



EFA Robert
Blackburn
Printmaking
Workshop

The Only Thing That Lasts:

An Oral History of Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop interview with Ademola Olugebefola

Ademola Olugebefola, born in the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1941, grew up in Brooklyn. During the civil rights movement he relocated to Harlem, actively engaging in political activism. He emerged as an influential figure in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s, as well as the early Afro-Futurism Movement. Ademola was a founding member of the Weusi Artist Collective, served as the first Educational Director of the Weusi Academy of African Arts and Studies, and was an early member of the Dwyer Cultural Center in Harlem. Ademola began studying printmaking at Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop starting in 1968, and in 2024 he received the Blackburn Legacy Fellowship.

In this excerpt, Ademola discusses the Weusi Artist Collective and the importance of representing Black people, celebrating Black beauty, and promoting education about African culture. He reflects on Bob's generosity and skill, and also delves into his print, *Musicians Making the Harvest Grow*.

Interview conducted by Camille Crain Drummond

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Ademola Olubegfola:

Socially, of course, we were in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement, so you had a lot of action, upheaval going on all around the country. And some of that, of course, was in New York and in Harlem where I worked at that point. Economically, during those times we were in and out of various levels of recession and the city went through some very hard times. Art-wise, I think we were around—probably on outskirts or right in the middle of—the Pop Art movement. And I was, as I still am, an eternal student. I think that's what art is, you are constantly learning and borrowing and mixing and experimenting. But the country, around that period, was going through a lot of changes. As I as I mentioned, we were in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement so there was Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and many local leaders in Harlem were very active. And that was part of the impetus for the WEUSI, because we knew that our people were not necessarily going to galleries and museums to look at art. Much of our population, because of tradition, we went to dance and music, and all of that. Very little fine art, it just was not in our menu.

But. We realized the power of the visual sciences, the power of sight, the power of color, and thus we also were facing the centuries of bad imagery. From the enslavement period, there was just a lot

of horrendous, really, I call them, images of our people. I don't have to go into a long talk about that. But one of the things that gave us energy was that we wanted to dispel of the myths of our imagery, how we were portrayed. So we set about to purposely create, in many ways, Black art for Black people. We weren't overwhelmingly concerned with what the mainstream art world thought of us. We paid a heavy price for that, because you didn't get the patronage, you got the critique, okay, they would classify work even though European artists are doing similar things in terms of being socially conscious or creating socially-conscious art. With us, they called it propaganda and dismissed it as that rather than being social-conscious art. So these are all things we had to grapple with. And then, of course, the horrendous images, the Aunt Jemima's and the Uncle Tom's and Uncle Ben rice. So we had to tackle all of these images and, in our way, correct them and give another look. So we purposely portrayed men as great warriors and kings, and women as queens, and our broad noses and big lips were glorified in our art. So we didn't follow necessarily the European standards of beauty. And we felt that was a part of our mission. So all of that was happening, all that kind of—there was a real boiling pot at that point. So, in many ways, it was challenging growing up in that kind of environment. But it was also wonderful. Well, as I think back on it, it wasn't so much fun at that point. But as a senior citizen now, I could look back and, you know, kind of relish on those experiences, they helped mold me. And, of course, at that point too I was raising a family. So I was happy that I was able to pass on to my children the whole idea of Black beauty, Black pride, you know, the importance of imagery in the home. And also the joy of color, form, all those things that I was able to be able to pass on among ourselves and our offspring. So, it was both challenging and glorious periods.

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Ademola Olubegbola:

As a personality?

Camille Crain Drummond:

Yeah, or extending what you just said.

Ademola Olubegbola:

Bob was a very gregarious person. Everybody loved him. I'd never heard really a bad word about him, except Bob was not the most ideal business person, quote-unquote. Which had its pluses and its minuses. Its minuses, of course, creates problems for sustainability in terms of, you know, in this capitalistic society. The good side is, not being concerned about money, he opened up the doors for so many artists who may not—you may not be able to afford the workshop fees, that wasn't going to allow, Bob wouldn't allow that to stop you from working. And he would encourage you. So. That was the experience of Bob Blackburn. He was an enabler. Big time. So, he enabled you to flourish, he enabled you to express yourself. He was very intent, though, on excellence. While you had all the freedom in the world, you had to do it properly and you had to do it well. That was what you had to pay into the process. You had to be serious. And Bob was very into, *Look, if you weren't serious, then you don't belong here.* And that was his modus operandi, in a sense.

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This particular piece, which I printed in black and white, but this is the original print. I printed it in black and white, and then I painted it with wonderful, blazing colors. You would love it when you see the print. But this is very rare that people see it in this form. It's called *Musicians Making the Harvest Grow*. And the title speaks for itself. And, you know, I love titles, titles give me an opportunity to create, kind of, poetry. So it's not just a title. It needs to resonate with whatever the visual impression I'm trying to leave in people's minds. So this is, again, *Musicians Making the Harvest Grow*, particularly influenced by two great musicians: one, Pharoah Sanders, the great tenor saxophonist and composer; and the other one, a groundbreaking vocalist named Leon Thomas. He took yodeling, which, if you go into the Swiss Alps and [makes yodeling sounds]. He took it into jazz. And look him up, Leon Thomas. And it's just fantastic what he's done with that particular type of sound. So it was dedicated to him, but this also has been published. It was published as the signature piece for the opening of the Dwyer Cultural Center, in color. And also on the cover of an album of Charlie Parker's music. So *Musicians Making the Harvest Grow* is one of my very favorite pieces.