

## CREATING A DIFFERENT IMAGE: BLACK WOMEN'S FILMMAKING OF THE 1970s-90s

### THE SOJOURNER TRUTH FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS

In 1976, an extraordinary group of Black feminist artists and activists—Faith Ringgold, Margo Jefferson, Patricia Jones, Michele Wallace, and Monica Freeman—co-organized the first ever Black women's film festival: the Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts. The festival, held at the Women's Interart Center in New York City, situated films by Black women within a broader Black feminist arts ecosystem. The festival was simultaneously a celebration of the emergence of a Black women's film culture as well as a radical call for the kinds of socio-political and institutional changes necessary for it to thrive.

Four decades later, **The Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts, 2023** commemorates the 1976 festival with a nine-week screening series—*Creating a Different Image: Black Women's Filmmaking of the 1970s-90s*—and a closing symposium March 3-4 celebrating the original festival and the tradition of Black feminist filmmaking with over 50 Black women filmmakers, artists, writers, and scholars participating.

### PROGRAM 3: TRIBUTE PAID TO WOMANIST MENTORS AND OTHER ARTISTS II

Toni Cade Bambara wrote in the early 1990s, "As Zeinabu Davis often points out, a characteristic of African-American women filmmakers is tribute paid to womanish mentors and other women artists." Two weeks of programs take inspiration from Bambara's and Davis's shared assessment of womanist cinema as built around networks of care and in robust dialogue with the multiple forms of artmaking.

#### ***Syvilla, They Dance to her Drum* (Dir. Ayoka Chenzira, 1975-1979, 22 min, digital video)**

Courtesy of Milestone Films and Kino Lorber.

*Syvilla, They Dance to her Drum* was Ayoka Chenzira's thesis film when she was pursuing her BFA in film production from New York University. The short film takes a careful look at Syvilla Fort, a professional dancer, choreographer, and a prominent dance instructor in New York City. As one of the first African Americans to teach film production in higher education, Chenzira carried on her dance teacher's legacy as an artist as well as instructor. Chenzira and Fort together have demonstrated what it truly means to be a womanist mentor, which is not only to produce great art, but also take on the responsibility to educate and inspire the next generation of artists.



#### ***Rainbow Black: Poet Sarah W. Fabio* (Dir. Cheryl Fabio, 1976, 31 min, DCP)**

Courtesy of the Black Film Center & Archive.

With *Rainbow Black: Poet Sarah W. Fabio*, director Cheryl Fabio paints an image of poet, educator, and performer, Sarah W. Fabio, who was also Cheryl Fabio's mother. This film was her master's thesis project and it explores her mother's artistic life and contributions to Black poetry and education. In the film, Sarah W. Fabio is interviewed in her apartment in Iowa. She is also seen in a studio, performing musical renditions of her poetry to the beat of a live band. Her poetry often times drew off of the "kaleidoscope," her favorite image to utilize in her work. Cheryl Fabio also captures her mother's role as an educator, showing her teaching a class at the University of Iowa on Black poetry. The film is a beautiful homage to Sarah W. Fabio, who made profound contributions to the Black arts.



***Stormé: Lady of the Jewel Box* (Dir. Michelle Parkerson, 1987, 21 min, digital video)**

Courtesy of Women Make Movies.

Michelle Parkerson's 1987 film *Stormé Lady of the Jewel Box* is a glimpse into the art and life of Drag King (male impersonator) Stormé DeLarverie, a performer and the mistress of ceremonies of the Jewel Box Revue, the first integrated female impersonator drag show. DeLarverie was the only male impersonator with the show which toured the United States between the 1940s-1960s, attracting a diverse audience. Aside from her many contributions to the world of integrated female/male impersonation, DeLarverie was also an activist for gay rights and is also believed to have initiated the Stonewall Uprisings in 1969. Parkerson's 1987 film gets Stormé DeLarverie's first-hand account of her experiences with the Jewel Box Revue and of the reactions others had to her male impersonation. The film includes a few clips of DeLarverie performing in drag. Michelle Parkerson skillfully weaves together Stormé DeLarverie's words and performances to create a portrait of a Black woman who greatly influenced the world of drag and the fight for gay rights.



***Unspoken Conversation* (Dir. Iman Uqdah Hameen, 1987, 24 min, digital video)**

Iman Uqdah Hameen's 1987 film entitled *Unspoken Conversation* follows protagonist Shanti as she returns to college to pursue filmmaking professionally, navigating the demands of higher education and those of home life as a wife and mother raising two children. Shanti's aspirations are left unrecognized by a husband who values his artistic pursuit over her own. The film, which mirrors the life of Hameen, was made as a thesis film under the mentorship of Kathleen Collins. *Unspoken Conversation* recognizes the challenges and sacrifices made by many Black women and the creative potential of women whose work is often overlooked and underappreciated. The film is a tribute to Black women who face the weight of gendered expectations and, as a result, leave their own desires for an undetermined future.



***I Be Done Been Was Is* (Dir. Debra Robinson, 1984, 60 min, DCP)**

Digital restoration courtesy of the Academy Film Archive.

Debra Robinson's *I Be Done Been Was Is* profiles four Black women comedians—Alice Arthur, Rhonda Hansome, Marsha Warfield, and Jane Galvin-Lewis. Galvin-Lewis's stand-up routine originated the title of this film and refers to the role identity plays in comedy. The four comedians are shown in their element, either backstage or on the road, as they address the role intersectional identities play in storytelling through laughter. The film uses live stand-up performances, interviews, and archival footage to depict how these artists understand their craft as they navigate the white, male-dominated world of comedy. It also includes a look back to vanguards Moms Mabley and Ethel Waters, demonstrating the evolution of the comedy scene along with the ongoing changes necessary in these often-hostile, yet deeply rewarding, environments.



Program notes by Maia Johnson, Payton Liberto, and Yao Xiao.

*Creating a Different Image: Black Women's Filmmaking of the 1970s-90s* was programmed by Monica Freeman, Yvonne Welbon, Michael Phillips, Hayley O'Malley, and Allyson Nadia Field.

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