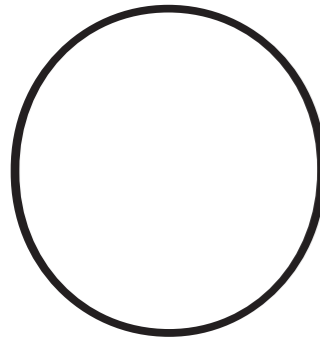




Black is beautiful

In the early 1960s, a new generation of African-Americans affirmed their culture with renewed self-confidence. The moment was vividly captured – and shaped – by photographer Kwame Brathwaite, whose 60-year career is celebrated in a forthcoming monograph and retrospective. By *Ekow Eshun*

Grandassa models at the Garvey Day Parade in Harlem, New York, 1965; the modelling troupe was launched by Kwame Brathwaite and a group of his friends for the *Naturally '62* fashion show to reinforce the 'Black Is Beautiful' message



n the evening of January 28 1962, a huge crowd gathered outside a nightclub in Harlem, jostling for entrance to a fashion show whose resonant slogan, “Black is Beautiful”, would change the course of American life. The show, *Naturally '62*, was intended as a celebration of style inspired by African rather than western ideals

of beauty. Models eschewed wigs or straightened hair for Afros. They wore large hoop earrings and chunky bracelets, and sashayed down a catwalk in vividly patterned dresses that mirrored fashions in Lagos, Accra and Nairobi. This was style as empowerment, a determined corrective to the idea of Africa, and people of African origin, as backward or primitive. As the event’s unwieldy subtitle put it, the show was an “Original African Coiffure and Fashion Extravaganza Designed to Restore our Racial Pride and Standards”.

Naturally '62 was the brainchild of a group of young African-Americans including Kwame Brathwaite, a 24-year-old photographer. The son of Barbadian immigrants, Brathwaite grew up in Brooklyn in an artistically inclined and politically active family, his creativity nurtured by a father who owned dry-cleaning stores and a tailoring business but was a talented painter in his spare time.

An unspoken but inviolable colour bar operated in the 1950s New York of Brathwaite’s youth. African-Americans faced discrimination in schooling and medical provision, in where they could eat, live and shop, even in which local beaches they could visit.

As a high-school student, Brathwaite had developed a passion for jazz. But seeing the era’s most exciting artists, such as Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Max Roach, meant venturing downtown to bars and clubs often hostile to African-American customers. In response, Brathwaite and a group of friends, all of whom had graduated from high school together, set up the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios in 1956. The group staged concerts and events in Harlem and the Bronx. Brathwaite was AJASS’s self-taught, in-house photographer and his pictures capture a mood of elegance and easy sophistication. Dizzy Gillespie and Art Blakey are snapped ▶

Kwame Brathwaite, a self-portrait, c1964



Top: Grandassa model Ethel Parks, photographed in Harlem, c1969

Above: jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (centre) talking to drummer Art Blakey (left) at the Randall’s Island Jazz Festival, c1958

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Below: model with an Afro hairstyle, Harlem, c1970





After opening a design studio in Harlem, Brathwaite and his brother Elombe Brath, a graphic artist, were commissioned to create album covers by the jazz label Blue Note using Grandassa models; examples include (clockwise from top left) Nomsa Brath on the cover of Lou Donaldson's *The Natural Soul* (1962), Clara Lewis Buggs on Freddie Roach's *Brown Sugar* (1964) and Brenda Deaver on Big John Patton's *Oh Baby!* (1965)

◀ between performances, smoking a cigarette and perhaps sharing a joke. Miles Davis blows his trumpet, intense and focused, beneath a spotlight. And the young men of AJASS are pictured too, dapper and well-groomed in sharp suits.

Through his photographs we see a young black generation coming of age, poised and self-confident, visibly proud of both their colour and their culture. As Brathwaite, now 81, says in a monograph of his work published next month, the goal was to show “the greatness of our people”. With AJASS, and their description of themselves as “African” at a time when most people were still using “coloured” or “negro”, Brathwaite and his friends were anticipating a pivotal shift in how black people sought to determine their place in America. Here, in infancy, was the cultural wave that spurred the civil rights struggle, the black power movement and songs such as James Brown’s “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud”.

Brathwaite’s affirmatory visual approach was influenced by his adherence to the teachings of Marcus Garvey, the early-20th-century political activist who preached a pan-Africanist philosophy of black liberation through economic self-reliance. Garvey called on African-Americans to “think black”, a notion that stretched beyond political consciousness to encompass how you dressed and carried yourself. Supporters were encouraged to slough off their western names, to don dashikis, wear their hair naturally and make a connection between their battle for civil rights in America and the battle of African states across the Atlantic to free themselves from colonial rule. It was this mix of radical politics and style-as-empowerment that led to the birth of the “Black is Beautiful” movement. The term was coined by followers of Garvey, but it was Brathwaite who popularised it through his photographs.

For the *Naturally* ’62 fashion show, AJASS launched Grandassa Models, a troupe of young Harlem women intended to personify a new vision of blackness. The show was hosted by the jazz artists Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln and drew such an eager crowd that a repeat performance had to be held the same night. Public enthusiasm propelled *Naturally* into an annual show, with the models also touring to Detroit and Chicago.

Brathwaite’s photos strove to capture both the glamour and the political intent behind the event. His pictures presented the proud assertion of black beauty as an integral part of the liberation struggle. Models were depicted posing beside African sculptures. They walked the catwalk to a backdrop of posters celebrating black nationalist icons such as Garvey and Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese freedom fighter and the country’s first post-independence president. In one image, Brathwaite’s wife, Sikolo, is wearing a headpiece by Carolee Prince, the designer of some of Nina Simone’s most striking looks, and the result is a majestic evocation of grace and self-sufficiency.

“Black Is Beautiful” was my directive,” says Brathwaite in his monograph. “It was a time when people were protesting injustices related to race, class and human rights around the globe. I focused my craft so that I could use my gift to inspire thought, relay ideas and tell stories of our struggle, our work, our liberation.”

Buoyed by success, Brathwaite and his older brother Elombe Brath, a fellow AJASS member and an accomplished graphic artist, opened an office-cum-studio on 125th Street in Harlem, near the Apollo Theatre. With their connections in the music world, they scored a string of commissions from Blue Note, the legendary jazz label. Brathwaite’s photographs of Grandassa models adorned the covers of albums by musicians such as Lou Donaldson, Freddie Roach and Big John Patton. The results were consistently arresting, if not always for the right reasons. On the sleeve of his record “Good Gracious!”, Donaldson casts a lascivious eye at the rear end of a woman in a tight black dress – empowerment teetering close to objectification.

But it’s hard to deny the force of Brathwaite’s work for Freddie Roach’s *Brown Sugar* album, which features the ▶

BLUE NOTE RECORDS



Above: at the Marcus Garvey Day Parade in Harlem, c1967; Brathwaite was influenced by Garvey, an early-20th-century political activist and pan-Africanist

‘People were protesting injustices related to race, class and human rights around the globe. I focused my craft so that I could use my gift to inspire thought, relay ideas and tell stories of our struggle, our work, our liberation’

Below: Nomsa Brath modelling Congolese fabrics at Stern’s department store in New York, c1963





Top: Grandassa models and members of the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS) posing for a *Naturally '67* poster outside the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, c1967; AJASS was set up by Brathwaite and friends to stage concerts and club nights in African-American areas of New York such as Harlem and the Bronx

Above: Abbey Lincoln singing at an AJASS event, Harlem, c1964



Black Rose on the cover of Lou Donaldson's 1963 album *Good Gracious!* – 'empowerment teetering close to objectification'

◀ full-lipped, dark-skinned model Clara Lewis Buggs staring alluringly at the camera – an image all the more compelling for its rejection of conventional 1960s notions of beauty. “Until that point,” says Kwame Brathwaite Jr, the photographer’s son, “there was no way for African-Americans to see visual representations of African standards of beauty. So these women who became part of the Grandassa Models, their role wasn’t simply to be a beauty object. They were there because they believed in the liberation of African people at home and abroad. The pictures were meant to convey that message.”

In the 1970s, Brathwaite became a photographer of choice for the era’s black megastars. He took pictures of Muhammad Ali training for the Rumble in the Jungle in Zaire, followed the Jackson 5 to Senegal on their first trip to Africa, and hung out with Bob Marley, talking politics and spirituality at the singer’s home in Kingston, Jamaica.

Brathwaite’s photos of celebrities and musicians eventually came to overshadow his earlier work. His images from the 1950s and 1960s gathered dust, and his singular role in popularising the “Black is Beautiful” movement faded from popular memory. Only in recent years has Kwame Jr begun working with his father to digitally archive his old photographs and bring them to a wider public. The result, he says, is a revelation: “I’m quite amazed by the quality of the images we’re discovering, it’s like treasure hunting.” In the wake of their efforts, Brathwaite is being rediscovered as a significant force in photography and popular culture. Museums and galleries are showing his images and the publication of his monograph next month marks the first book of his 60-year career.

Brathwaite’s work may have been overlooked in the past decades, says his son, but his influence on modern America is undeniable. From Beyoncé to Barack Obama, it’s hard to think of a black figure who does not owe their prominence, in some measure, to the ethos of “Black is Beautiful”. “For me, the way that you have these incredibly powerful women and men today is a direct link to what they did back then,” says Kwame of his father’s legacy with AJASS and Grandassa Models. “He helped people embrace and be proud of who they are and not feel they had to change and fit into someone else’s mould. From a visual representation perspective, people are realising now how important he was.” **FT**

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“Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite” is at the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, April 11-September 1. The book about Kwame Brathwaite’s work, “Black Is Beautiful”, is published by Aperture on May 1