

152nd Emancipation Festival

August 1st – 2nd, 2014

Grey Roots Museum & Archives and Harrison Park, Owen Sound

Rebecca Shaw¹

Every year since 1862, families have gathered on the August 1st weekend to celebrate African-Canadian history in Owen Sound, the Northern Terminus of the Underground Railway. A weekend-long event, it includes a Speaker's Forum, Art Show, Ancestor's Breakfast, and Emancipation Picnic. This year, a special presentation to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Cairn in Harrison Park was also included. The Festival offers an opportunity to reconnect with family and friends, revisit history, and, most importantly, celebrate emancipation.

Emancipation Festival Speaker's Forum

The 152nd Annual Emancipation Festival was launched on Friday, August 1st with the 12th Annual Speakers' Forum at Grey Roots Museum & Archives. This year, the evening



Jane Penhale at the book table with George Elliott Clarke and David Lee's books

celebrated the importance of music in history. The 14th Annual Art Show, entitled "Music to My Eyes," featured paintings by various local artists, and the first speaker, David Lee, played double bass, while speaking about the jazz saxophone legend, Ornette Coleman. Dr. George Elliott Clarke, an award-winning poet and novelist, was the keynote speaker for the evening.

During Clarke's presentation, Lee improvised accompaniments to some of his poems, maintaining the musical atmosphere of the evening. This year marked the

¹Article photos taken by Susan Martin unless otherwise noted.

best attendance of the Speakers' Forum, drawing people from near and far to hear Lee and Clarke, both respected experts in their fields of study.



***Girl with Cello* acrylic and collage on canvas, by Linda Johnson**

Prior to the main event of the evening, attendees had some time to purchase the speakers' books; visit the display on the Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery; sample wine provided by the Coffin Ridge Boutique Winery; and enjoy the small art show (organized by Bonita Johnson-deMatteis). Including exquisite canvases by artists Linda Johnson, Tony Miller, Anna-Maria Dickenson, Susan Washington, Loraine Thomson, and Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, each painting offered a different interpretation of music's effect on history, the future, comfort, and celebration. For instance, Johnson's four canvases—*Girl with Cello*, *Boy with Violin*, *Girl with Violin*, and *Boy with Cello*—used collage to journey from the days of the minstrels to the present-day academic environment of classical music. In the art show's accompanying booklet, she explained music's place in cultural heritage: "[In] our heritage through the ages, freedom was found in music. Music not only was used for entertainment, but such expression was the only venue which bonded each one in their suffering, their trials, their love, their culture, and their freedom—spiritually and eventually physically." Other artists took different approaches to the show's theme. Tony Miller's *Wilson* displayed the fierce, raw emotions in jazz music, whilst Susan Washington's *Whistling in the Woods* experimented with "the absence of colours" to depict the musical sounds of nature.

The Emancipation Festival Board president, Blaine Courtney, began the evening by thanking the Festival Board for their hard work, particularly Barry and Jane Penhale for their valued contribution to the Speakers' Forum. Barry Penhale acted as the Master of Ceremonies for the evening, providing informative introductions

Prior to the main event of the evening, attendees had some time to purchase the speakers' books; visit the display on the Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery; sample wine provided by the Coffin Ridge Boutique Winery; and enjoy the small art show (organized by Bonita Johnson-deMatteis). Including exquisite canvases by artists Linda Johnson, Tony Miller, Anna-Maria Dickenson, Susan Washington, Loraine Thomson, and Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, each painting offered a different interpretation of music's effect on history, the future, comfort, and celebration. For instance,



Emancipation Festival Board Chairman, Blaine Courtney

to the speakers. Brian Milne, the Grey County Warden, also made some opening remarks, emphasizing the importance of the Festival and of honouring one's heritage. These sentiments were echoed in a recorded message from Owen Sound's Mayor, Deborah Haswell.

The first speaker was musician, journalist, critic, and author, David Lee. After growing up in Mission, British Columbia, he came to Toronto in 1975, and almost immediately began working at *Coda*, the Canadian jazz magazine. He also ran a small publishing house, Nightwood Editions, with his wife, and toured internationally with the Bill Smith Ensemble as a double bass player.² His book and the subject of his presentation, *The Battle of the Five Spot: Ornette Coleman and the New York Jazz Field*, was the result of a Master's thesis that he completed at McMaster University. He is currently working towards his doctorate at the University of Guelph.



David Lee with his double bass during presentation and reading

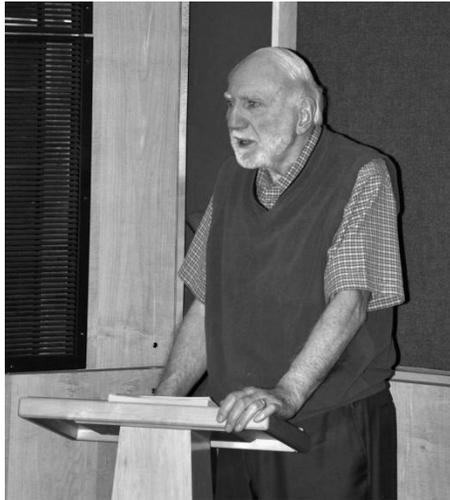
Ornette Coleman arrived on the New York jazz scene in the 1960s, first performing at the Five Spot Café on November 17, 1959 with his jazz quartet. At this time, their musical style was extremely controversial, as it featured beautiful melodies but was harmonically free, lacking the conventional chordal instrument—guitar or piano—included in other jazz ensembles. Instead, Coleman's quartet consisted of melodic instruments with Coleman on saxophone, Don Cherry on trumpet, Ed Blackwell on drums, and Charlie Haden on bass. Juxtaposed against the Art Farmer Jazztet, with whom they alternated sets at the Five Spot, Ornette's music was revolutionary. Coleman would later become known as the father of free jazz.

Despite the inclusion of Coleman's name in the title of Lee's book, Lee emphasized that the focus of his study was not Coleman himself, but the perception of Coleman's music in the larger jazz community. Lee recounted the initial uproar that Coleman's music caused, with critics alternately condemning and applauding it. Ultimately it was hailed as the "hip" music of the 1960s, and musicians sought to align themselves with the new free jazz scene.

²Bill Smith was the art director, co-publisher (with John Norris), and then editor of *Coda*.

Leonard Bernstein, a prominent composer and conductor, reportedly stood on a table one night to declare Coleman’s music “the greatest thing that has ever happened in jazz”.³

Lee connected Coleman’s rise in popularity to the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement that was occurring simultaneously in the 1960s. The free jazz movement gave rise to numerous music co-operatives in America (and Canada, particularly in Toronto), which were overtly political. Their agenda was to bring communities together and proclaim freedom, equality, and basic human rights through music. Just as the civil rights movement fought against societal oppression, free jazz musicians sought to relieve traditional jazz music of its past conventions, stripping it back to its basic elements—melody, rhythm, and pitch—before rebuilding it in their own way.



Barry Penhale introducing the keynote speaker, Dr. George Elliott Clarke

To conclude his presentation, Lee read the preface to *The Battle of the Five Spot* while improvising on his double bass. The preface recounted Lee’s own relationship with the free jazz scene in Toronto and his connection to the Five Spot Café. Initially visited in dreams with the Bill Smith Ensemble, when he and his fellow musicians would fantasize about “an afterlife spent in an eternal nightclub with the beer always cold, the grand piano always in tune and clean restrooms,”⁴ he has now returned to the Five Spot as a scholar.⁵ The end of the preface—and Lee’s presentation—returned to the overarching theme of the evening, expertly defining the importance of music: “The purpose of art, the purpose of any cultural work, is to discover and

reveal ourselves and to understand what makes us tick, as individuals and as social creatures.”⁶

³Lee, David Neil. *The Battle of the Five Spot: Ornette Coleman and the New York Jazz Field*. Hamilton: Wolsak & Wynn Publishers Ltd., 2014:94.

⁴Lee, *The Battle of the Five Spot*, 8.

⁵The Five Spot Café is no longer standing in New York.

⁶Lee, *The Battle of the Five Spot*, 8.

When introducing the keynote speaker for the evening, Barry Penhale was overflowing with praise for Dr. George Elliott Clarke, calling him a “national treasure”, who has brought great distinction to Canada and introduced American universities to African-Canadian history. Both Penhale and Clarke mentioned numerous awards that the latter has received, including a Dartmouth Book Award for his novel, *George & Rue*, in 2006; the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award in 2004; the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Fellowship Prize in 2005; and, appointment to the Order of Canada at the rank of Officer in 2008. Clarke is also Toronto’s current Poet Laureate and a professor of English at the University of Toronto. Clarke is currently working on his second novel, loosely based on his father’s 1959 diary, which deals with the politics of courtship in the Black community in a partially-segregated city; his travels around North America; and, his struggle to establish himself. *The Canticles*, an epic poem on slavery and the image of Blacks in the West, will be published in 2015.



**Dr. George Elliott Clarke reading from
*Whylah Falls***

Although Penhale’s interest and introduction largely related to Clarke’s only novel, *George & Rue*, Clarke began his presentation by reading from one of his poetry books, *Whylah Falls*, first published in 1990. This work was intended for performance, as Clarke demonstrated with his impassioned delivery of various poems from this collection. Utterly immersed in his—sometimes daring—words, Clarke told stories of love and death in a mythical African-Canadian community in Nova Scotia. For two of the poems, one of which was a “blues” poem, Clarke invited Lee to return to the stage to improvise bass accompaniments. Although not rehearsed, Lee and Clarke worked well together, listening to each other’s rhythm to

create an effective performance. Essentially, Lee provided audio representations of Clarke’s poems, imitating sounds and ideas from the poems on his bass.

Clarke then turned his attention to *George & Rue*, a true crime novel that he termed “a slap in the face” to *Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron. Clarke copied the latter’s font and book design and called his own novel, “my Black version”. *George &*

Rue follows the story of two of his relatives, Rufus and George Hamilton, brothers living in Nova Scotia, who were born into poverty and only received a grade three education. The book relates a crime of desperation, for which the brothers were hanged on 27 July 1949. Earlier in the year, George’s wife had given birth to their second child, but the hospital refused to release them until the delivery fee had been paid. With a history of thieving—Rufus had recently been released from prison—the two brothers turned to crime to obtain the necessary money, murdering a taxi driver. Out of family shame and embarrassment, Clarke did not learn of this story until he was 34. The novel was recently named on CBC as one of Canada’s top 100 novels.



David Lee accompanying Dr. George Elliott Clarke

After introducing the novel, Clarke read from various sections of the book, where events were described in graphic detail and with the same passionate language seen in his poetry: “The boys were not hanged; they were felled. They were not conquered; they were quelled. Their deaths will last as long as life itself.”⁷

Clarke concluded his presentation by reading several poems from *Lasso the Wind*, a collection of poems inspired and dedicated to his daughter, Aurelia. The colourful collage-style illustrations—which he showed before reading each poem—are by Susan Tooke. Clarke proudly acknowledged that it was named one of the top five children books in Canada last year.

After a long, but educational and stimulating evening, Blaine Courtney gave the closing remarks, inviting the audience to the Ancestor’s Breakfast and Emancipation Picnic at Harrison Park the following day.

Ancestor’s Breakfast and the 152nd Emancipation Picnic

On Saturday, August 2nd, the Ancestor’s Breakfast and Emancipation Picnic were held at Harrison Park. The day started at the picnic shelter with a pancake breakfast, followed by a procession to the Cairn, and a special ceremony to mark its 10th Anniversary. A moment of silence to honour the attendees’ ancestors, a reading of “I am Your

⁷Clarke, George Elliot. *George & Rue*. (Toronto: Harper Perennial Ltd., 2005).

Ancestor,” and readings from ancestors’ journals were included in the ceremony. People were invited to post pictures and messages on two banners hung at the Cairn.⁸



**Cairn at Harrison Park, designed by
Bonita Johnson-deMatteis**

Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, the Cairn’s designer, spoke about the Cairn during the presentation: “I wanted to meld together the idea of foundation of church and home because that is where sanctuary was for the early Black settlers. Their home kept them safe as best they could, and the church definitely buffered that, and I wanted this to be the cornerstone of that.”⁹

The Cairn includes windows copied from the first Black church in Owen Sound, and the ruins symbolize the

destruction of slavery and the creation of a new life in Canada. The clay tiles displaying various quilt squares are copies of those used in the Underground Railway to guide slaves to freedom. Inscribed with messages including “We are free at last” and the lyrics from “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” the tiles help to convey the oppression and tyranny of slavery and the joy of freedom.

The day ended with the Emancipation Picnic in the afternoon. While adults perused the various cultural displays, children were kept busy with games and activities. Volunteer musicians entertained everyone in attendance with jazz, R&B, blues, and soul music, including a festival jam with Bobby Dean Blackburn and Friends. There was also a gospel workshop by Dave Sereda. Filled with excellent food, music, stories, history, and celebration, the day was a great success and a suitable ending to another Emancipation Festival.

⁸Gowan, Rob. “Emancipation Festival a homecoming.” *The Owen Sound Sun Times* 4 August 2014.

⁹Gowan, “Emancipation Festival”

¹⁰Photo taken by author Rebecca Shaw.