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A Tribute To Bob Gumbs and Harriet McFeeters: Two Community Leaders Who Changed the Way We View Bronx History

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Bob Gumbs (1939-2022)

Bob Gumbs was a brilliant graphic designer and publisher who played a pioneering role in the Black Arts movement in the 1950's and early 1960's, and then 40 years later, played a central role in the creation of the Bronx African American History Project. Brought up on Lymon Place, a small street in the Morrisania section of the Bronx which played an important part in American jazz history because jazz pianists Elmo and Bertha Hope residents there, and Thelonious Monk visited regularly, Bob was part of a small group of young Bronxites who sponsored jazz concerts in the borough in the middle 1950's to call attention to jazz as an art form of African origin. Even in later years when he moved to Harlem and became a graphic designer whose work highlighted Black History and Culture, the Bronx held a special place in his heart, and when he read an article about Fordham professor who started an oral history project with Black residents of the Patterson Houses, he contacted that professor to urge him to include Morrisania, which he called "The Harlem of the Bronx."

This began a 20 year collaboration which turned the Bronx African American History Project into one of the premier community based oral history projects in the nation. Bob helped organize over a hundred oral history interviews, participated in scores of community tours, was responsible for landmarking several streets and parks in the Morrisania neighborhood, and collaborated on a book "Before The Fires: An Oral History of African American Life in the Bronx from the 1930's to the 1960's" which transformed the dominant narrative of Bronx history to include Black experiences and perspectives. Bob also appeared on numerous radio and television shows highlighting Black contributions to Bronx History, and helped create an exhibit at the Bronx County Historical Society with that as its theme!

Finally, at a time when the world honors the Bronx's role in the creation of Hip Hop, Bob made sure, through his joyous but relentless activism, that the world also recognized the Bronx's contribution to jazz from the mid 40's through the late 60's, not only as a place where the most important jazz artists of that era performed regularly, but where many of them lived

Bob Gumbs was one of those rare individuals who changed the way people defined themselves and interpreted their own histories. As a creative artist and community historian, he helped people see the Bronx as a site of unparalleled cultural creativity, and a true melting pot for peoples of the African Diaspora.

The Bronx African American History Project would not have had a fraction of its influence and historic reach without Bob Gumbs guidance.

He will be sorely missed by family, friends, and all his collaborators in the Black Arts movement and the BAAHP.

Harriet McFeeters (1926-2022)

I just learned that my dear friend and collaborator, Harriet McFeeters, one of the Bronx's greatest educators, and a driving force behind the creation of the Bronx African American History Project, passed away.

Harriet, a graduate of Hunter College who lived her entire adult life in her family's brownstone on 168th Street between Union and Prospect Avenues in the Morrisania section, was a fixture in Bronx schools for almost 50 years, serving as a teacher, principal, staff developer and assistant district superintendent. Harriet, who was as passionate about learning as she was about teaching, and who was deeply committed to the children of the Bronx, left an indelible mark on everyone who encountered her. More than 300 people, most of them fellow educators, came to her 90th birthday celebration several years ago, and spoke of her with reverence and affectionate humor, as Harriet was a person who commanded every room she was in. But though Harriet radiated intellect and power, she also was a kind, generous person who created a sense of community among those she worked with and her friends represented every cultural group in the Bronx.

My own connection with Harriet came in the Spring of 2003 when we started the Bronx African American History Project. I was put in touch with Harriet by her brother, Jim Pruitt, former director of the Upward Bound Program, who told me that Harriet, who had recently retired, was passionately interested in Bronx African American History and would have a lot to contribute to our research. That proved to be a considerable understatement. Once she discovered what we were trying to do, Harriet literally took command of the BAAHP's research on Morrisania, helping us recruit interview subjects, identifying important community institutions, and holding events at her home on 168th Street where she took a particular interest in the brilliant young research assistants I hired, to whom Harriet became a surrogate grandmother.

Along with Bob Gumbs, another brilliant product of the Black Morrisania community, Harriet helped recover the lost history of a Black community in the Bronx which produced several generations of professionals in a wide number of fields and created as many varieties of popular music as any neighborhood in the United States. It was Harriet who introduced us to Valerie Capers, the great jazz pianist, educator and composer, whose concerts and performances became a fixture for BAAHP staff, and who alerted us to the significance of St Augustine Presbyterian Church and its brilliant minister Edler Hawkins, who mentored so many of the great leaders who came out of Morrisania. Until her health began to falter a few years ago, Harriet was a fixture at BAAHP conferences, concerts, and interviews at Fordham, where she was as commanding a presence as she was in Bronx public schools. She also made a huge contribution to the BAAHP via our fundraising, both through her individual donations, and by encouraging others to contribute.

As I write this tribute, with tears in my eyes, I will close with this final comment. Although Harriet's degrees were in education, not history, and although she spent her life working in public schools, Harriet was as much an historian as any professor working at our

most distinguished universities. When I first learned that Morrisania was the community where the BAAHP should concentrate its research, it was Harriet who told us how the community evolved, who its most important leaders were, which schools and churches we should focus on,

and who we should interview. Of the more than 100 interviews we did with Morrisania residents past and present, more than half came through Harriet. Without her guidance, the BAAHP would not have had the fraction of the influence it ultimately attained.

We can learn so much from the example Harriet McFeeters set. Harriet was passionately devoted to learning about and teaching Black History. She fought hard to have it included in public school curricula and made it an integral part of her pedagogy. But she did so in a way that drew everyone around her in, insisting that Black History was everyone's history, that learning it would uplift all who possessed that knowledge, and would help people from all backgrounds better understand their American journey. That is one of the reasons why so many teachers who were Jewish, Italian, Irish and Puerto Rican joined their Black fellow educators in paying tribute to Harriet at her 90th Birthday Celebration.

Harriet spread knowledge, but she also spread love. She embodied the highest values of the Bronx and its people. She may have passed on, but her spirit lives in the tens of thousands of people she touched as an educator, and in the publications and digital archive of the Bronx African American History Project where Harriet McFeeters vision of community history has been brought to life.