always aspired to do more with her skills.

In 1951, she joined NASA, working as a “human computer,” performing complex calculations in a segregated workspace



alongside other Black women. Even in this limited role, her mathematical brilliance was clear, but institutional barriers hindered her advancement.

Overcoming Racism and Sexism

As both a Black person and a woman in the 1950s, Jackson faced a double bind of discrimination. Despite her evident talent, she was continually underestimated due to her race and gender. In 1953, she began working with engineer Kazimierz Czarnecki during her career at NASA, who encouraged her to become an engineer herself. However, Jackson needed further education to qualify, which required taking additional courses at a segregated, all-White school.

In the segregated South, Jackson had to petition the city of Hampton to attend night classes at Hampton High School. Even after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, desegregation was slow, and Jackson was often the only Black student in the classroom. She faced hostility, yet she persisted, completing the necessary coursework and proving that

determination could overcome entrenched racism.

Becoming NASA's First Black Female Engineer

In 1958, Mary Jackson's perseverance paid off when she was promoted to aerospace engineer at NASA, becoming the agency's first Black woman to hold that title. As part of the Compressibility Research Division, she conducted crucial experiments on airflow and thrust, contributing to the development of cutting-edge aircraft and spacecraft.

Jackson's expertise in boundary layer effects, which influence flight performance, was vital to many NASA projects. She thrived in a male-dominated, predominantly White field where many believed women, particularly women of colour, had no place. Despite these attitudes, she excelled, demonstrating that skill and intellect are not determined by gender or race.

Challenging Stereotypes and Advocating for Diversity

Throughout her career, Jackson not only defied stereotypes but also worked to dismantle them. Her success at NASA sent a powerful message: talent and ability are universal, regardless of background. Jackson's story inspired countless young Black women to pursue STEM careers, showing them that they, too, could succeed in fields where they were often underrepresented.

After more than two decades as an engineer, Jackson made a selfless decision to transition into a human resources role, focusing on advocacy. She became an administrator in NASA's Equal Opportunity Specialist Program, where she worked tirelessly to promote diversity in STEM and push for more women

and people of colour to be hired and promoted within the organization.

Jackson understood that diversity is not just a moral necessity but a key driver of innovation. Different perspectives generate new ideas and approaches, which are essential for solving complex problems like those tackled at NASA. Her work in promoting inclusion helped make NASA a more representative organization and ensured future generations could follow in her footsteps.

Why Mary Jackson's Story Matters Today

Mary Jackson's life is a reminder of the importance of breaking down barriers—whether rooted in prejudice, sexism, or outdated societal norms. Her achievements demonstrate that brilliance and ability exist in everyone, regardless of race or gender, and that diversity is essential to the success of any industry, especially STEM fields.

In today's world, efforts to encourage more women and minorities to enter science, technology, engineering, and mathematics continue, and Jackson's story holds immense relevance. By celebrating pioneers like her, we honour their legacy while ensuring future generations are inspired to reach even greater heights.

Jackson's work at NASA, both as an engineer and an advocate for diversity, shows us the power of opportunity, mentorship, and determination. The path may be challenging, but as Mary Jackson demonstrated, it is worth every step. Her story continues to inspire, proving that anyone, given the chance, can change the world.

HAVE YOU HEARD GEORGE'S PODCAST?!

Mrs J Peters

Always a bit late to the party with cultural phenomena, I'm fond of the Radio 4 podcast [This Cultural Life](#), when I'm doing household chores. Each week a guest from the arts world talks to the gently inquisitive journalist John Wilson about the major influences on their life and work. I've learned to go with the flow and enjoyed some mind-expanding moments. That's how I came to find myself listening to ex-rapper, spoken word performance poet and cultural phenomenon **George the Poet**, whose forensically intelligent and independent perspectives on his own experiences and the histories that are told to us both enthralled me and made me uncomfortably aware of the limits of my euro-centric knowledge of world history.

George Mpanga, better known by his stage name George the Poet, is a spoken-word artist, poet, and podcast host with a powerful interest in social and political issues, and in recent years he has offered some extraordinary insights into African history in his beautiful, shocking, podcast series: *Have You Heard George's Podcast?*

George's paternal grandmother was Ugandan politician and former cabinet minister Joyce Mpanga. His parents came to Britain as asylum seekers in the 1980s and lived on the St Raphael's Estate, in Neasden, NW London. He's described his family life as "beautiful" and acknowledges his parents' high expectations: "My mum made it clear very early in my life that she wanted me to go to Oxbridge." "They never compromised". George's mother was determined that her bright son would get an exceptional education, so she "rolled up her sleeves and taught me herself" because she "didn't feel the education system was taking us seriously". This ensured his successful entry into prestigious grammar school Queen Elizabeth Boys' in Barnet—

thirteen miles away and a 90-minute journey to and from home each day. Once there, he rose to the academic challenge but was in a very small minority of black students travelling in daily from far outside affluent Barnet. "The reality is much of our lives growing up in London is organised along racial lines". Despite often feeling socially isolated where "opportunity wasn't equal"—he succeeded in going on to read Politics and Sociology at King's College Cambridge, an experience which he has also described as "a lonely journey" but one which "made me commit to the life of political science".

George was a rapper from his mid-teens. "I was a rapper first..." but "while I was rapping... I felt like there was room to evolve that in a poetic form." He also increasingly felt that as a black rapper performing to largely white audiences, he was a "caricature" — giving an "impression of a black person" and he rejected the negative stereotypes perpetuated by commercial grime, rap and hip hop. By the time he left university he had already managed to secure himself a record label with *Island Records*, but as a performance poet, no longer a rapper.

He rapidly gained huge success and recognition. In 2012, he premiered the piece "My City", about his hometown London. Subsequently, BBC Radio 1 selected him as the face of their Hackney Weekend, and Sky Sports F1 commissioned him to write poems for their coverage of the 2012 Formula One season and the 2013 Monaco Grand Prix. He was nominated for the *Brits Critics Choice Award* and the *BBC Sound of 2015* and opened the BBC coverage of the royal wedding between Prince Harry and Megan Markle, by reading a love poem.

However, he became uncomfortable with being treated as a token representative of his community — wanting "deeper conversation" and when he was offered an MBE in 2019 he declined the award, citing the British Empire's treatment of his ancestral homeland, Uganda, as his reason.

In 2019 he launched a podcast produced by the BBC, entitled *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* This genre-defying podcast interweaves stories of George's own upbringing with detailed explorations of contemporary, social and political issues. All delivered in rhyme, it is supported by an extraordinary soundtrack, composed by musician and sound engineer Benbrick. It has been described as having "reinvented the form of the podcast..." and won a host of prizes - five awards at the 2019 British Podcast Awards including "Podcast of the Year", and the *Peabody Award* - a prestigious American prize for broadcasting which had never before been awarded outside the United States.

Always analytical — aiming to "present scenarios in a way which would allow me to advocate", his first three series covered a wide range of topics — Grenfell — 2011 London riots — personal reflections. However his most recent fourth series *After Empire* aims to teach complex ideas through the context.

He said on *This Cultural Life*, "Right now I want to reintroduce black history — from the analysis of the independence of Africa, the decolonisation of Africa and some of the things that have happened since. That's the space that I'm trying to open up." "There's a need for a return to Ground Zero. What exactly happened? What might that indicate about how to move forward?"

His podcast episodes have endeavoured to make inroads on this project, delivering new perspectives on the complex histories of Ghana, Congo, 'former' French African colonies, Jamaica and Uganda in naturalistic rhyming essays which he says are "infinitely difficult to create".

In 2021, he also began studying for a PhD in Economics at University College London, focusing on the potential for black music to catalyse social power and economic progress.

Although he is cautious of describing himself as an

activist and remains scrupulously diplomatic and generous in his responses to questions, George the Poet is uncompromising and provocative in his desire to achieve an objective assessment of African history and politics:

"What's Black History Month gonna do for a continent plus a diaspora?"

"Try and teach white history in a month and let me know how it goes."

If this has stirred your curiosity, or a glimpse of a realisation of the infinite number of historical narratives that, like me, you don't know anything about...

Listen to George in his own words:

[Impossible](#) is a spoken word piece about self-belief in the face of personal battles and doubtful outsiders.

[JamaicanDemAhCrazy](#) from his recent podcast series explores Jamaica's 1970s bid to end global inequality and its impact.

