SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL
INTRODUCTION

This series is dedicated to Dr. Ray Costello, the foremost historian of Black Liverpool

"When everyone makes a film about the Caribbean, it's about Caribbean men and so I made the film 'Daughters of the Windrush' because I felt it was really important that we looked at the daughters and the granddaughters. I turned the story on its head because there's always a back story and the film was a back story behind the Windrush generation here in Liverpool. And I think it's up to people to find out that the story is not just London and Tilbury or Brixton but to find out more about the generation here in Liverpool." [1]

Bea Freeman

Today, when Black people think about Black culture in Britain back in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, it's images of Afro-American and West Indian culture that dominate. There are far fewer images of African culture. [2] It's soul music like Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross and the Supremes; James Brown, the godfather of soul!; hip hop and rap, like NWA, Snoop Dog, Salt-N-Pepa, and reggae music like Bob Marley and the Wailers, Burning Spear and Marcia Griffiths. People remember British-based groups like Matumbi and Aswad, singers like Carol Thompson and Louisa Marks, and dub poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Jean Binta Breeze. Black Studies courses talked far more about the USA and the West Indies, than they did about Africa.

People remember American TV shows with Black characters like the Cosby Show, and The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, and British shows with people like Lenny Henry, Norman Beaton and Judith Jacob.In sport, it's boxers like Muhammad Ali and Marvellous Marvin Hagler, Frank Bruno and Chris Eubank and football players like Viv Anderson and Ian Wright. When people think about Black British youth culture, it's styles like the Afro, and Afro-shirts, platform shoes and beatboxes, and it's Rastafari, including dreadlocks, and red, gold and green colours. Black British youth often had names like Leroy and Winston, and Beverly and Sonia, names that marked them as having West Indian parents. Black British culture was predominantly the culture of West Indians recently settled in Britain since the 1940s, and their children, from families with two West Indian parents, and mainly about London.

True, there were some streams of African culture present too, especially by the 1990s. Groups like Osibisa, singers like Fela Kuti, Youssou N'Dour and Miriam Makeba, and writings by people like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Buchi Emecheta.

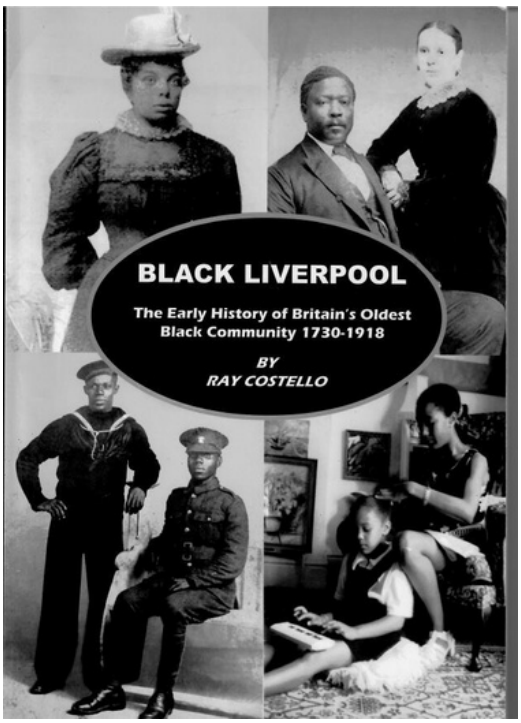

Image of Ray Costello's book 'Black Liverpool'

BLACK CULTURE IN LIVERPOOL: A LITTLE DIFFERENT

Black people in Liverpool in this period knew about and appreciated these cultural patterns but despite appearances, Black culture in the city was just not the same as London and other cities. That's because the city's history was unique, and the Black community distinctive, as compared with Black communities in other cities. From the start of the twentieth century far more Africans than West Indians settled in Liverpool, and it was overwhelmingly men, not women. Most of them were seamen (and some stowaways).

There was frequent inter-racial dating and marriage and a large population of mixed Black/white origins almost all born and raised in Liverpool 8 (which is the district in which most Black and mixed families lived since the 1950s, and was commonly known as L8). Our community was confined to live in inferior housing in the L8 area, and we faced severe economic obstacles and entrenched racial inequality. Despite continuous racism, our community built up a more vivid collective memory of the city's vicious role in slavery, than Black communities in other cities had done; and we had continuous first-hand experience and memory of Liverpool imperialism in Africa throughout the twentieth century.

Black women shared much in common with Black men, and were always prominent activists in community organisations (often in greater numbers than Black men). But Black women's experiences were shaped by the interplay of racism and sexism, as well as unequal access to economic and other resources. So Black women also had different goals, priorities and tactics than Black men.

I've been carrying out research for more than thirty years on transnational Black culture in Liverpool in the final decades of the twentieth century. I've examined music, performance and nightlife, social and political beliefs and practices, Black History courses and literature, language and dialect, and personal fashion, dress and hairstyles.

The ways that sexist ideologies and practices, and the experiences of Black women figure in all of this has always been a priority. What I've found is dramatic changes from the 1970s to the early 2000s, a period in which Afro-American culture was predominant, West Indian culture was rapidly ascendent, and African culture was on the rise.

What I've found in Liverpool are cultural patterns that are unique in the country. They can be described with images and metaphors as an ocean of waves and flows, currents and undercurrents, tides and rushes, ebbs and flows. It's true that transnational Black culture in other cities reflected similar experiences, but not to the same extent, not with the same intensity, not in a community packed into one segregated neighbourhood, and not over the decades, generations and longer, nor with the on-the-ground local experiences and memory of imperialism, as happened in Liverpool.

Back then, the African presence and influence – and the key features of the Black community – are amazingly clear. National music celebrities like The Real Thing (Chris Amoo, Eddie Amoo, Ray Lake, Dave Smith, and earlier on, Kenny Davis), (described in the 1970s as 'the most popular Black British soul group' in the nation), The Christians (including Garry, Roger and Russell Christian), and Distinction (Donna Aleyne, Amanda Bilal-Jones, Barbara Phillips and Susan Phillips). Local music celebrities in the city itself like Derry Wilkie, Ramon 'Sugar' Deen, Colin Areety, Bernie Wenton and Dave Clay (known as 'Soul 8'). And before them it was The Chants. One of the most distinctive aspects of the music scene in L8 were the African nightclubs located on – and close by – Prinny Avenue[3], like The Sierra Leone, The Ibo Social Club, The Yoruba, The Nigerian, The Ghana club, and The Somali Club. They played soul music, reggae and some calypso, along with a small (but very notable) amount of West African music, including artists like Fela Kuti, Prince Nico Mbarga, and Highlife (the precursors to what in the 2020's is called Afro-beat). No other city in the nation (not even London) had a concentration of African nightclubs like this, all in L8, each of them just a few hundred yards or less from one another.

Television and film actors born and raised in Liverpool that come to mind include Paul Barber, Louis Emerick, Kathy Tyson and Craig Charles. There were poets like Eugene Lange (aka Muhammad Khalil) and Levi Tafari; footballers like Howard Gayle, Maxi Branch, Wally Brown and Leo Skeete. (John Barnes was an exception, because he was born and raised in Jamaica with one Jamaican and one Trinidadian parent). Boxers included world champion John Conteh, and fighters like Carl Speare, Larry Paul, and Richie and Nigel Wenton (and before them, Tommy Wright and Noel Quarless). Most of them came from families of mixed Black/white origins.

Reggae and Rastafari also figured strongly in the culture of Black Liverpool but again, there were differences. Liverpool-born Black youth were far more likely to have family names that marked them as having an African (rather than West Indian) background like Mendy and Mohammad, Ogunburo and Osu. When Liverpool-born young Black people spoke in Jamaican patois, Scouse accents were pronounced. And because so many of us were of mixed Black/white parentage colour also frequently marked us as different from Black people in other cities.

At the start of the 1970s Afro-American culture was the most prominent, but from the 1980s there emerged a far more determined effort in L8 to engage publicly with African history and culture. During this period, the long-established 'half-caste' identity which had been prominent in the city was largely discarded by most people in the community.

This unique assemblage of features in Liverpool directly shaped the arrival, embrace and transformation of transnational Black culture in the city from Africa, the West Indies and Afro-America.

FORTHCOMING BOOK ON BLACK LIVERPOOL

The multilayered context of Black Liverpool from the 1970s to the early 2000s provides the background to the fascinating story that I tell in my forthcoming book - tentatively entitled ***Black Liverpool is the Real Thing: West African, West Indian and Afro-American Culture at the end of the Twentieth Century*** - which will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2026. The book describes the arrival, embrace and transformation of multiple waves of transnational Black culture in Liverpool from across Africa and the diaspora in the final three decades of the twentieth century. This book draws on first hand insights and experiences shared in more than seventy original interviews with L8 residents, workers, activists and celebrities who were around in this period; as well as multiple interviews obtained from television, radio and social media. And it draws rich factual information from a wide array of leaflets, pamphlets, drawings, and other documents from community and city organisations, and from newspapers. The people interviewed and the documents consulted reveal precious textured insights into Black culture in Liverpool, information not available in books and journals.

The stories I tell in the book describe the unique history of Black Liverpool, and the fundamental changes from the 1970s to the early 2000s. They disclose how the L8 community understood and explained our circumstances, our relationship to Africa, the West Indies, as well as our relationship to Black London.

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Indeed, the book brings to light how the initiative, creativity, drive and endurance of the L8 community were the driving force of these changes, again signaling how Black women were typically at the forefront. And how, overall, we continually refused to be silent in the face of indifference, inaction or hostility by Liverpool authorities, education and media to our lives and to our history and culture. All of it was achieved with limited resources.

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Concretely, I outline what was unique about Afro-American culture, personified in the magnetism of the Timepiece soul music club, the inspiration of Angela Davis and the Black Panther Party, visits to the city by Afro-American military men and their relationships (and often marriages) with women from L8. I describe how these issues coalesced in the powerful and passionate activities of the 'Green Jackets,' (L8's Black Panther Party) including an explosive incident at the Silver Blades Ice Rink on Sheil Road.

Free Angela Davis image 1970

I describe the emergence of organisations like Steve Biko Housing Organisation and Delado African Drum and Dance Company; and the increased appreciation for the Prinny Avenue African nightclubs. And how attendance at a series of the powerful and enlightening African Liberation Day activities dramatically expanded the Black community's direct engagement with African politics, history and culture. I describe how reggae sound system culture emerged, as well as Rastafari, in all its secular and religious aspects. Most importantly, I foreground the activities of two of the most influential organisations in L8, Liverpool Black Sisters and Mary Seacole House.

These organisations prioritised the economic, social and mental wellbeing and success of Black women in particular and the L8 community in general, and drew on transnational Black culture as one component in achieving those goals.

I describe how these cultural influences were spread across the Black community via film, television, press and radio. How some elements were brought first hand by individuals and families who visited or settled in the city; and other elements were brought first hand by L8 residents that travelled internationally and returned home.

DETAILS OF THIS CURRENT SMALLTALK SERIES

This Smalltalk series - African Diaspora culture in Liverpool at the end of the 20th Century - is my first opportunity to share some of the compelling ideas and information in the book. Most people in Britain don't know about the rich and fascinating currents of Black culture in Liverpool in this period; and most commentators and writing on Black culture in Britain don't talk about it. **The stories I tell are local stories, as well national stories. That's because any story of Black people and Black culture in Britain that focuses primarily on the so-called Windrush Generation, and Black British youth, is bound to be limited in scope.**

So instead of a London-based story of West Indian arrivals since the 1940s, what we need is a story of the Black presence in Britain over several centuries; an analysis that interrogates the British Empire's relationship with Africa and Africans including long after slavery ended in the West Indies in the 1830s.

Finally, I wrote this book - and I'm writing these articles - because I am determined to describe how these various cultural flows gave rise to a unique assemblage of Black culture in the city, a distinctive mixture, modified and adapted to the local situation by L8 families. In the articles in this Smalltalk series, I share some previews of how these changes were groundbreaking and revolutionary.

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Professor Gus John

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to my brother Terry Small, my comrade and other-brother, Jimi Jagne for sharing their knowledge, insights and astute observations. Special thanks also to my other-sister, Gloria Hyatt, MBE, for her advice, insights and for carrying out so many of the interviews for the book. My deep appreciation to every one of the people that I interviewed for the book for sharing their memories and insights. And my thanks to the many people that provided feedback on several of these articles, including Samia Benbrih, Bolaji Bologun, Mike Boyle, Dionne Dow, Nasra Elliot, Dean Huggins, Neil Innis, Lorraine Kennimouth-Williams, Abigail McCulloch, Carlene Montoute, Colin Small, Karl Smith, Terri Telles, Jennifer Tosch, Elsa Tranter and Sharon Williams. And my sincere gratitude, as always to Madeline, Mike, Jenny and the staff at Writing on the Wall for their constant support and encouragement.

Image of Charles Wootton Centre building.

[1] All quotations in this series are paraphrased from the original interviews for clarity and brevity. The full quotations are provided in my forthcoming book.
[2] In this series (and in my forthcoming book) when I say 'Black people' I mean people of African descent from Africa and the Caribbean, including people of mixed Black/white origins. I recognise that in this period 'Black' was often a political identity, as well as being a matter of African ancestry and I know that some organisations in Liverpool included people that were of Chinese, Asian or Middle-Eastern ancestry. But my focus is primarily on those of African and mixed origins. I use the terms 'Afro-American' and 'West Indian', because they were the most commonly used phrases by and about these communities, at least until the late 1980s. I know they have fallen out of favour and have been replaced by 'African-American' and 'African-Caribbean'.
[3] Prinny avenue is the affectionate local name for Princes Boulevard (a combination of Princes Road and Princes Avenue) a major road in the heart of L8.

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SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

AUTHOR PROFILE

Stephen Small, PhD, is a Professor of the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley, a role he began in January 2025 after he retired from teaching. Prior to that he taught in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies since 1995. He was Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (June 2020 to January 2025). He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe. As a professor he researched the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. Since retirement he mainly works on legacies of British imperialism, with a particular focus on Liverpool. He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his MS.C in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979).

His most recent book is ***In the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana,*** 2023. Before that he published ***20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe***, January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: ***Black Liverpool is the Real Thing. West African, West Indian and Afro-American culture at the end of the 20th Century***, and will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2026.

Stephen was born and raised in Liverpool 8, in the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Transatlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum which opened in 1994 (and which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).