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Marshall Lewis, Miles. “The Man Who Made Black Beautiful: New Doc Tells Kwame Brathwaite’s Untold Story,” *Ebony*, November 26, 2025.

Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Naturally '68 photoshoot in the Apollo Theater featuring Grandassa Models and Founding members of AJASS (Frank Adu, Elombe Brath and Ernest Baxter), 1968 c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

The creative team behind Black Is Beautiful: The Kwame Brathwaite Story takes us inside their documentary process.

Not since the Oscar-winning Summer of Soul has a documentary shed light on untold Black history quite like *Black Is Beautiful: The Kwame Brathwaite Story*. The true origin of “Black Is Beautiful”—the 1960s sociocultural slogan and self-love movement that encouraged appreciation of African-American features and hair textures—eluded many at first. The National Museum of African American History hadn’t attributed the Black is Beautiful origin to the African Jazz Art Society (AJASS) and The Grandassa Models when it first opened, that is, until the family enlightened them for a well-earned update.

Directed by Yemi Bamiro, Black Is Beautiful walks viewers through the life and times of the late Bronx-raised and Harlem-based photographer Kwame Brathwaite, including the birthing of the BIB Movement through AJASS and Grandassa Models, two groups he co-founded, known for their annual Naturally shows in Harlem. It was also through his artist-activist life mission to foster solidarity between Black people in America and Africans abroad, his professional stints as a house photographer for the Apollo Theater and a photojournalist for *Blues & Soul* magazine and more.

Told through archival footage and interviews with Kwame Brathwaite Jr., Gabrielle Union, Jesse Williams, Swizz Beatz, Alicia Keys, various Grandassa Models and others, *Black Is Beautiful* recently opened for a sold-out American debut at the DOC NYC film festival in downtown Manhattan. In conversation about the film, Bamiro, producer Joanne Boateng, Robynn Brathwaite and Kwame Braithwaite Jr. discussed with EBONY the role of the artist-activist in modern society, the challenges of bringing this must-see story to the screen and the ultimate legacy of the late, great Kwame Brathwaite.

EBONY: What was the most difficult aspect of putting together *Black Is Beautiful?*

Yemi Bamiro: We always joked about how many lives Kwame lived. I still feel to this day that you could have told a four-part series about his life, his movement, and everything he contributed. I think one of the challenges was in the edit room. It was, how can we make the most compelling story when there is so much story? And that was a challenge, because every aspect of his life is just fascinating. But you can’t put that all into a comprehensive, coherent 90-minute film. It’s like, what are the things we are not necessarily going to leave out, but not delve too deeply, because other things are a little bit more important for the story and narrative?

EBONY: Do you think the role of the artist-activist in Black culture—embodied by the likes of Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, or even Public Enemy—has declined?

Bamiro: I guess my thought is that the world is a really noisy place at the moment. I think everybody is vying for our attention, and certain things get more attention, but that doesn’t mean that work isn’t being done, and characters are not doing the work. I think if you look hard enough, you’ll be able to find people who are doing really important work, whether that be activism or the arts, talking truth to power. But you have to find it, seek it out. There’s a phrase on the internet: “We make the wrong people famous.” People become famous for silly things, but I think the ones who are doing the work are there. It’s just our responsibility to seek them out and give them their shine; give them their flowers and highlight the work that they’re doing.

Robynn Brathwaite: The people who are in our film were extremely supportive: Jesse [Williams] does not shy away from speaking his mind about how he feels about things; Swizz [Beatz] and Alicia [Keys], who are continually supportive and really amplify artists. Even the [painter] Amy Sherald thing, where she pulled her show (from the National Portrait Gallery over concerns about her transgender Statue of Liberty painting) and relocated to her hometown, the Baltimore Museum of Art. I think people are making those decisions as they go out into the world, and they’re a reflection of the times.

EBONY: Kwame Brathwaite was hugely influential in launching the Black Is Beautiful movement, if not singularly responsible. What was your father’s greatest influence on you personally?

Kwame Brathwaite Jr.: My father wasn’t singularly responsible. This was the work of the collectives, AJASS and The Grandassa Models, which he co-founded. Those two groups are the ones who established the Black is Beautiful movement as we know it. The most influential thing I think he imparted to me was to have something he

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Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Sikolo Brathwaite with Headpiece designed by Carolee Prince), 1968 c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

was so passionate about. He discovered photography at the age of 18 and was so passionate about his craft and the work he was doing that it carried him through his entire life. To find that, I think it's such a rare thing. It's what we all look for as individuals: what is your purpose? I feel like he found it and recognized it right away. There are times when you don't find it until later in life.

And his work ethic. That was always something very prevalent and evident to me when I was a young person: just how hard he worked. The idea of working so hard around something that you're really passionate about was the biggest thing for me as a young person, even into adulthood.

EBONY: How did you locate so many Grandassa models from the 1960s?

Brathwaite Jr.: My mother is one of the Grandassa models. In 2018, they were convinced to have a reunion. As we were also building the platform to help people understand who they were and what they were doing, the two things came together. If they are doing a project or some event, whether it's educational or about taking care of yourself, they sometimes meet once a week. But they've come together.

EBONY: Do you think Kwame Brathwaite's renown suffered from America's penchant to only give shine to one African American superstar artist at a time? For so long, the only canonized Black photographer was Gordon Parks.

Brathwaite Jr.: Maybe to some extent. But he was really about the work, about the things that were important to him. Bringing truth to people, disseminating these ideas, and ensuring that people had what they needed to really move in these liberation spaces were really important to him. He loved and knew Gordon, and there was this family of Black photographers. For Gordon's 90th birthday, they did the Black photographers' picture in the style of the Great Day in Harlem [photograph]. There were so many of them, and so many of them are not known. I also think he was so much about celebrating other artists, to lift up everyone, I think, maybe, it took the shine away from him. I don't know. He was very selfless in that way.

EBONY: Would you consider your father to be equally influential in the Black Arts Movement as he was in the Black Is Beautiful movement?

Brathwaite Jr.: This film is about him within the group; it was a collective of AJASS and the Grandassa models really doing that together. But they predate the Black Arts Movement. That was '56. Whereas the Black Arts Movement technically is the mid-'60s, right? They gave the foundation. The photography, the narratives they were putting together in these Naturally [Grandassa Models fashion] shows—connecting people to their roots and helping them understand what was propaganda and what was truth, right?

EBONY: Joanna, how were you chosen for the project? How was it brought to you as an option to get involved?

Joanna Boateng: I remember I was sent the treatment that Yemi [Bemiro] wrote after they had a long phase of finding funding for the film, which is completely independently funded. And we're in a tricky [political] time, you know. But once they were able to secure the funding and drew up a treatment, the treatment was sent to me. Gorgeous treatment, gorgeous photos. I recognize these images. This is the sort of film I would love to watch as well as work on, and I was deeply surprised that I didn't know Kwame's name. It was that gap in my knowledge that instantly drew me to the film. I thought, "I want to work on it, I want to be in that archive, I want to meet this family and understand who this is."

Bamiro: I think it was the most fun I've ever had, with the treatment. I think at the root of it was Harlem for me. I remember coming to Harlem [from the U.K.] when I was like 17 or 18. I wanted to come to Harlem because I'd been obsessed with the Harlem Renaissance. I'd read books and was fascinated that this kind of Black utopia existed, and I wanted to explore what that was and walk the streets that Langston Hughes and Zora [Neale Hurston] did in person. I was very idealistic about the whole thing.

To have Kwame's story attached to that… This was his stomping ground. He used to take pictures at the Apollo. I was just like, I'm in, right? [laughter] It was all about, "How can we make a film that gives this man his flowers and highlights the contribution that he made?" It wasn't a hard treatment to write. It was fun, free-flowing. Back and forth with Kwame and Robynn getting certain things right.