

IMPRESSIONS OF DETROIT

City Where Dreams About America Die First

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From the Detroit Institute of Arts, courtesy of Romare Howard Bearden Foundation



Soldiers and Sailors Monument

The Black brother stands at the street corner, wailing as if he is upset in the mind. Another roams around the nearby petrol station, asking for alms. Yet another stands in the midst of moving traffic, hawking the *Final Call* newspaper. Here and there a dot of White faces in a city of abandoned houses and homeless people. Detroit, America's border city of cars has bumpy, patched-up roads like the sub-water-ways of Lagos metropolis.

Is this America the great, the country of dreams? Is this the industrial America, the model state of aspirations? Majek Fashek sang about it in his *So Long, Too Long*. He saw beggars and hawkers of the American dream and he was bewildered. Men may still escape to her shores, but may her streets never kill their dreams.

Like the biblical Bethlehem which was the least among the princes of Judah but nevertheless produced a governor

that ruled over the people of Israel, Detroit's African-American community has played a pivotal role in many events that have shaped America's culture and history.

Ever heard of 'the real McCoy'? Elijah McCoy was the 19th century inventor whose high-quality craftsmanship of seventy-eight inventions sparked the phrase. He was from Detroit. Joe Louis of the 'Brown Bomber' fame was also the world heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949, victories which were a symbol of American pride and honour during the Second World War period. How mighty the Black community has been!

Time would still permit us to mention Dr. Ralph Bunche who as a United Nations mediator during the Arab-Israel war of 1948 won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Coleman A. Young, Detroit's first elected African-American mayor in 1973 was a civil rights and labour movement activist.

The Mother of the Civil Rights Movement herself, Rosa Parks is also from Detroit. She reminds you of Nigeria's Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the iconoclast female opposition leader who warred against traditional chauvinism and colonial exploitation. Rosa Parks it was who ignited the historic Montgomery bus boycott when she refused to give up her seat to a White person.

In the field of music is Aretha Franklin, the acclaimed queen of soul. She also grew up in Detroit area, singing in her Reverend father's church until show business finally beckoned to her. When you think of people like Ebenezer Obey, Shina Peters, Simeon Adebo, Ernest Shonekan, Olusegun Obasanjo and the Ransome- (Anikulapo-) Kutis and their home city, Abeokuta, and examine their contributions to the history and culture of Nigeria, the story of Detroit in America would have been well understood.

Whether one talks about America's underground railroads, the automotive industry, labour unions, the civil rights movement, religion, politics, music and the arts, Detroit's African-American community, home to the largest concentration of Blacks outside continental Africa, has greatly influenced the course of the American life.

As a people of beauty, the present and past is lived and re-lived aesthetically. Not less than ten museums grace Detroit, all offering a variety of permanent and changing exhibitions illustrating the history and culture of African-Americans. On Frederick Douglass Boulevard is the Museum of African History which is dedicated to educating the general population about the Black man's struggle for freedom and dignity. Its permanent exhibition titled *An Epic of Heroism: The Underground Railroad in Michigan, 1837-1870* offers a moving portrayal of life in Africa, the Middle Passage, life in America during slavery, and the escape to freedom in the northern United States and Canada.

On its own part, Motown Historical Museum is filled with rare photographs, vintage clothing, memorabilia and artefacts recapturing the history and legacy of this era in American music. Popular artistes like Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye and The Temptations recorded their first hits in the Museum's studio known as Hitsville U.S.A.

The Detroit Institute of Arts on Woodward Avenue exhibits famous African-American artists like Romare Bearden and Charles McGee and houses extensive collections of works from ancient cultures including Greece, Rome and Egypt in more than one hundred galleries.

There is the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village which features the Matton House and the Hermitage Slave House. The Matton House explores life

for one African-American family from enslavement through the 1930s, demonstrating how rural southern African-Americans raised crops, livestock and faced up to everyday tasks. Life on industrial plantation and the ingenuity and courage it took to escape from slavery is shown on the Hermitage Slave House. The Village also houses the George Washington Carver Memorial. It has a permanent exhibition about American industrial history titled *Made in America*.

Other notable museums are Your Heritage House, Detroit Historical Museum, National Museum of the Tuskegee Airmen, The Black Cinema Gallery, International Jazz Museum, African-American Heritage Cultural Centre and American Black Artist Museum. The internationally famous Motown Records is also in Detroit, making it a big cultural centre in America.

Africa may well shape up if she knows what her children in the Diaspora think of 'home'. The romanticization of Africa's glorious past may indeed be therapeutic to the souls of the children who couldn't accurately trace their roots. Many of them have rejected their English names and adopted African names which they can't pronounce well and whose meaning they may not even know.

At the shrine of the Black Madonna, I came across 'fellow brothers' who look so much like me. I stopped short of speaking



Aretha Franklin.



Rosa Parks.



Some participants at the last African World Festival in Detroit.

my 'home' language to them. Coming inside their bookstore and galleries, I was awed. What with the array of African crafts, arts, clothes and musical instruments like drums, even *gangan* and *sekere* which they call calabash. For twenty-two years, we learnt, this bookstore (the largest African-American bookstore in the country) has offered an array of Afrocentric items from the world over, including fabrics like *kente* clothes, ties, belts, leather goods and old rare pieces.

Browsing through the collection confirmed the assertion. All known Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe books are there. Ditto for Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*. Zainab Alkali and Buchi Emecheta were not left out.

Opening a book jointly written by Chris Stapleton and Chris May titled *African Rock: The Pop Music of A Continent*, this writer was elated to read about Nigerian musicians. The Afrobeat and Afro-pop section features Fela and Tony Allen, Sonny Okosuns, Onyeka Onwenu amongst others while Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, Dele Abiodun and Segun Adewale graced the juju pages. Apala, sakara and fuji pages have Haruna Ishola, Ayinde Barrister and Gasper Lawal, a Nigerian percussionist resident in the United Kingdom, as stars. The book discusses the background, style and profiles of music from West Africa especially Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Senegal, Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire with singers like E. T. Mensah, Prince Nico Mbagha, Pat Thomas, Manu Dibango, Osibisa, Salif Keita and Musa Suso amongst others. We didn't see this book in Nigeria. Christopher Alan Waterman, once a juju musician in Nigeria, has another book basically on juju music titled *Juju: A Social History and Ethnography of An African Popular Music*.

There are books by, and on, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale

Africa may well shape up if she knows what her children in the Diaspora think of 'home'.

Hurston, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ama Ata Aidoo. Other books are on religion, Black theology, music, dance, literature, history, biography, arts, revolution and nutrition. One could know so much about Africa without once stepping on the African soil. And we thought to ourselves, 'They read what we live.' They would also want to experience what we detest. It is the nature of the world that men must continually move. Where we are going is where others are coming from.

The famous Broadway Theatre is around the corner, Sunny Ade and Sikiru Ayinde Barrister had performed there before. There are other concert venues apart from this. Detroit Repertory Theatre, Chene Park Music Theatre, Fox Theatre and Gem Theatre amongst others are around. Works and places of arts in Detroit can never fully be explored. They can just be glimpsed through.

But does the rich heritage mean so much to the average American Black? Many still live below the poverty level while the money made in the city is used to develop the suburb where the whites live. Ask yourself what the sublime aspiration of a society is and you would remain a philosopher! **GR**



This boxer welcomes you to Detroit



Hitsville, USA