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A young man in a checkered shirt and jeans is walking through a street filled with rubble and debris. He is carrying a large white sack on his shoulders, which has some text on it, including "MEAL". In the background, other people are visible, including one person carrying a backpack and another holding a red and white bag. The scene is one of devastation, with buildings and structures in various states of collapse.

When the World Shatters
Brooklyn College Responds to the Earthquake in Haiti

Brooklyn's Own Black Renaissance

We've all heard of the Harlem Renaissance. Less well-known is Brooklyn's own Black Renaissance, which began in the early 1960s.

A yearlong celebration, kicked off at Brooklyn College in February, aims to bring greater attention to the Renaissance and the significant artists involved, such as Randy Weston, a world-renowned jazz pianist and composer, who grew up in Bed-Stuy; and the Urban Bush Women, the celebrated Fort Greene-Clinton Hill-based female dance troupe. Organized by the Brooklyn Arts Council and produced in partnership with Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the festivities will showcase performances, symposia, and workshops that will culminate in a daylong conference at Brooklyn College this October.

"The idea is that, if indeed there was a Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and '30s, it was very much a literary one with jazz tagged on to it," explains Ray Allen, professor of music and American studies at the Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music at Brooklyn College. "The Renaissance that is still taking place in Brooklyn is stronger in the area of the performing arts, with things like music, dance, ritual, and spoken word traditions."

According to Allen, three major cultural influences inform Brooklyn's Black Renaissance. A 1965 change in immigration laws brought an influx of Caribbean nationals to the borough. These immigrants added to an arts scene based largely around Carnival traditions, including calypso and steel-pan music, and Afro-Caribbean drumming and dancing. Additionally, Brooklyn's sizable African population makes prolific contributions in areas ranging from music to art, dance, and fashion. And a younger generation has made a significant mark on the worlds of modern dance, hip-hop, and spoken word poetry.

Two performances at Brooklyn College in the spring captured the diversity of the Renaissance: a February 28 dance extravaganza highlighting the influence of African dance on modern choreography, and an April 22 jazz tribute to legendary Brooklyn composer Cal Massey, featuring Fred Ho's Afro-Asian Ensemble and the Brooklyn College Jazz Band under the direction of Professor Salim (Michael) Washington.



Restoration Dance Theater Company. Photo by Etienne Frossard.

"The key concept here is hybridity—the mixing of southern African American, Caribbean, and African traditions across artistic genres," Allen says. "We want to point out the diversity of Brooklyn's black community."

The fall conference, organized by the Hitchcock Institute, received a \$9,000 grant from the New York Council for the Humanities to help sponsor the event. The conference will look at the migration, immigration, and political movements that have galvanized black Brooklyn's cultural expressions. Panels will include academics, journalists, cultural activists, musicians, and dancers who have been observers and participants in Brooklyn's Black Renaissance. Weston, who received an honorary doctorate from Brooklyn College in 2006, will participate on a panel.

Allen notes that the entire project fits nicely with the institute's plans to sharpen its focus on New York City's contribution to American music, and with the College's goal of increasing community outreach and place-based learning. The institute has sponsored past conferences on Caribbean music in Brooklyn, New York City's global music scene, the New York City-based folk music revival, and Brooklyn-born composer George Gershwin. In the future, officials at the institute would like to develop programming around other borough-based music that comes from Jewish and Arab traditions, and perhaps a conference focusing on Brooklyn jazz. —J.S.