



Musical Crossroads

by Dwandalyn Reece

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) was established by an act of Congress in 2003 making it the nineteenth museum of the Smithsonian Institution. Part of the NMAAHC's mandate is to remember and celebrate the African American experience, both as a story of a nation's people and as a lens into what it means to be an American. Scheduled for completion in 2015, the museum will be built on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on a five-acre tract adjacent to the Washington Monument. Currently, during the pre-building phase, the museum is producing publications, hosting public programs, and building collections such as the Civil Rights Oral History interviews with the Library of Congress.

NMAAHC is pleased to continue its collaboration with the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in producing *Rhythm and Blues: Tell It Like It Is* for the 2011 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The program is a natural outgrowth of the museum's programming in African American music. One of the museum's largest permanent exhibitions, *Musical Crossroads* will explore the history and cultural impact of African American music. Telling the story of African American music from the arrival of the first Africans to the present day, *Musical Crossroads* will explore the role music has played in African American life, its impact as a sustainer of African American cultural traditions, its use for social change, and its profound influence on American musical traditions.

Musical Crossroads will cover the diversity of African American music drawing upon a wide range

of musical genres, highlighting musical innovations, significant time periods and events along with historic performances to capture the music's impact and influence within the United States and abroad. Museum curators are currently seeking out a broad array of objects—musical instruments, recording equipment, handwritten scores, costumes, personal records, stage sets and props, and other memorabilia—to use in the exhibition and include in its permanent collection. Some items in the museum's collection such as Louis Jordan's manuscript for his hit, "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby" (1944), the organ and speaker set James Brown used on tour, or Dinah Washington's traveling case, are just a sample of the types of items the museum hopes to continue to collect.

For more than forty years, the Festival has helped millions of visitors remember and celebrate diverse cultures and traditions that fully embody the American experience. *Rhythm and Blues: Tell It Like It Is* follows in that tradition. This year we celebrate the birth of rhythm and blues (R&B), its diverse geographical roots, its role as the voice of Black communities, and its overwhelming influence on American popular music. The NMAAHC is honored to preserve and celebrate R&B as one of America's most enduring cultural treasures.

Dwandalyn Reece, Ph.D., is Curator of Music and Performing Arts at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. She is curating the museum's permanent music exhibition, Musical Crossroads.

(Left) The exterior design concept of the National Museum of African American History and Culture features the three-tiered corona.

Image courtesy of Freelon Adjaye Bond/Smith Group

(Right) James Brown's speaker cabinet and Harmonics Trek II electric organ are among the items in the National Museum of African American History and Culture's collection. Photo © Christie's Images Limited 2008, courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

(Below) The stage costume worn by Jermaine Jackson of the Jackson Five, circa 1972, is part of the collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Photo by Shaan Kokin/Julien's Auctions, courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture



The Dixie Cups are among the impressive line-up of artists participating in this summer's Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The *Rhythm and Blues: Tell It Like It Is* program is an exploration of the rich historical, cultural, and musical matrix of R&B. Through music and dance performances, workshops, and narrative discussions, this program considers R&B as a collaborative art form that is shaped by composers, performers, producers, and communities of listeners. Most importantly, it highlights how music provides a dynamic lens to explore the relationship of African American history and experiences to American popular culture.

The history of R&B and the breadth of what it encompasses—socially, commercially, and artistically—suggests that it is not monolithic. It tells a complex story of many strands and experiences. A distinctly African American music drawing from the deep tributaries of African American expressive culture, it is an amalgam of jump blues, big band swing, gospel, boogie, and blues that was initially developed during a thirty-year period that bridges the era of legally sanctioned racial segregation, international conflicts, and the struggle for civil rights. Its formal qualities, stylistic range, marketing and consumption trends, and worldwide currency today thus reflect not only the changing social and political landscapes of American race relations, but also urban life, culture, and popular entertainment in mainstream America.

The emergence of R&B as a music category reflects its simultaneous marginalization as a form of African American music and its centrality to the development of a wide repertoire of American popular music genres, most notably rock and roll. Three historical processes provide the framework for understanding the social and cultural contexts of the development of R&B: the migrations of African Americans to urban centers surrounding World War I and World War II, and the civil rights movement.