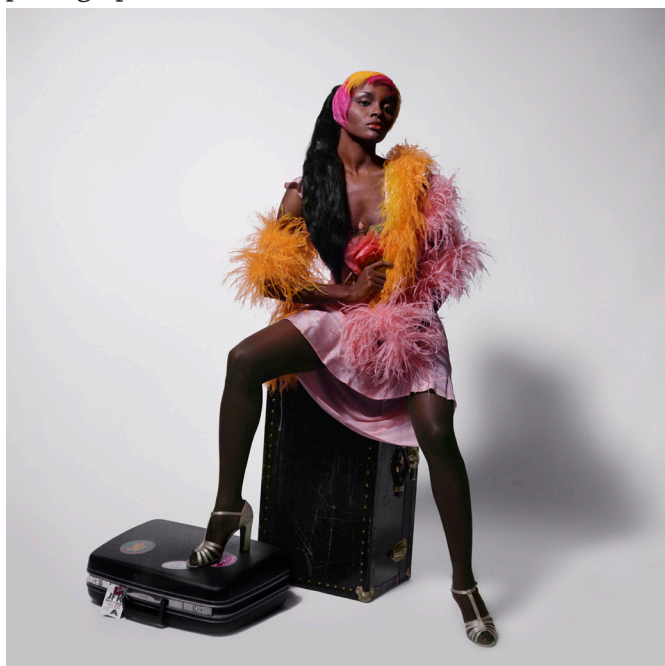


# The Guardian

Bradshaw, Peter. "Black Is Beautiful: The Kwame Brathwaite Story - exhilarating record of game-changing photographer," *The Guardian*, October 9, 2025.



Kwame Brathwaite  
*Untitled (Studio shoot with Marcia McBroom. Album cover for The Players' Association featuring David Sanborn and Mtume), 1976*  
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

There have been some fascinating documentaries about photographers: Tish Murtha; Martin Parr; Vivian Maier. Maybe the movie documentary form is something that naturally comes alive when showcasing particularly vivid still images. Here is another outstanding example, from writer-director Yemi Bamiro, about the remarkable career of Kwame Brathwaite, a photographer, musician and African American activist who was a unique politico-aesthete. With his brother Elombe, he virtually invented the phrase "Black Is Beautiful" in the 1960s by photographing the Grandassa Models in Harlem: young African American women who became the sensational template for beauty, doing away with the usual cosmetic products and the usual white standard of femininity.

Black Is Beautiful became a radical rallying cry, an inspired three-word prose poem and manifesto for change. Simply to assert that black people were beautiful was a liberating force in art, politics and culture, and Brathwaite became a part of Black power's pan-Africanist movement by photographing Muhammad Ali before his Rumble in the Jungle fight in Zaire in 1974. He was the exclusive photographer for the Jackson 5's African tour, and became the house photographer for the Apollo theatre, building an amazing archive of black musicians, and with Elombe was the driving force behind bringing Nelson Mandela to speak in Harlem.

His son Kwame Jr is interviewed and he recounts the family's mission to get his father's legacy and achievement properly recognised after he was hurtfully overlooked in Washington DC's National Museum of African American History and Culture, opened by Barack Obama in 2016. And the film also recounts the inexpressibly painful origin of Brathwaite's interest in photography: the horrendous images of Emmett Till, the young African American lynching victim whose grieving mother defiantly asked for an open coffin so the brutal truth of racist violence could not be covered up.

In this image of horror, Brathwaite found a kind of anti-epiphany which led him to images of beauty and of aspiration and community. And his images were eloquent of celebratory strength and often not overtly political: he curated a new iconography of empowerment around which political movements could gather. It is an exhilarating record.