

Honor and Learn This Black History Month

More than ever, this month is a welcome time for the education and celebration of Black American culture.

By **Adrienne Gaffney**

Jan. 30, 2021

It's not an understatement to describe the events of the past year as historic, and particularly for Black Americans. The nation elected its first Black vice president, a woman and a graduate of a historically Black university, and Georgia send its first Black senator to the Capitol. (Both of these realities were possible through the tireless organizing efforts of women like Stacey Abrams of Fair Fight and LaTosha Brown of Black Voters Matter.)

This period also had Black Americans experiencing disproportionate deaths and job losses from Covid-19, police brutality and myriad race-fueled attacks. The killing of George Floyd, a Black man in police custody, ushered in a period of collective reckoning — one that prompted widespread protests, a push for racial justice and a re-examination of the education system's failure to teach the accurate history of Black and Indigenous people.

As Black History Month kicks off, there may not be a physical coming together, but there are numerous cultural events in which to take part.

'Judas and the Black Messiah' and 'One Night in Miami'

This awards season brings us two celebrated films from Black directors about pivotal moments in history. Shaka King's "Judas and the Black Messiah" focuses on the rise in power of the chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, Fred Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya), and the betrayal that led to his death at the hands of the F.B.I. The directorial debut of Regina King, "One Night in Miami" is centered on the night of Cassius Clay's famed upset of Sonny Liston in 1964, making Clay (before he became known as Muhammad Ali) the heavyweight champion of the world. The film also imagines a meeting among Clay, Malcolm X, Jim Brown and Sam Cooke, during which they have a heated debate about the civil rights movement. "Judas and the Black Messiah" is in select theaters Feb. 12 and streaming on HBO Max; "One Night in Miami" is currently in select theaters and streaming on Amazon Prime.

'Men of Change: Taking It to the Streets' exhibition by the Anacostia Community Museum, Washington

An exploration and celebration of world-changing African-American men, both famous and not so, was designed for the gallery of the Anacostia Community Museum before health considerations caused it to be revamped for the outdoors. Now, the exhibition graces two blocks in the Deanwood neighborhood, between a recreational center and Ron Brown College Preparatory High School. "Men of Change" explores American history through the contributions of figures like James Baldwin, W.E.B. DuBois, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ryan Coogler. A virtual panel for the exhibition's opening moderated by CNN's Omar Jimenez will discuss how Black men embrace creativity amid systemic racism. Jimenez will be joined by Dr. Rob Gore, who started the youth empowerment movement Kings Against Violence Initiative (and who is also featured in the exhibition), the architect Jonathan Jackson and the artist Tariku Shiferaw. *Feb. 1-May 31, 4800 Meade St., NE, Washington, D.C.; opening panel discussion, Feb. 6, 1 p.m., smithsonian.zoom.us/webinar/register*

‘The Motherlode: 100+ Women Who Made Hip-Hop’

The author and journalist Clover Hope’s enthralling book gives female architects of hip-hop their long awaited dues. The stories of Lil’ Kim, Missy Elliott, Lauryn Hill and Lisa (Left Eye) Lopes are highlighted, alongside less-celebrated heroes like MC Lyte and Roxanne Shanté. Hope gives tremendous context to the contributions of the multitalented Black women who were all too often denied the credit they deserved. Greenlight Bookstore in New York will be holding a Feb. 3 book opening featuring Hope, the illustrator Rachelle Baker and the music journalist Briana Younger. greenlightbookstore.com/event

Association for the Study of African-American Life and History’s Virtual Festival

Fully virtual this year for the first time, ASALH’s 95th annual Black History Month festival will examine the theme “The Black Family: Representation, Identity and Diversity.” Events open to the public include an author talk with the former astronaut Mae Jemison, a discussion on “How African-American Families Have Been Portrayed in the Media” and music from H.B.C.U. choirs. The marquee event (which is ticketed) is a conversation between Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the group’s president, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, on the search for family roots within Black history. The organization was founded by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who instituted Negro History Week (a precursor to Black History Month), tied to the February birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. asalh.org/festival

The 35th Annual Brooklyn Tribute to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Held on Martin Luther King’s Birthday and online for the first time this year, the annual Brooklyn Academy of Music event featured a keynote address from Alicia Garza, a founder of the Black Lives Matter Global Network; musical performances from PJ Morton, Tarriona “Tank” Ball and the choir Sing Harlem; along with poetry from Ashley August and Timothy DuWhite. Political appearances included Letitia James, the New York attorney general; Representative Hakeem Jeffries, Democrat of New York; as well as Mayor Bill de Blasio and Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York. Available to stream through the month of February. bam.org/mlktribute

‘Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019’

After the killing last year of George Floyd, in police custody in Minneapolis, Ibram X. Kendi’s 2019 book “How to Be an Antiracist,” soared up the best-seller list. In February, Kendi, the director of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, and the historian Keisha N. Blain will release “Four Hundred Souls,” a historical retelling they assembled by 90 writers, each examining a five-year period in Black American history. On Feb. 1, the two editors will kick off the book release with a discussion of the work alongside the fellow writers Isabel Wilkerson, Clint Smith and Kiese Laymon. eventbrite.com

Black History Month in the Parks

Join the Urban Park Rangers for a series of distanced outdoor events in New York’s Central Park that will explore the city’s Black history. One walking tour focuses on Seneca Village, which was a neighborhood of predominantly African-American property owners in the pre-Central Park 1800s, while another discusses the sanctuary that the area provided for people escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. For more modern history, check out Feb. 27’s gathering, which will look at how a recreational room party in the Bronx birthed hip-hop, when its growing crowd spilled over to what is now known as Cedar Playground. nycgovparks.org/events/black_history_month

Flowering Forest: A Tree Tribute to John Lewis

The death of Representative John Lewis in July was a tremendous loss to both his city, Atlanta, and the legacy of the civil rights movement, of which he was a longtime hero — Lewis was just 25 when he was beaten at a voting rights march in Selma, Ala. Atlanta will be honoring him in Freedom Park with a living memorial made up of shrubs, daffodil fields and more than 300

blooming trees. The multiyear project begins Feb. 19 as a three-day volunteer planting project, finishing on the 21st, which was the Lewis's birthday. The plants are intended to bloom annually around that time, honoring his memory year after year.
treesatlanta.org/johnlewis/