

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

"The Liverpool Black experience had all the same ingredients as Black America. One minute we had "skiffle" haircuts and the next, we had afro combs and long black leather coats. We had been through the "ghettoisation" process. Toxteth was officially the "Black quarter". We more or less emulated Black America in fashion, music, dance, language, police relations, poverty, prison and resistance" - Dave Clay

At the start of the 1970s, Liverpool 8 residents knew more about Afro-American culture than Black culture in Africa or the West Indies combined. And by the start of the 2000s, after knowledge of West Indian and African culture was vastly expanded in L8, we still knew more Afro-American culture (by then it was called African-American culture) than either of them. This was mainly due to the global influence of mass media from the United States, an influence that it had held throughout the entire twentieth-century. It was also due to the authenticity, boldness and confidence, as well as the humanity and dignity, of Afro-Americans. They were, after all, the coolest Black people on the planet.

They were the best singers, actors, performers and dancers, the best athletes and boxers, and they even had the best tennis player (Arthur Ashe). They wrote the best books on Black history and culture, including novels and poetry. And they had the best schools and organisations.

We admired their commitment to self-determination, their pride and poise, and we idolized the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, the Black Panthers and the Black arts and literature movements.

No surprise that all the Black leaders we knew were from the United States - Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael, at least until the arrival of Nelson and Winnie Mandela.



Clockwise from top left: Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael

Black women more than anyone else, admired Black female leaders. On top of all that they were the best dressers and they had the best accents.

The Afro-American cultural impact in Liverpool was similar to its impact in other cities, and it arrived in the same way - via music, film, television and magazines. To these enormous waves of innovation and creativity can be added the real live Afro-Americans who were also physically present across Britain, especially in their thousands on military bases, and frequently seen and heard in nightclubs and on the streets of the nation's main cities. But again, in Liverpool the Afro-American impact and presence was a little different.

THE TIMEPIECE IS THE PLACE TO BE!

The single most important manifestation of Afro-American culture in Liverpool could be found in the incomparable soul and funk music nightclub, the Timepiece. Located in the city centre, the Timepiece was the embodiment in Black Liverpool of the Afro-American experience.

It was the most popular and the most soul-full of all the clubs that Black people from L8 went to in the 1970s and 1980s.

Mostly this was because of the initiative, drive and charisma of the Timepiece DJ, Les Spaine. He had grown up in Liverpool fascinated and inspired by Black American music, and as a young man frequently visited American bases. Friends on these bases provided him with the very best Black American music of the day.

Given how small and confined the Black community was in the city, and how limited in number were the nightclubs that didn't discriminate against Black party-goers, the visual and experiential impact of Afro-American culture was far bigger, far more concentrated and far more impactful, than in London or Birmingham, with their massive populations and where Black people lived in multiple neighborhoods. Afro-American male military personnel returned to Liverpool time and time again, many mentioning the friendliness of scousers in general and Black scousers in particular.

First and foremost, the Timepiece was a place for singing, dancing, meeting and dating – and maybe more. It had the best music, the best dressed clientele, and the best atmosphere. Beyond music, the Timepiece raised the Black community's consciousness which included Afro-American self-expression, style and fashion. It evoked the Black political consciousness of the era, and it signified the creativity of the Black Arts Movement in all its visibility and colour. It was truly the place to be.

Even though the numbers of Afro-Americans (mainly men) in the Timepiece, and in Liverpool, were tiny compared to their presence in London nightclubs, they had an outsized impact. Never had so many positive Black role models been seen in person and in one place.

BLACK AND MULTI-RACIAL ORGANISATIONS

All the L8 community organisations promoted Afro-American culture – from Stanley House, The Blackie, the Methodist (including Elimu Wa Nane library, which meant education for eight in Swahili) the Charles Wootton Centre, Liverpool Black

Sisters, Liverpool Anti-Racist Community Arts Alliance (LARCAA) and Source Books.

These were supplemented by L8 residents' individual actions. We read books like *Blood in my Eye* and *Soledad Brother* by George Jackson, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and the biography of Angela Davis. Later on, we read books like *Ain't I a Woman*. *Black Women and Feminism* by bell hooks, and *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins. The books themselves, and photo-copies of key pages, were shared in the community with the value of precious gems.

After Stanley House, the Blackie promoted Afro-American culture more than any other organisation, with films, videos, music, dance and performance. It also welcomed Afro-American celebrities. Local resident of Liverpool 1, Steve Smith, worked there for years and organised events and films. He even interviewed Michael Jackson at The Empire when Jackson performed there in the 1970s. Before Steve, was Bobby Nyahoe, Liverpool-born of mixed origins, who campaigned widely to promote a positive Black identity and consciousness, and introduced a whole generation of young people to Afro-American literature.

RENOWNED VISITORS FROM THE UNITED STATES TO LIVERPOOL

Afro-American visitors to Liverpool included Professors Molefi Asante, Leonard Jeffries and Jan Carew (born in Guyana, resident in the United States), along with authors, poets and champions of social justice, Maya Angelou and June Jordan. They gave lectures or performances and promoted their writings to jam-packed audiences attended by masses of L8 residents. One of the most memorable visitors was Kwame Touré (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael), whose surprise visit and powerful lecture to an overflowing audience took place at the Caribbean Centre in 1983.

Touré was under strict restrictions by British authorities and was not supposed to visit Liverpool, but he defied the authorities, his visit happened anyway and it had a significant impact.

L8 VISITORS TO THE UNITED STATES

L8 residents visited United States' bases in England and Germany, while others went directly to the heartland, that is, to the United States itself. Many people went for tourism. Others went to buy Afro-American fashion products. Others went for insights into Black Studies courses, literature and affirmative action programmes. At the forefront of knowledge-based visits where people like Mike Boyle, Michelle Charters, Dave Clay, Abdul Gayle, Gloria Hyatt and Lenford White.. Everyone went for inspiration. Several community organisations sponsored L8 residents to visit the United States, for insights that could be shared back in L8 for the benefit of the community. Obtaining information on the experiences and success of Black women figured prominently in these visits. The Transatlantic Slavery Gallery, which opened in 1994, was not part of the L8 community, but it too got information from the United States, and brought visitors, in ways that benefitted the L8 community.



Distinction

HOMEGROWN SINGERS

Several music groups and singers influenced by Afro-American music emerged in Liverpool. The most famous of course was the Real Thing, with their 1976 international hit – *You to Me are Everything*. Several other singers were important, if not as famous, like the four women group – Distinction – and the groups L8 Connection and Bantu. As well as individuals like Dave Clay (whose stage name was “Soul 8”), and percussionist Lionel Duke. And then there was Malik Al Nasir, who developed maybe the closest and longest lasting relationship with a prominent Afro-American musician, Gil Scott Heron. Malik’s story is evocative and significant, and he has shared details about that story in one of his recent books, *Letters to Gill* published in 2021. Marcia Ambrosius, born in Liverpool to two parents with mixed origins, has continued this tradition. She was a member of the R&B duo Floetry, which formed in 1977, and later developed her solo career, with her first album in 2011.



The Real Thing

DATING, MARRIAGE, AND RELOCATION TO THE UNITED STATES

A number of women from L8 dated Afro-American military men, and several got married and relocated to United States. They met at the Timepiece, in other L8 clubs, or during visits to a United States base.

Though their numbers were small their impact in L8 was big – **it seemed like everyone in the L8 community had a female family member or a close friend that dated or married an Afro-American male, and relocated to the United States.** Many women saw the opportunity for personal fulfillment, family happiness, professional development and for travel and excitement. I've found no evidence that any men from L8 married and relocated to the United States – though there could be one or two somewhere with their own unique stories.

Dating and marriage were not always smooth, (are they ever!) and individual outcomes were uneven. Some women stayed permanently in the United States, some returned to L8; some were professionally successful, others less so. But it's not really a matter of whether they stayed or not, because several women that returned to Liverpool had learnt a great deal in the United States, and when they came back they put their knowledge and experience to excellent use for personal, career and community uplift.

These romantic experiences brought to the surface a long-standing contention between local Black women and men. Many locally-born Black men were reluctant to date or marry locally-born Black women. Instead, they preferred white women. But the double-standard was exposed when some local men expressed resentment, and sometimes verbally abused Black women who dated Afro-American military men.

Then there was the colour issue, which, in a variety of ways, was a constant feature of the L8 scene. In this instance, Black Liverpool had a national reputation – for better or for worse – for having so many mixed-race (or light-skinned) women. This was one of the drawing factors for Afro-American men who seemed mainly to want light-skinned women. And of course, women with a British accent. The fact that these accents were scouse did not matter to them, as they did not harbour the long history of contempt for scousers typically held by people in the south of England.

The Green Jackets (aka The Black Panther Party)

One of the most impactful (and explosive) occurrences in Liverpool ignited by our community's embrace of Afro-America is the story of the Green Jackets, which was L8's own Black Panther Party. Inspired by the Black Panther Party in the United States the Green Jackets were formed in 1971 by several older Black and mixed origins lads and men. Members of the group wore military-style green jackets, and organized boycotts of city centre shops known for racial discrimination, like the Army and Navy Store. They also did physical exercises in the backyard of Stanley House community centre on Upper Parliament Street, and in the grounds of the Anglican Cathedral. They were determined to prepare us to fight against the racist aggression of skinheads in particular and white boys and men in general. They probably thought they could defend themselves against the police, too.



The Green Jackets

One of the most memorable legacies of the Green Jackets is a photo of members training in the Anglican Cathedral grounds, which appeared in The Observer colour supplement magazine in 1971, in a double-page spread. Copies of the photograph have been passed around the community ever since, some organisations hung a copy on their walls, and it has appeared in one or two publications.

By the way, I was a member of the Green Jackets myself, and I appear in the photo – I'm in the upper mid-centre of the photo, in a red sleeveless pullover and short-sleeved white shirt. I was barely a teenager at the time

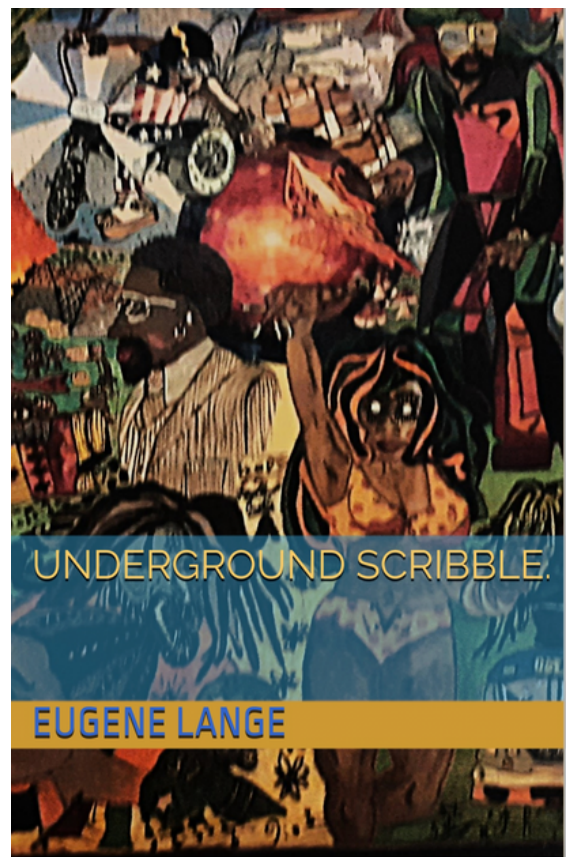


Silver Blades Ice Rink

The most controversial aspect of the Green Jackets was the alleged attempt to blow up the Silver Blades Ice Rink on Prescott Road. This Ice Rink housed a nightclub called The Bumble Bee discotheque which had become popular with young Black men and women. The ice rink was located far outside L8, in an area notorious for racist violence, particularly from skinheads. After multiple incidents of racist abuse and some violence at the discotheque, a group of men from L8 planned to avenge these experiences. Four men were arrested in a car with several petrol bombs, were convicted and imprisoned. Many rumours about what happened and why it happened spread throughout the L8 community, and have lingered to the present day. And much is still unclear. That unfortunate incident reveals the extremes to which people can be driven, and also reflects the highly gendered nature of resistance – it's no surprise that it was four men and no women that were in the car that fateful night. Overall, this episode is shrouded in secrecy, and I have been unable to obtain more than superficial information about what transpired. Brief details from the court case in the Liverpool Post, say nothing about racism and portray those charged as simple thugs.

But the violence of skinheads, and indifference of the police is perfectly captured in the first-hand narrative by Eugene Lange (aka Muhammad Khalil), in his book *Underground Scribble*. The Green Jackets as a group were short-lived, but their impact was powerful and has left a legacy in memory of self-determination, a proud photo of resistance to racism, and a continuing puzzle around exactly what happened on that fateful night at the ice rink.

The Black Panther Party existed in London and other cities in this period.



Underground Scribble by Eugene Lange

Most publications about The Black Panthers in Britain focus almost exclusively on London, with just a few paying lip service to Liverpool in one or two sentences. Typical. Hopefully, what I write in **Black Liverpool "the real thing"**, will help us break out of the London-centric bias for a more comprehensive story.

“Meeting and working with Maya Angelou and June Jordan, two of the most amazing, strong, creative Black women, during their visits and performances in Liverpool was inspiring. They both encouraged me in my work and instilled confidence” - Ruth Grosvenor



Maya Angelou

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 "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).

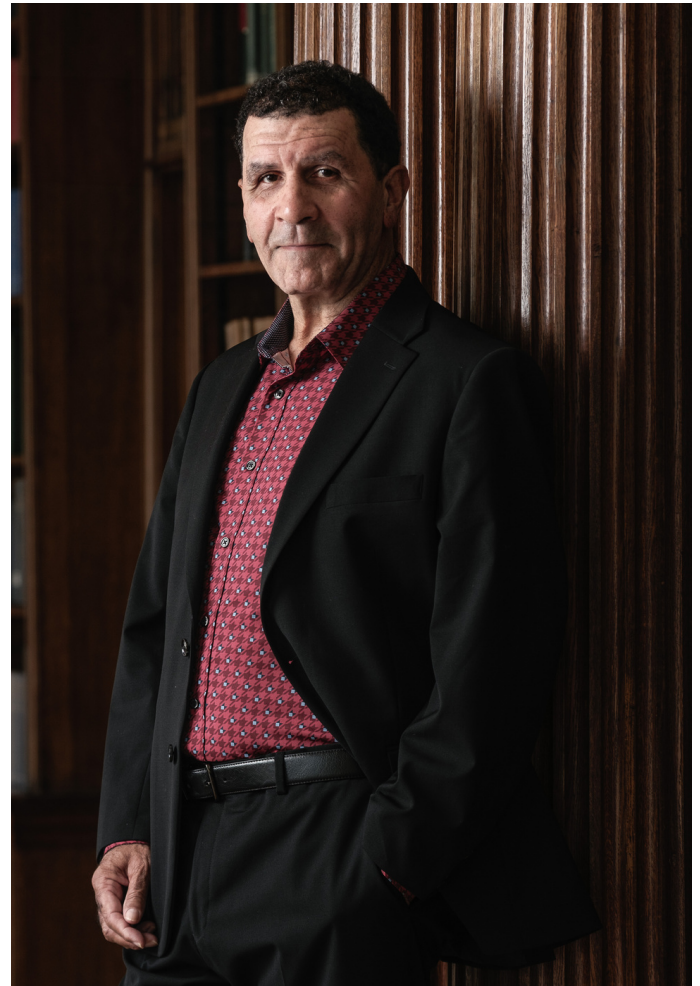


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