

## **The beginning of the Black History Month in Berlin**

*Anthony Baggette*

Black History Month has its roots with the African American historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who placed importance on the role of African Americans in American culture, science, education and the arts. At that time knowledge about their own history was deliberately withheld from African Americans. In the 1920's Dr. Woodson undertook a journey through the American South, on which he collected thousands of publications and artefacts concerning African American history. A Journey, which put him in grave danger. Fearing attacks from the KKK, Mr Woodson had to travel with an escort. The American south was a very dangerous place for a black man telling black people that they should be proud of their rich heritage. At that time what is known now as Black History Month was called "Negro History Weeks". The timing for these was chosen to coincide with the birthday of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas, two figures the Woodson considered key influences on the lives and social conditions of African Americans.

During the sixties BHM flourished again due to the Black Power Movement in America and around the world, and till today it continues to inspire people from all walks of life, colors and religions to pay tribute to the many people who stood on the front for human rights, women's rights, workers rights, children's rights, and who fought for the recognition and acknowledgement of black perspectives in education, music, science, arts rights, literature, film, etc. In the late 70's in Berlin the U.S Army began a program at the U.S Army Education Centre called "Black Studies" and that is where BHM Berlin has its roots. Some of the American Black soldiers had served in Vietnam and some of these had a so called Black militant attitude. They had insisted that the Army educate the soldiers more concerning the roles African Americans played in the US military and throughout society.

In the early 80's we had a few Black History Month events- at the Filmbühne am Steinplatz and The Babanossa. Some of the artist that took part in those early years were- Cecil Brown, Jay Oliver, James Melvin Chaney, Joe Purifoy, Bob Lenox, Anthony Baggette, Charley Wynn. These events were not sponsored, we believed then that we should as much as possible sponsor BHM ourselves. Also during the late 70's and 80's AFN (American Forces Network) began to broadcast special BHM programs so people in the black civilian community began to see the importance of BHM and in the late 80's we started having discussions about introducing a wide ranging BHM here in Berlin.

With the fall of the wall there was an influx of the African Diaspora into Berlin from former soviet countries, mostly students from African countries, who had been studying in the Eastern bloc. From then onwards BHM took a change away from only focusing on the history of African Americans to also include all of the African Diaspora, and it was a challenge, to say the least. Bringing the different African Diaspora communities together was initiated by **Harambee, The Initiative of African Women e.V, People Arts Ensemble, Europa-Afrika Kulturzentrum e.V and The Initiative for Black Germans**. The belief was, that the world was changing and we as people of color were very diverse but had many things in common and many bridges to build. We dreamed then that BHM would inspire us to work together all year and that within twenty years it should be an institution inspiring us all to pass along the knowledge gained from the past. There were a number of artists that took part from other parts of the world and the list is too long to mention all. BHM throughout the 90's was very diverse, reflecting the changing face of the African Diaspora in Berlin.

By the middle of the 90's most of the American forces had been withdrawn, thus taking with them the Black American soldier community along with their families.

Although Black History Month has been referred to as "African American History Month", the event in Europe is a celebration of the contributions of the African Diaspora throughout the world. The BHM Berlin program allows and encourages people to learn about and pay tribute

to the many achievements that Black folks have provided to society. The goal is to educate and inform the public with the hope that more knowledge about Black people will eradicate some of the racist and negative attitudes people tend to hold when living in a state of ignorance and misinformation.

The fact that we feel we still must have a BHM says volumes about the current state of affairs. The first goal of BHM is to raise awareness of important contributions within a particular field of science or the arts, that might have been deliberately omitted because of racism which is why Black history was started. BHM Berlin also hopes to offer fresh perspectives on history and individuals ( most people are not aware that George Washington the first president of America was a slave owner). Through panel discussions we bring these facts to light, and we have to rethink if he was a great man all over again. But first one has to have the facts.

The BHM program has never backed away from controversial issues such as drugs abuse in the black community, attitudes towards homosexuality in the black community, communism the black power movement, black leaders, child soldiers, female genital mutilation, child abuse, and black on black crime.

BHM recognises the efforts of individuals from the entire African Diaspora family and not only African Americans. BHM not only educates but entertains as well. The panel discussions, seminars and movies are embellished with the addition of a rich culture program with dance, theatre concerts and poetry readings. This culture program provides an experience into the hearts of people who are darker than blue. Taking you on a journey of joy and pain, a journey that has influenced all art forms and created some of our most cherished treasures. BHM reminds us of our rich past and tells us to keep an eye on the future. We give credit to Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglas, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Frantz Fanon, Martin Luther King jr. The Black Church and all the brave souls that died in the fight for human rights and against racism, from Mississippi to South Africa, fighting that every man should be treated with dignity regardless of color. These people we honour because they have made the world a better place to live in.



**Anthony Baggette** moved from Ohio/USA to Berlin in the early 80's and was very active in Berlin's jazz- and funk scene till the late 90's.

The poet (*Talking Jazz*, early 90's) knows how to focus serious topics in his own and very charming way, spiced with irony and pop metaphors. He's responsible for one of the biggest acid jazz hits from 1994, even reaching top10 in the UK. He's the winner of the first poetry slam in Berlin and has played with his band *Jazzoetry* in about every live club in town, leaving impression with his special remake of John Coltrane's *Love Supreme* amongst others. He has worked together with *Jazzanova* on radio shows and club nights at the *Delicious Donuts* in Berlin and released some gems on *Tokyo Dawn Records*. In February 2009 he was awarded the annual *Bridge of Hearts Award* in Hamburg for the work he has done over the years for the community and with youth. Mr Baggette first got involved with BHM in 1982. He wrote and directed a number of performances: *It's A Black Thing*, *In the Dishroom*, *This Is Madness* and *Turn The Lights Off When you leave* and organized and performed in numerous poetry readings. In the nineties a BHM with concerts, poetry readings and pantomime was held annually in Baggettes Café "Blues Café", situated in Berlin. From 1991 till 1995 he functioned as director of the *People arts Ensemble* which was very much involved almost all the culture events of the BHM at this time.

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Die Autoreninformationen wurden der Seite: <http://clearbluewater.jimdo.com/>, sowie eigenen Angaben Anthony Baggettes entnommen.