

Hallam Ifill interviewed by Samenua Sesher

Respect Due, Episode 3

00.01

Introduction Music

'Intro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00:08

Samenua Sesher

You're listening to Respect Due.

00.16

Introduction music

'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00.22

Samenua Sesher

For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves. The Museum of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour.

In this episode, we will be discussing the incredible contributions of Hallam Ifill.

Hallam is the leader of Rainbow Steel Band, one of the longest-running steel pan bands in the country, based in Hallam's hometown of Bath. Sadly, Hallam couldn't be with us, but we are delighted to be joined by Pauline Swaby-Wallace and Shawn Sobers.

So, I want to start off by asking you both to just introduce yourselves. Tell me a bit about what you do, and how you know Hallam. So Pauline, can we start with you?

01:51

Pauline Swaby-Wallace

Yes, I'm Pauline, Pauline Swaby-Wallace. I'm the current manager of BEMSCA - Bath Ethnic Minorities Senior Citizens Association - based at Fairfield House since 1995, so about 27 years. It runs a day service for ethnic minority senior citizens, but also incorporates any older people that wish to use the service. The service was set up to support those whose language was... English was not their first language, but also to access services in the wider mainstream community. And it's a vibrant place at Fairfield House and it's a unique service as well. And as for me, I've lived in Bath since 1969. And at my first school, a junior school, St. Andrews, I met Jeffrey which is one of Hallam's sons. So, we went to school together and as families within Bath we've all grown to know each family, and still are family and friends up to today. So that was, what, about fifty years ago (laughs) and yes, so that's how long I've known the family in my time.

03:01

Samenua Sesher

Long-time knowledge, love that. Okay, thank you Pauline. Shawn, your turn.

03:06

Shawn Sobers

So yeah, my name is Shawn Sobers. I'm a Bath resident. I was born in Bath, 49 years ago. And I kind of know Hallam as Uncle Hallam and I know his wife, Ursuline, as Auntie Ursuline. They're not blood family, but they're long-time friends of my parents. So, we were always visiting them as children, in and out of each other's houses. So, you

know, I don't know a time when I didn't know Hallam, really, or his children and things like that. My day job: I'm an Associate Professor of the University of West of England in Bristol, but I'm also the trustee of Fairfield House CIC, which is where Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizens Association that Pauline's just been telling you all about, that's where they're based. So, I've known Pauline, also, for an incredibly long time and we work together closely, as well, at Fairfield House. So, there's a tight knit community in Bath and long may it continue.

04:05

Samenua Sesher

Pauline, can you tell me a little bit about Hallam's early life and his move to Bath, and what Bath was like at that time?

04:11

Pauline

Okay, his early life... He left Barbados, aged 21, and came to England to follow a friend. And the story is that he booked his passage, and the friend booked his passage, so they didn't travel together - so he travelled alone. And when he came to London, he was on his own - he was just standing at Paddington until someone who knew him passed by and took him home, and he stayed with him for a couple of weeks. But he then came to Bath because a friend of his told him that they were earning more money than what he was earning in London, and that's why he came down, not so much to Bath but to Chippenham. But again, it wasn't a nice place and it wasn't... the condition for living was bad. And then someone mentioned coming to Bath, so he came to

Bath but he could still travel back to Chippenham to work. And that's how he came to Bath. But that also helped him to reach out to other people that he knew that were living in other parts of the UK. And they came to stay with Hallam, and somehow then lived with Hallam in this basement room... they said there were six of them that was in that basement for a while, until he got married.

He was at the YMCA for a while. He met Mr. Parson, and that's how, you know, he found the steel drum, he made the steel pan. And Mr. Parson loved the story that, you know, he come here and how he got to Bath, and also to see him play the pan and encouraged him with that. So, during that time, he told him that he was going to send for his girlfriend, Ursuline. So, when Ursuline came, Mr. Parson, you know, planned the wedding for him; he said he did nothing, all he had to do was to turn up, and even when you see the picture, you think, 'How could you have turned up?' You would have to have planned this, with the suits, the way they were dressed. So anyway, Ursuline comes up, she knew no one... so again, it was that time, you saw someone on the street and said, you know, 'hello', and before you knew it she'd made a friend, somebody could come and help her to get dressed or to do her hair. And they turned up at the church on the morning. And she didn't live far from the church, but the landlord, who was very unkind to them, decided that he would drive her to the church on the morning, and he went to take photographs. And she just couldn't understand how we would do that, because the story was where they were living, they were never allowed to come in through the front door, they had to go through the basement, but on this day, she was allowed to come through the front door, get in his car, and he just drove her – Shawn, you would know, from Russell Street to Christ

Church is probably a walk - he drove her to the church, and they got in. And I think they said people from Bath lined the street, that they wanted to see this black couple getting married. And when they came out, they were surprised that all these people then throwing confetti on them, you know, and of course they wasn't used to confetti and didn't know what it was that they were doing to them. But yes, they had a wonderful story for their marriage and sixty plus years later, you know, to still talk it with that nice warmness.

07:33

Samenua Sesher

So, Hallam was nominated for this podcast by Fairfield House. Why did you want more people to know about him? And why did you want to pay public respect to Hallam? So, Pauline first, and then Shawn, if you can go after her?

07:47

Pauline Swaby-Wallace

Okay. Yeah, when I first heard of this, Hallam was my first choice, but I did put it out to others in my group to say, 'Look, you know, why would it be Hallam?' And for me the opportunity to record Hallam, you know, his story, and he was one of the first black person living in Bath. And when you tell his story, when he came here, there was probably one or two, if you'd seen them, but they were happy when he tells the story. It was happy. You know, (laughs) although we've heard stories along the way of how people were received in Bath or received in this country. But he just felt that he was blessed, and he was lucky to be

able to come here, to be able to find somewhere to live, to be able to send for his wife, and they were the first black couple to be married in Bath, so we have that in 1956. Hallam, he's that person that has just come over adversity and has taken whatever was thrown at him, but didn't use it and say, 'Well, I can't do' or 'I won't do', he just made the best of it, and he made it for so many people, that even when you speak with him, he doesn't see that he's done anything, but he's just done so much for our community and we're proud of him. And he is a member of BEMSCA and when he's here, you know, I will talk a bit more about him because of his love for dominoes and his presence in the house. You know, as Hallam Ifill. (laughs)

09:18

Samenua Sesher

Okay, Shawn - why Hallam? Why Hallam for this nomination, a portrait of Hallam?

09:24

Shawn Sobers

Well yeah, I mean, I was so pleased when I heard that Pauline nominated Hallam because he is a pioneer. You know, we talk about our parent's generation, the first generation that came over from the West Indies. And, you know, we see their achievements. With Hallam, he is such a humble individual but he has achieved so much. As Pauline said, the Rainbow Steel Band, which we'll talk a bit more about in a moment, you know, the longest-running steel band in the country. He is also one of the pioneers, the founders of the Bath West Indian

Cricket Club. You know, his wife Ursuline, as well, I remember her doing the pardner system, you know, the money pardner system, in the community back in the day. And he is just a pioneer, but just a really humble individual. And as Pauline said, he wouldn't see himself as any big deal. But he really is, he really is a big deal, and so many things in Bath have happened because of his inspiration.

10:24

Pauline Swaby-Wallace

Even looking back, he was... it was his 90th birthday last year, and he was so surprised to see so many people there. And yet, there could have been more and we could have used the Abbey - we could have used, you know, the biggest space in Bath to hold such a thing - but it was in a humble space. And he was just like, 'Oh, these people, how are they here?' And it's true, all the things that he's done, so... we haven't recognised him, so this is, for me, the recognition for him.

10:57

Samenua Sesher

That's exactly what Respect Due is about. So, you've both mentioned the Rainbow Steel Band. Can you tell me a little bit about where it sits in the significance of steel bands? Because when I think of steel bands, I think of carnival. I grew up in London so I think of Notting Hill Carnival, but I'm aware that there were steel bands all around the country. So, what is the significance of Rainbow Steel Band?

11:22

Shawn Sobers

So, The Rainbow Steel Band is known widely amongst circles as the longest-running steel band in the country. But I kind of take you back a little bit of the history, really. So when Hallam first came to Bath in 1955, he was then followed by other friends from Barbados, such as Orman Clark, Lionel Chase, a gentleman called Cassar, Clyde Chase, and also Luton Skinner. They came to visit Hallam in Bath and a lot of them didn't plan to stay, particularly people like Orman, who I've known living in Bath all his life - he planned to just visit Hallam for a weekend and then go back to London, but he ended up moving here. And they were the beginning of what we now know as the Rainbow Steel Band, and they all played pan together in Barbados. And back then they were known as the Barbados All Stars, and they formed in Bath YMCA in 1956. And they used to practice in Hallam's house which was in Burlington Street... 15 Burlington Street, in the basement.

But what started to happen is that their children, and children of the other members, were also seeing what they were doing, and they wanted a piece of the action as well. So, when the Barbados All Stars were practising, when they left the pan, then the younger ones came up - people like Toussaint Fields, Roger Fields, you know, Jeffrey Ifill and the children of Hallam... they started to get in on the action as well, and they formed their own band which was called the Rainbow Steel Band. And eventually they merged as the older ones... some of them went back to Barbados, and other ones stayed here. They all amalgamated and Rainbow Steel Band was kind of formed in 1957. So that was kind of how what we now know as the Rainbow Steel Band came about, and they've been going ever since. And for the city of

Bath to have the longest-running steel band in the country, do you know what I mean, I just find that... that's very beautiful, really. And I think Bath has a lot of hidden history, which a lot of the rest of the country would just be fascinated by.

13:29

Samenua Sesher

Wow. And Pauline, do you want to tell us when you first heard the steel band?

13:35

Pauline Swaby-Wallace

Yes, it would have been probably even as a child because we always had events in Bath, whether it was a party, you know, Rainbow would play. But I think it was probably more in my late... in my twenties when you're allowed to go out by yourself, you know, your parents weren't there... or you would go... you know, you couldn't dance or do to do the dance you would want to do... But yeah, it's probably my twenties, you know, you start to follow Rainbow, if they were going somewhere, when they were out of town you would be going too. But it was more the festivals that we had in Bath, you know, the celebrations that we had in Bath. And I've just loved listening to the steel pan. Till now, I manage events, so they're always top of my list for the church services, for even playing here at Fairfield House in our garden space. It's a birthday, you know, funerals, whatever, Rainbow is the band that you're calling, and they have certain tunes that they play that are your favourites. And it's a joy, a joy, because, you know, we have Hallam

playing here. He has his own... he brings his one pan and he would play here and you know, whether you're in a wheelchair, you've got a disability... you hear that music, your shoulder's moving and your foot is tapping and sometimes your stick goes over to one side, and you forget about any pains that you have. So that is our Rainbow and when I hear it, when I speak of it, I just speak of it with that warmth, that joy, and just being proud to even be a part of that family of the steel pan.

15:20

Samenua Sesher

Fantastic. Now both of you have touched on something that I just want to ask a quick question about. Shawn, you mentioned that there's a bit of a hidden history in Bath, of people maybe not expecting there to be such a vibrant Caribbean community - I know it's not just Caribbean people. But if you could tell us a little bit about what it is like being in Bath, and why people who came from London and thought they were going back to London chose to stay in Bath? Because we associate these communities with the big cities, you know - the Manchesters, the Londons, the Bristols, the Birminghams - we don't think of Bath (laughs). So, what is it like growing up in Bath, being in Bath, being part of your community in Bath?

16:05

Shawn Sobers

I mean, yeah, it's an interesting question. But there's a myriad of ways of answering it. I remember growing up and saying to my parents,

'Why didn't you stay in London?' But actually, I'm really pleased that they didn't and that they stayed in Bath. I mean, you know, I was the only black child in my class, one of four in my year - one of which was my cousin, you know - so it's very... it is a very white space with a very kind of marginal black community, if you like.

But the black community themselves are very tight, and they're not consigned to just one geographic area. You know, we live in different spaces in the city but we are a very tight knit community. And I guess for survival we had to be, you know. There were certain places that we would go, if you like... Snow Hill was known as the area where quite a few of the black community lived, or we had The Long Acre pub, which was a safe space. So, it is looking for those safe spaces. But I remember my childhood, you know, even though my, I guess, friendship network was white at school, but it was also black back at home. You know, we're very tight with my cousins, always in and out of friends' and family's houses, such as Hallam, over weekends coming up to London to visit family. So, I just respect my parents for keeping that connection with their friends.

17.20

Samenua Seshar

Coming to Pauline, what is it like living in Bath now?

17:24

Pauline Swaby-Wallace

Living in Bath now... I think the foundation that was set from when our parents came here - my mum, for instance, you know, she has dementia and one name she will always remember is Norma, which is Shawn's mum, because of the friendship that they had growing up. And we grew with that, as I said. We knew each family, we knew where they were, we knew to go to their houses, we were welcome... so everyone was Mr. or Mrs. or auntie and uncle. So, you didn't have to be from the same island, you didn't have to be the same blood, you just knew that you were family. And that is what has kept us, at this age anyway... as I said with the youngsters, you're trying to bring them back in.

But for us, because we knew each other, we knew where to get our support - because sometimes we were on our own, sometimes things did happen in our lives that made it difficult. People have left and come back. And it's also good to have that connection, because then you know that - especially Fairfield House right now - this is the place to come, because this is where you will reunite and reconnect as well, and those people that you know are here. But we are here, you know, Shawn and myself, we're now reaching up to the elder status, so we have a foundation to continue to pass down to others. But it's a beautiful place, and of course, we live in a historied place as well, and we are history. So, we want to make our history known within Bath as well.

18:57

Samenua Sesher

That's so beautiful. I mean, you're talking here about cultural continuity across the generations through the steel band, but also through the relationships that you have kept going, even if you leave, people coming back... it's basically the essence of community. So, I just want to ask one last thing, and that is about... what does it feel like when you hear the steel band? How does it feel?

19:22

Shawn Sobers

It feels like my childhood, it feels like nostalgia, it feels like pride. I mean, I might one of my regrets is never learning. And I had the opportunity, you know, when I was a teenager my mum and dad used to say why don't you go down and practice... and you know, Hallam would say it to me, Toussaint would say it to me, the other members... and I do regret not doing it. My nephew Jacob now is in the steel band, and he's one of the members of the younger generation. And yeah, I'm just really proud of him.

I mean, the thing about the steel band that I really want to mention, as you just said, is the generational thing. So, Hallam's children, you know, some of them, they're in the band. Orman, who was one of the founding members, his children are in the band. Richard Sobers, who's my cousin, his nephew, Daniel, was in the band, you know. So, it really is a generational deep thing. And also, other members of the band like Roger, Leroy, Melvin, they teach in schools... so now there's a whole range of schools in Bath, Bristol and Plymouth, which is where Leroy now lives. You know, there's a new generation in schools that are inspired and being taught by Rainbow Steel Band. Notting Hill Carnival,

when they have the panorama, one of the big bands that win that often are called Real Steel, they are from Plymouth. That's led by Leroy Clark, who is Toussaint's son. Leroy used to be in the Rainbow Steel Band before he moved to Plymouth, you know, so even though Rainbow themselves... they are long-established, but they are a jobbing band... their influence on steel band culture, it goes across the country and is international, actually.

21:04

Samenua Sesher

It absolutely is. And Pauline, you were talking about the celebration, and it's interesting because the sound of the pan has definitely gone beyond our cultural communities because it's one of those things that you think of, 'Oh, yes, celebration. Yeah, let's bring in a steel pan band', because it has that sound that is really uplifting.

Now, I said it was the last question, but I lied. So, we want to know a little bit more about Hallam - can you tell us a little bit about what he's like... his character? Pauline, do you want to start?

21:34

Pauline Swaby-Wallace

Yes, he is a very short man in stature, but big in personality. He's got this beautiful smile, very quietly spoken. And I mean, he has a love of dominoes and dominoes is when you will see the real Hallam because you've got to know your domino to play with him. You know, you can't put down the wrong card... and if anybody knows dominoes, you have

to be reader. So, he loves dominoes - when he's playing dominoes, you just know by the action, the noise that goes with that. But he's also... he loves his garden; I was there a few weeks ago, and he had grown some beautiful onions, spring onions. I came away with lots of things. He's a great cook, you cannot go to Hallam's and not eat. Now, you can't go to any Caribbean house and just walk away, you have to have something to eat. So, he cooks - well, it's not that they're expecting you, but there will always be something there. And most of all is pan playing, you know, he has a pan in his front room now and every day he plays that pan. So, his character for me someone who just takes life that might seem easy, but he's put a lot into it, so now when I see him and know his story, it's his time just to be Hallam and to enjoy the fruits of all this labour.

23:00

Shawn Sobers

I know Hallam... he's just always laughing, he seems to always have a permanent laugh, and talking through his laughter. And even his face... He's very slight, as Pauline said, but his cheeks are quite pronounced. And when he smiles, his cheeks are there, and it's just such a feature on his face. Yeah, you know, his accent is quite deep, if you're not that au fait with Bajan... he's got a very deep Bajan accent, and sometimes I have to sort of listen twice to what he said, because he actually talks very fast as well. So, when you're laughing, you're talking very fast, with a very strong Caribbean accent that he still has... Yeah, I mean, he's just a really lively character.

But I remember back in 2007, 2008, I made a documentary about Rainbow Steel Band, and that was their 50th anniversary at the time. So, I was interviewing him, photographing him and, you know, I was in a different space with him than I usually am. And interviewing him about his steel band, his history, how he plays... all of a sudden, you just saw this focus, this kind of more seriousness about what he does, and he was explaining how he, you know, plays the notes on his pan, the tenor pan, and you just realise, wow, yeah, I mean, not only is he Hallam, this guy is a musician and he's a master musician that knows his craft. He knows what he does, and he takes it incredibly seriously. But he won't show you... but he doesn't walk around like he's anyone important. You know what I mean? He's just like one of the guys but he's just... incredible talent.

24:42

Pauline Swaby-Wallace

I just want to share with you... He has a motto which he shared with us and I just think it's so nice to end with this... He says, 'Happiness is my motto, and I try very hard to allow nothing to make me unhappy. But life, it is very hard to control.'

25:04

Outro Music

'Moon River' by the Rainbow Steel Band

Samenua Sesher

Hallam Ifill was nominated by the staff and trustees of Fairfield House. Fairfield House was the home of Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, during the five years he spent in exile in Bath. In gratitude for their hospitality, he donated the building to the city in 1958 as a residence for the elderly.

Respect Due is presented by me, Samenua Seshar, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at <https://museumofcolour.org.uk/>. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

The introduction music was from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*, but for now, we will let the wonderful Rainbow Steel Band play us out. Thank you for listening.