

unity



Celebrating Food, Art & Culture

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The works of William H. Johnson: Virtuosic. Iconic.

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Unity is published in February (Black History Month), March (Women's History Month), May (Asian Pacific American Heritage Month), June (Pride Month), September (Hispanic Heritage Month) and November (Native American Heritage Month).

A trailblazer – and preeminent storyteller – in American theater

Playing Henry Higgins in his high school's performance of "My Fair Lady" was a turning point in Sheldon Epps' life. He thought he'd study law, but involvement in the school's drama club changed his career direction.

"I was blessed to get to play Henry Higgins," says Epps, a Los Angeles resident.

"That success is really what pushed me to saying, 'This is what I want to do as a career.'"

Born in Compton, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, California, Epps moved with his family to Teaneck, New Jersey, for junior high and high school. With his parents' support, Epps studied theater at Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania, graduating in 1973 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

"I'm really a storyteller," Epps says. "Theater is my form of telling stories, as a book is for a novelist. I love taking that stack of pages that the playwright has given you and really give it life, make it something full of flesh and blood on the stage that has theatrical life and vitality."

In 1997, Epps joined Pasadena Playhouse in Pasadena, California, as the artistic director. His selection was met with a spectrum of emotions, from anger to joy. "At that time, it was known as a very white, very conservative theater," Epps says. "It had certainly never had a leader in an executive position who was a person of color. (The theater) very rarely catered to people of color in the audience. It was quite an event for me to be appointed to that position."

Epps set out to create great American theater in Pasadena by drawing from his experiences at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C.; Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and the Old Globe in San Diego, California. He also wanted to bring diversity to the theater by attracting a younger audience and



"Theater is my form of telling stories, as a book is for a novelist," says Sheldon Epps. Courtesy of Sheldon Epps

people of color to the audience, staff and stage.

"In my first couple of years there, I would frequently be the only person of any color and the only person under 65 walking into the theater," Epps says. "And both of those things, to me, were unacceptable."

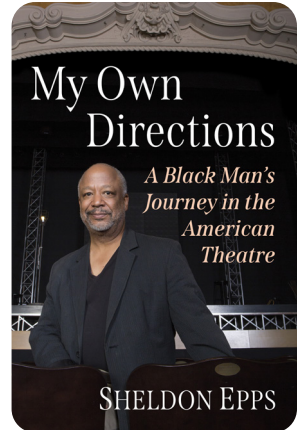
Within a few years, Epps saw significant change in the theater's audience, programming and staffing. At times, 35% to 40% of the audience were people of color. Epps writes about this time at the Pasadena Playhouse in his memoir, "My Own Directions: A Black Man's Journey in the American Theatre," released in 2022.

During his 20-year tenure at Pasadena

Playhouse, Epps conceived and directed the Duke Ellington musical "Play On!" It received three Tony Award nominations and was produced at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago during the 1997-1998 season, where it received four Joseph Jefferson Awards, including best musical.

In 2006, he brought Angela Bassett and Lawrence Fishburne to play in "Fences," a play by August Wilson. "You couldn't get a ticket," he says. "It was a wildly diverse audience. Many were coming to the theater for the first time. That was one of those times when I felt I had nailed what I set out to do."

Since 2020, Epps has been serving as the senior artistic advisor at Ford's Theatre in D.C. - traveling east several times a year to consult on the season's programming and advise on the hiring of actors, designers and directors. Every other season, he may direct a play or musical. His biggest project is commissioning BIPOC playwrights to write plays about little-known figures in American history. "So not Lincoln, not Jefferson, not Washington, not well-known names," Epps says, "but people behind the scenes who accomplished great things in American history."



Acclaimed playwright Sheldon Epps' memoir, "My Own Directions: A Black Man's Journey in the American Theatre," was released in 2022.

Accomplished cellist's greatest joys: Improvisation and collaboration

During fourth grade, when the other girls were choosing flutes and violins in an elementary school in Takoma Park, Maryland, internationally known cellist and composer [Tomeka Reid](#) selected the cello because it was the largest instrument.

"I'd never heard the cello played," Reid said. "I liked it. I thought it was fun. (And) I really liked playing in that orchestra because of the community aspect."

Reid, a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant recipient in 2022, continued her musical training at Levine School of Music in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., during high school. She had little parental support and paid for musical lessons with scholarships and money she earned from a job. Reid played on a borrowed school cello from 1995 until 2014, when she was finally able to purchase one.

When Reid pursued a Bachelor of Music at the University of Maryland, College Park, she felt ill-prepared because many of the other musicians came from intensive programs.

"I wasn't totally prepared to be a cellist at the undergrad level because I didn't have the training," she says. "People didn't take me seriously in school because I couldn't play certain milestone pieces because I didn't have the experience. It wasn't that I didn't care to practice."

Surrounded by other cellists, Reid thrived. "For a long time, I felt like I had to catch up," she says. "I progressed pretty rapidly because I was practicing a lot and I was in an environment where there were other cello players."

In 2002, Reid graduated with a Master of Music in classical cello from DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. She earned a Doctor of Musical Arts in Jazz Studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2017.

In the early 2000s, Reid began experimenting with improvisation. Even now, more than 20 years later, Reid practices scales, pieces and ideas so she's ready to respond to the musicians on the stage and the audience.

"Improvisation is instantaneous composition," she says. "You're practicing to constantly be ready for



"I love the idea of being on a team and making music with others," says Tomeka Reid. Photo by John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

whatever improvised situation that you may be in. I find that very exciting - to have all of these possibilities. To have any sound possibly be information for the performance."

Collaboration with other composers and improvisers such as [Nicole Mitchell](#), a North Carolina-based flutist, and membership in the [Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians](#) has helped Reid grow as a jazz musician. AACM's culture promotes musicians finding their own voice and creating their own path, she says.

"I met all these great musicians who were really supportive and encouraging," she says. "(AACM wants) to foster new composers and new generations of jazz musicians."

Although Reid calls Chicago and New York City home, she will be composing, performing and teaching all over the country and internationally with other musicians in 2024. She tours New England on a double bill with the Tomeka Reid Stringtet, a 16-member improvising chamber orchestra, and Tomas Fujiwara 7 Poets Trio in February.

In March, her Stringtet plays at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Also in March, she leaves for a European tour with trumpeter Dave Douglas for his new project, Gifts Quintet. As the Hopkins Center for the Arts Resident Artist and Roth Visiting Scholar, Reid will perform in April at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. She's composing for a show at the Kennedy Center for an April event.

"I love collaboration," Reid says. "I love the idea that I make this sound, and you make this sound and then we make it together. I love the idea of being on a team and making music with others."

The works of William H. Johnson: Virtuosic. Iconic.

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In the canon of American art, William H. Johnson stands tall, revered for his pioneering spirit, remarkable talent and unwavering dedication to his craft.

Born in Florence, South Carolina, in 1901, Johnson's artistic journey remains unparalleled for his profound commitment to his Black heritage and a relentless pursuit of artistic excellence. His work, characterized by vibrant colors, bold compositions and a deep sense of emotion, continues to captivate audiences around the world, leaving an indelible mark on the art world.

The racial tensions of the 20th century marred most of Johnson's early life. However, with a bit of luck and perseverance, Johnson attended the National Academy of Design in New York City, where he developed a distinctive artistic style. Like many of his peers such as Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Lois Mailou Jones, his early works reflected a keen influence from European modernism.

During the 1920s he moved to Europe, immersing himself in the rich artistic traditions of France. He met his wife, the Danish artist Holcha Krake, during this period. The couple married in 1930 and moved to Scandinavia. These formative years abroad allowed him to refine his technique and experiment with various artistic styles of Europe.

In 1938, Johnson and his wife moved to New York and settled in Greenwich village. Johnson's reentry into the New York art scene came toward the end of the Harlem Renaissance movement celebrating Black heritage. However, the artist soaked up all of these encounters with the vibrant cultures of Africa and the African diaspora and infused them into his work. Johnson's paintings from this period depict scenes of everyday life in the Black community, capturing the spirit and resilience of his people.

One of Johnson's most significant contributions to the art world was his ability to seamlessly blend modernist aesthetics with African and Black cultural themes. His paintings often featured bold,

expressive figures rendered in vivid colors, capturing the essence of his subjects with remarkable depth and sensitivity. Through his art, Johnson sought to challenge prevailing stereotypes and celebrate the beauty and dignity of Black life.

In the 1940s, Johnson's work took a dramatic turn as he embraced a more abstract and simplified style, as seen in "Three Great Freedom Fighters." Johnson abandons the expressive brushstrokes of his earlier works for a less exaggerated approach. The work, borrowed from Hampton University's collection, features abolitionists John Brown, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass standing stoically and clasping each other's hands in the center



William H. Johnson, *Three Great Freedom Fighters*, ca. 1945, on cardboard, 35 1/2 x 28 1/2 in. (90.2 x 72.4 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1142

of the composition. In "Dr. George Washington Carver," Johnson combines his earlier intention to highlight the lives of Black people with his new style by celebrating the brilliant scientist and inventor. The artist creates different vignettes in order to memorialize Carver's accomplishments.

Johnson's paintings from this period depict scenes of everyday life in the Black community, capturing the spirit and resilience of his people.

This period marked a departure from his earlier work, as he delved into the realm of abstraction with enthusiasm and creativity. He revisits the subject of Harriet Tubman again in the 1945 eponymously named painting. Here Johnson displays some aspects of his earlier Expressionist paintings with the contrasting bold colors that surround Tubman's figure. However, this abstracted composition becomes characterized by geometric shapes and rhythmic patterns in comparison to his previous work. Through his new techniques, Johnson lends more power to Tubman's legacy.

Despite personal struggles toward the end of his life, his artistic legacy endured, thanks to the efforts of art collectors and scholars who recognized the importance of his work. Today, Johnson's paintings are housed in prestigious museums and galleries, ensuring future generations can appreciate his contributions to the world of art. These and other works from this period of Johnson's career are currently on view in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's "Fighters for Freedom" traveling exhibition, scheduled to open in Washington D.C., in March 2024. The exhibition highlights the later period of Johnson's career while simultaneously celebrating Black cultural heritage and history.



William H. Johnson, *Dr. George Washington Carver*, ca. 1945, oil on cardboard, 35 1/2 x 28 1/2 in. (90.2 x 72.4 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1142



William H. Johnson, *Harriet Tubman*, ca. 1945, oil on paperboard, 28 7/8 x 23 3/8 in. (73.5 x 59.3 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1146

Enterprising chef's power source: A 'mountain of ambition'



Quincy Randolph is the co-founder of [Roasters Next Door](#) in Roanoke, Virginia. Photo by Jennifer Hayward

Quincy Randolph, Virginia native and chef, envisions a big future for himself and the brands he's creating within the food industry. When he isn't thinking about his coffee shops in Roanoke, he's developing new recipes for dairy-free ice cream and craft-made doughnuts or interviewing prominent chefs on his podcast, "[Rookie Restaurateur](#)."

"I have a mountain of ambition," says the 27-year-old Randolph.

After finishing at a Richmond high school in 2013, Randolph enrolled in Sullivan University's two-year culinary program in Louisville, Kentucky, and graduated at the top of his class.

He worked at several restaurants in Louisville, before cooking for two years at Blackbird, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Chicago, which closed during the pandemic.

He's also been a participant on Food Network's "Guy's Grocery Games" and "Beat Bobby Flay."

Randolph founded [Roasters Next Door](#), more commonly referred to as RND, with brother [Steffon Randolph](#) in Roanoke's Wasena neighborhood in 2019. A second location opened in the Vinton neighborhood in 2021. Beans purchased from

certified best practice importers on the East Coast are roasted by RND in Roanoke.

"We have a few staple blends," Randolph says. "We'll get coffee from anywhere as long as we can get it ethically, and also if we think it's going to be delicious."

RND is a community-based coffee shop, welcoming everyone, says Randolph. RND partners with local organizations providing coffee for the YMCA and churches. Local art, available for purchase, decorates the coffee shops' walls.

"We wanted people to know we were a coffee shop for the neighborhood," Randolph says. "We're always thinking about what we can provide to the people in the area, more than just coffee. We strive for all types of people to feel included in our locations. We create an environment where people can relax, something that's underrated."

Randolph and Nate Sloan, chef and owner of Bloom in Roanoke, decided to collaborate on a dessert concept. The high demand for dairy-free alternatives in coffee and other menu items led the duo to create a recipe for a nondairy ice cream called Crème Fresh. The ingredients include sourced coconut milk and scratch-made oat milk. Chocolate crisp, cookies 'n' cream and peanut butter-banana flavored nondairy ice cream bars are sold locally in a few businesses and grocery stores. They want Crème Fresh products in grocery stores along the East Coast.

About a year ago, Randolph started experimenting with doughnuts. He admittedly loves the sweet pastry and saw a gap in the city's doughnut industry. "(I like) delicious, handmade, craft, not commercial (doughnuts)," Randolph says. "I wanted fluffy doughnuts with interesting toppings."

Randolph and his research and development team landed on several flavors. The Earl Grey Lavendar doughnut and any filled doughnut are popular. The Banana Pudding doughnut is on his greatest hits list, Randolph says. The base is a cake yeast-hybrid doughnut topped with a caramelized banana glaze, pastry cream and finished with crumbled vanilla wafers. "I try to have a balance of approachable flavors mixed with a few more unique ones," Randolph says.

He rotates selling the doughnuts on Saturdays at the local farmer's market and RND's locations. "I will get up around 3 a.m. and make about 200 donuts and start selling them at eight," he says. "If the weather is decent, there's a chance they will be gone by 10. I've yet to make enough doughnuts to not sell out at the farmer's market."

Chef brings seafood restaurant to N.C. barbecue scene



Chef Nailah Curry credits her father, and her childhood Easy-Bake Oven, for her enduring interest in cooking.
Photo by Johnson Coe Phillips

Chef Nailah “Lou Lou” Curry opened Lou Lou’s Seafood, the first Black business on Main Street in Lexington, North Carolina, in early 2021. Her memories of cooking date to when she was a little girl playing with an Easy-Bake Oven, a toy for children. “My dad cooked a lot,” Curry says. “I liked helping him. I was always trying to do everything he was doing. Eventually it grew into me experimenting with things.”

Curry was born and raised in New York City but moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, to attend college. Curry graduated from North Carolina Agriculture and Technical University in 2011 with a degree in chemistry but continued her education at Horry Georgetown Technical College in Conway, South Carolina. She earned a culinary arts degree in 2014.

Curry admits to crying in the walk-in refrigerator during a college internship at a restaurant in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The pressure to learn the menu quickly in an intimidating environment influenced how Curry operates Lou Lou’s and interacts with her employees. Curry trains her staff, using a firm approach with reasonable expectations about work duties. She understands many will go onto other careers in different industries, but they will leave knowing how to work under stressful conditions and talk to people, Curry says.

“A lot of the staff start right out of high school,” she says. “They’ve never had a real job before. I try to guide them. I’m going to teach them skills they can take with them wherever they go.”

While at NC A&T, Curry met her husband, Josh Curry. In 2016, the couple, now parents to four children, moved to Lexington to be closer to family. The support has helped them keep a healthy balance between work and family. “Our village is big and strong,” Curry says.

Lou Lou’s specializes in seafood boils, po’ boys, and crab macaroni and cheese. Chicken, lamb, sandwiches and wings are also on the lunch and dinner menus. “My favorite dish to cook is salmon,” Curry says. “It looks really pretty when I put it together, after searing it in the pan and putting it on top of rice with sauce.”

Although the Currys were met with skepticism when they first pitched a seafood restaurant in a city known as “The Barbeque Capital of the World,” the community has embraced the husband-and-wife team. Local council members and other restaurant owners eat at Lou Lou’s often and share what’s going on at the restaurant on social media. Customers visit from all over the state. “The support is crazy,” Curry says. “They want us to succeed.”

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Chef brings seafood restaurant to N.C. barbecue scene

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Blackened Fish Tacos With Pico de Gallo

Servings: 6

Ingredients

- 1/4 cup, fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1/2 tablespoon cumin
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 jalapeño diced, remove seeds for less heat
- 1 lime, juiced
- 1/2 small red onion, diced
- 1/4 teaspoon salt and pepper
- 4 Roma tomatoes, diced
- Three 4- to 5-ounce whiting fillets
- 1/4 cup blackening seasoning
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1/4 cup sriracha
- 6 flour taco shells
- 8 ounces mixed greens
- 10 ounces Monterey jack cheese

Directions

For the pico de gallo, add the cilantro, cumin, garlic, jalapeño, lime juice, onion, salt and pepper, and tomatoes to a bowl. Mix it all up and set it to the side.

Cut the whiting fillets in half, and season with the blackened seasoning.

Heat a sauté pan and add the oil. Pan-fry the fish until fully cooked.

In a separate bowl, mix the mayo and sriracha.

Assemble the tacos with the flour tortilla shells, mixed greens, fish, cheese, pico and mayo mixture.



On the cover: William H. Johnson, Dr. George Washington Carver, ca. 1945, oil on plywood, 32 1/2 x 26 3/4 in. (82.6 x 67.9 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.597. Published six times per year, *Unity* is exclusively distributed to clients of Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group, both world leaders in foodservice. To contact us, send an email to marketing@thompsonhospitalityjv.com. ©2024 Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group. Produced by [Content Spectrum](https://www.content-spectrum.com).



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