

	MENELIK SHABAZZ
	Empowering a Voice
	<p>I was born in Barbados and I was there until the age of six and so my memories are quite vivid actually of I come from the country. In my village you had the plantation which was a sugar plantation on one side of the road and people and the houses on the other side of the road. And my early memories are of going on a plantation with a flask of food for my aunt and for my mum and for my aunt. Memories of learning how to capture birds. W we had little monkeys in the in the little woods who we used to throw things at and then they would catch it and throw it back at you. Playing cricket learning how to play cricket. And I also remember people sharing their produce because again you know working in a village your life is not endowed with money. And so that whole system of people sharing food and so on. So people who would you know would grow potatoes, sweet potatoes other produce, they would then come and exchange. You know in our place we grew, we had a cow, we had a sheep. And in fact my first love affair was I had a pet lamb. I don't know how we became together but I remember walking around with it on a leash. We used to walk everywhere together my lamb and me. D'you know! And so and so you know. So we you know we had a cow so we produced milk, we had chickens, eggs. So there was that kind of situation where people were growing things because they had to, to sustain themselves, and then shared er little spices you would grow and so on. So all of that economy was kinda working. And I saw that.</p>
	School in Barbados
	<p>The kind of schooling regime where you had to be on point with your dress, you had to be on point with your nails, they had to look right. And of course you had the beatings I used to get a few times for my mathematical inadequacies. I used to get little beat rats in your hands and stuff. Which ironically continued even when I was in England because you know they had that same system because you know the Barbados system is really a replica of the UK or the British system.</p>
	The 'Cowboy Cinema'
	<p>In terms of my journey with film we had a mobile cinema on the pastures in the village so there you know so my first experience was watching these um Westerns mainly and I used to call it 'The Cowboy Cinema'. That's how you say it 'cowboy cinema' and so that was my first introduction to cinema. You know then, I never really saw myself in it as a kind of you know I wanted to be a film...you know I didn't, that idea never even my crossed my mind. I was just a great consumer.</p>
	Leaving Barbados
	<p>So yeah we came as a result of my father being in the UK ahead of us and sending for us which was a tradition the men went and then they would send for their families. It was a kind of usual immigrant journey. There wasn't much on offer in Barbados for a black man um and my dad was very bright and wanted to actually go to university or go to college and cause he was very good at maths and so on but couldn't fulfill that because didn't have any money. And so anyway he went off to England took advantage of the you know recruitment that was happening at the time, people were coming to the UK.</p> <p>I remember the boat journey, well at least entering the boat because Barbados was such a small island the bigger ships couldn't actually come in. So you had to kinda take a smaller boat to meet the ships and what they did and just put a plank of wood that connected the two boats and we had to walk that, and I remember that and I've, that really affected because you know you're looking down at the water just you know and you're walking and my mum's carry me like side, you know by side you know and I and that had an affect on me in terms of my fear of water. I think</p>
	Arriving in London in 1961

<p>First we came to North London. We came to Finsbury Park and I remember my dad used to say to me 'you have to be quiet, you have to be quiet, you can't say anything so quiet' so I couldn't say anything, we couldn't say anything and it's you know coming from Barbados in a village where you're just running around everywhere it was just like free, you know to kinda in this situation and I didn't understand what was happening. But obviously later on what I realised when we first came was that, where he was there weren't supposed to be children, d'ya know what I mean? So he's just kinda bringing us in and stuff so he just wanted to keep us quiet. These were rooms, because we didn't get, in those days it wasn't flats it was rooms. it was a culture shock. The cold, the fog. Because in those days you had smog as well as fog and in and it was so dense that you had to have torches to see. You know what I mean it was you know so you had that you know going from clear blue skies, sunshine, to this you know and the cold. But I was fascinated by the lights. And I remember I used to always kinda sit and wait for the lights to come on at night you know it was a kinda. You know I was I was fascinated by the bright lights um people closing their curtains and lights going on, and switching off and on. And then eventually in the, by '66 I remember sixty six. We got a house. My dad and my mum they got a house, because my dad was always kind of wanting to be independent.</p>
<p>School in London in the 1960s and the pressures of assimilation</p>
<p>I was at this school Tollington Park, which was really a, they called it a sink school. So there wasn't much that was expected of us. Being in the B Stream it was always you know, because the streams went all the way to H. Right so generally you had at the A and B streams were kinda mainly white. And then it kind of as you go down the grades, towards the end your H an F and all that was mainly black. And that kind of also underlined certain things that were happening that I you know we didn't know because there was that level of racism that was happening there that wasn't, that we didn't pick up on yet. I was in a minority. And I had, and there was a few experiences that we had that started to show that I was kind of different. I'm now in a white world a world that you know was for me a world that I wanted to I guess be part of. It wasn't, I didn't feel that oh I didn't wanna be part of it I just felt - You're going to a new place and it's all new, it's all exciting. Okay let me be part of it. My instinct was to be part of it. And then but part that meant assimilating, which also meant because again you know you had all the world around you was white. So then you then begin subconsciously to want to be white. I think that was then the transition that I went through wanting to be white in terms of. Yeah. Or white, not necessarily the skin colour. But in mannerisms and in all the things that would make me be acceptable. So er so I went to that process bit by bit.</p>
<p>Tennis Whites & Black Power</p>
<p>And then I got into tennis and then that took me into a whole new middle class world. That um I... Which was another experience because my dad gave me a tennis racket I remember when I was about 11, don't know why, he went into, it was a 'Victory' racquet, he went into Woolworths, saw it, gave it to me. I took to it and started playing on the back of the walls of corners of the houses and stuff. I remember I used to play little local tournaments so I thought I was very good and I got to the final and then I got beaten by this guy. Mashed me up completely and I thought 'where does this guy come from?' And then I found out he was part of a tennis squad of guys and fine and then joined that. And so then I was on this serious tennis situation. I was playing tournaments. I played a tournament in Pinner and these, I remember these old ladies used to come out and they used to come out watch me because in those days all I had, cause you know, all I had was khaki shorts, you know I used to play against all these middle class guys with their white shorts and five racquets and I only had my one little racket. I got sponsorship at that time from Wilsons so I had one racquet. And I remember people used to come out because I was a bit of a novelty definitely at that time. A few guys came out after that, but yeah at that time I was yeah. And so all of that kinda confirmed my world of whiteness. Riding alongside that now was a whole black power movement. I was around 14. And the shift happened for me when I read <i>African-American History</i> by Malcolm X, because we were now in the kind of black power era but because my mindset was still white I kinda didn't, I kind of dismissed it in a way, I'd say "ah, its not true what they're saying". You know so I found ways of saying nah this black thing no. Anyway I read <i>African-American History</i> and that pressed a button in me in realising certain things and realising about slavery realising that I'd been lied to. And for some reason I believed what I read when before I didn't believe what people were saying to me. And so that was a watershed moment.</p>
<p>Thomas Braithewaite becomes Menelik Shabazz. Joining the Black Liberation Front (BLF) and becoming an activist</p>

	<p>At school I was known as Thomas. In my tennis world I was known as Tom. And they were very much linked to the consciousness of me living in a white world and wanting to aspire to that white world. The conflict came when I then entered into the Black Power world or the black, the black power movement. Some friends you know we were guys we were talking and stuff and they were part of an organisation that you know, the BLF, Black Liberation Front. And eventually I started to go to meetings and started to hear what the older guys were saying and started to get all of this kinda black power and all the black history, and started to wash myself with all of this knowledge that previously I was you know not aware of. And I was really taken by. And so the Black Panther movement; people like Huey P Newton, you know was my hero at the time. And then Angela Davis and George Jackson were all these people who were you know really articulating what you know, this is all about. And then of course Malcolm X, and then eventually you know took on the name of his name Shabazz. His name was Malik el Shabazz. And I took on the name Shabazz. So all of that was a great inspiration. At that time I was still playing tennis. And so I was kind of like coming into this middle class world, and then into this black world. And it was just like... It came to a head. I think it came to a head I think when I was 18. Just didn't, it wasn't jelling with me having to play Thomas in one world, or Tom and being Shabazz in the next world. So eventually I'd stopped playing tennis. And a little bit of sadness because I love tennis. And I occasionally still play.</p>
	<p>Not getting in to Art School but discovering the PortaPak</p>
	<p>I didn't go to art school and I think it was the lowest moment for me because all my friends at the time you know they were going off and doing stuff and I was this like stuck. So I decided I was going to go and do my get my extra O-level. And I decided to go to North London College. While I was there we had to attend these social studies courses and some guys came in with this PortaPak for us to kind of play around with and stuff. A PortaPak is a kind of it's like a recorder with a camera attached to it and it was a real revolutionary equipment at that point. And so they said to us why don't we just you know go and do something and with the equipment. And I had immediately had an idea and I got a group of people together. And we just said okay went off and we started shooting stuff and I was like wow I like this. It enabled me to actually film something and it was simple to operate and that it opened a world that I have only dreamed of watching films you know it I suppose all of a sudden things came together. What I wanted to do in terms of having my voice, I always felt that I needed to speak and so here was this instrument that allowed me to do that.</p>
	<p>Experimenting with style by making a first film about life in Ridley Market</p>
	<p>I had an idea to do a film about the life in Ridley Market. But I wanted something a bit more static. I wanted to shoot a little bit more static I didn't want all this moving around, at that time it was very much about um demystifying cinema and documentary and styles so it's about moving around the camera and stuff. It wasn't about you know just traditional kind of everything static kind of situation. And I though you know what I wanna do something a bit more static because the people that I was aiming it for are not going to be au fait with that style you know that's a kinda more avant garde style and you know people weren't ready for that. So I thought no I need to do it this way. The whole visual thing had now um taken root in me now cos I was started off with a PortaPak and then I found out about Super 16 and stuff and I started to you know get in to that shoot little stuff and round and little stories and stuff. So I was getting to it. I had a friend who was an African American woman Alice who lived in a squat. And I said Alice you're at film school. I want a shoot this film. It's gonna be in a market it's going to be Ridley Market and so and so and so she asked she started asking me all these questions so oh what stock are you going to use? Is it daylight? All this stuff that I have no clue what she was talking film she weren't talking video. (Laughs) Where you just press play on a tape and record it so I um I said to Alice come on I want you to shoot this film with me and so on and she goes Menelik you know I don't want to be your donkey so I suggest you go to film school.</p>
	<p>Six Months at London Film School</p>

	<p>So I applied to London Film School, but to get in I need to get a grant, and it was a discretionary grant, and it's also a postgraduate course um er and I hadn't even done a degree! They accepted me provisionally in the film school. Based on me getting a grant from Haringey Council. Haringey Council took time to make a decision, it took them six months. But it was a blessing for me because I was in a school for six months. And at the end of six months they said no. They weren't going to give me a grant. But in that six months I was at film school. Wow! That really was another leap for me because I was amongst people who were as passionate as me, because before then it was just me and my little passion and so on. But now I'm with other students, other people from different parts of the world. Who were now who were there want to make films and so on passion and all that was there. The PortaPak took me across in a way the film school kind of made me land on the you know on the ground and to land and to feel confident because again you have a confidence thing class and all of that you don't think you're good enough you can be up to all of that. So now I'm in this film school when I'm getting the confidence. I knew I wanted to direct so in the film school I didn't really do, cos you had a choice of modules and I kind of wanted do sound all the the other things except direct and to learn about the sound learn about all the areas of film and so that was really my you know my stepping point. And then after six months I was confident and I wanted to make a film and I made my first film um <i>Step Forward Youth</i>.</p>
	<p><i>Step Forward Youth, 1977</i></p>
	<p>Step Forward Youth OK it came about because I was concerned at the time of the way in which black men, or young black youth were portrayed in the media. And it was at the time when the whole term mugging came into being. And so all these newspaper um reports and stuff was kinda associating young black men with muggings. And so I wanted to respond to that. And I wanted to interview young people to hear from their point of view rather than how the media was portraying it. Cobbled together some money, old stock that people had in their fridges because in those days you know camera men used to have stock in their fridges (laughs) Because we were shooting on film now. So you know stock alone is costing you two hundred, three hundred pounds for four hundred foot or something. And I remember having to discipline myself in terms of that stock in how I'm interviewing people. And I remember we did a pre-interview with people to get a sense of what they going to say. And I had to work out every question and how much it's going to be in time and (Laughs) And so that was good for me though because it obviously gave me discipline. And at that time I was living in Ladbrooke Grove and I interviewed Drummie who is you know in Aswad who became famous in Aswad, interviewed a young woman in Brixton and then we also had a discussion group. Then we took them into nightclub er dances and stuff but anyway it's really about giving their view about the police, about family, about education the school system and all of that. So that's what inspired me to want to do that film. And all that's come out of my activist background and desire to, wanting to translate my consciousness around black politics into my work, to film which is how um I saw it. I saw it as a tool for that.</p>
	<p><i>Step Forward Youth at the festival of black arts and culture in Nigeria</i></p>
	<p>It was accepted to be shown at the festival of black arts and culture in Nigeria in 1977 and they paid my fare, put me up in a hotel, gave me £40 a week pocket money. So it took opened my door to going to Africa which I always wanted to get to but never thought I could at that stage. And that film took me to Africa not just took me to Africa, took me to Nigeria and took me to a celebration of the greatest talents in the Pan African world. Stevie Wonder all kinds of other people were there. And so I was again bathed in this tremendous experience I think probably the greatest experience of my life that being in a national stadium with all the different countries all over Africa, Europe, America um just sharing as artists.</p>
	<p>Entering the world of TV</p>
	<p>I had a screening of <i>Step Forward Youth</i> at the Filmmakers Co-op and at that time a producer from ATV was there. Richard Creacy was the producer and he's a one of those rare radix, radicals in television at the time there was a few scattered around who were kinda given carte blanche to kinda do what they wanna do more or less. And he says oh I like this. What else have you got doing? I'm with ATV give me a project. And I had a project which was SUS. You know about a SUS law and was what was happening at the time. And he commissioned it.</p>
	<p>Making a documentary about the SUS law for ATV</p>

	<p>They put me with a producer. I had an office, they gave me a pic... a researcher. And so we're shooting in London and in Birmingham and stuff around the SUS law because a SUS law was being used against young black men. Being a suspected suspicious person often with a scenario that a police officer would say they saw a young black man trying to put his hand in a woman's handbag. You don't have to actually commit the crime. But you can be suspected of it. And so they were using that to arrest and you could get to six months imprisonment for that. And it was happening a lot, and especially in the West End. And so it became a big issue in the community. And so I wanted to do a film to talk about this. Initially I had a title for it, always have something, title clear which was <i>Battering Down Sentence</i> which was from a Bunny Wailer song. A lot of my titles I tend to think of reggae songs as a kind of link into the title. They said erm no come up with another idea. So eventually we ended up with a title called <i>Breaking Point</i>. OK.</p>
	<p><i>Breaking Point</i>, 1978 Breaking new ground</p>
	<p>We had people like Stuart Hall, Yehudi Narayan, Paul Boateng, or Lord Boateng now, who were the talking heads. And it was a first actually, I didn't realise, there's never been a documentary on mainstream television where all the people were talking in authority positions are black. That was a kind, I never thought about it because you know when you're young it's just like I'm going to do it. That's how I naturally think so I'm going to do it that way. And so they let me get away with it. So the shoot and everything went well then. Then I didn't realise they'd put me with a right wing editor and so we'd be in the cutting room setting things up and you know. And then I'll come back and I see somethings been cut out. So I had to kind of correct certain things at certain points. I mean we didn't have a confrontation it was never like that, it was never on that level, it was kind of more subtle. The issues didn't really come to a head until they presented the film to the IBA - the Independent Broadcasting Authority said it's imbalanced, because it's all these black people talking about their experiences. The view of the film was imbalanced they felt. And we argued I'd argued that actually it's redressing an imbalance that the mainstream media has been projecting consistently for years. And so they agreed with the controller of ATV, as to decide it kinda went up, Charles Denton, to have a disclaimer on front on the front of the film. This disclaimer said, because the programme went out after News at Ten. It said: "This film is made by a black director. It's about people's feelings." That's the disclaimer that they put on the front of <i>Breaking Point</i> before it went out, or as it went out, as people watched it. Which was quite extraordinary. Never ever seen that happen before. I've never seen anything, so this film is made by a Scottish director this films made by a Jewish director this film is made by wow. So that's what went out.</p>
	<p>The power and the problem with the mainstream</p>
	<p>The film did help to repeal the law, the SUS law, because soon afterwards there was changes in the SUS Law and the film did help to do that. And that's the the power of mainstream. And I always felt that if mainstream was able to work for the benefits of people and ideas and to be expansive then it would be such a great er tool, vehicle. But I realised after that experience that this was not a place for me to try to continue my development because I knew that I would have to censor myself and I'd get in to that censorship mode. And then I would loose my cutting edge, my voice really and so I decided I do not want to work in mainstream. I would become an independent filmmaker.</p>
	<p>Developing <i>Burning an Illusion</i> 1978 with financial support from the BFI</p>
	<p><i>Burning an Illusion</i> came after I did um <i>Breaking Point</i> and I was interested in drama. I didn't have any intention really of doing a movie. It was just a very small little film that I had in my mind. It just came to me, it wasn't something that I'd kind of previously thought about, I just had this vision of this woman in front of a mirror talking about her experience. I then submitted it to the BFI as a short film. And then they gave me some money to develop it. And so I developed it initially as a short story. But then I was writing and writing and it was just went on and on and on and on and on till I ended up with a 90 page script. And then went back to the BFI who then gave me the money. Apparently Jeremy Isaacs was critical, was crucial in that, turning the decision makers to give me the money at the BFI. It was shot on 16mm. The budget for <i>Burning an Illusion</i> was eighty thousand pounds. Which was not bad in those days but then it wasn't, it was seen as a very small budget, and then they put money into it for the distribution.</p>
	<p>Documenting the New Cross fire <i>Blood Ah Go Run</i>, 1981</p>

	<p>Blood Ah Go Run is very much about class. It's a very strident film in that I tried to reproduce a kinda newsreel type format. Because after the the fire in Deptford we were very angry, and then we did a march and so on. But the film itself talks about um class because it extends to looking at capitalism. Style and language is important for me to the audience that I'm speaking to. My films tend to be a very straight narrative in a sense and let the power of what's said carry it. Because I always feel that I tend to work with people's emotions and of course obviously intellect comes into it but at the heart of filmmaking you want to bring people in emotively to what you're doing. I felt that to do that you have to be still, because if you're moving around people are not, are looking at you know are drawn to your style or drawn to something else but you're not drawn to you know, it doesn't always happen. I mean I'm just being general here. <i>Blood Ah Go Run</i> isn't like that, <i>Blood Ah Go Run</i> is much more, cos it's a march it's much more edgy in that sense. It's a different type of style in a way but it's still within a way in which people can engage.</p>
	<p>Establishing a video workshop</p>
	<p>I've always had in my mind bringing people together to create something. And at the same time I came to be aware of the workshop movement where you had a collective format of working and it was unionized and these were supported by the BFI and other people put money into it and even Channel 4 as well supported them you know. Alan Fountain was very crucial in all of this. So I thought wow why don't we have one of those. So I then went to the BFI and Channel Four, Alan Fountain and they supported you know the workshop Ceddo.</p>
	<p>Ceddo Film and Video Workshop</p>
	<p>Community video is empowering a voice at a local level. 1982 it was set up and the title Ceddo came about. It's a it's a name film by Ouseman Sembene a Senegalese director and Ceddo means cultural resistance. And so that was really um typified really what we were about. We were trying to tell our stories without filter. I brought a number of people together to set it up but they weren't going to be the people that are going to be working and therefore the unionised relationship wasn't with us, it was about the people who were being employed. So that created a different type of relationship. We got the funding and also got money from Harringay. They also gave us the old school building....one of the floors which was amazing. So we were able to have equipment, do training courses, we were one of the first organisation in the black community to do film courses in the community, make it accessible. We also were showing films. You know and we had Spike Lee over when he when he came with his film <i>School Days</i>. He came to the workshop. So it was a real hub. And we did that for I think eight years or something 8/9 before the funding went with Margaret Thatcher came in.</p>
	<p>Broadwater Farm and making <i>The People's Account</i>, 1986</p>
	<p>In Ceddo as I said one of the things that I wanted to do, why we had equipment was to go out and document and you know get this history. That's what we had you know the liberty now to do. When the Broadwater Farm umm uprising kicked off. We were in the area and it was important that we had to be there. Cause Tottenham was my manor. And I was there and Sister Dennis, who was a real revolutionary camera-woman/director. We went down there and erm the thing is though we couldn't really film that much because we were now behind the lines and so you know we can film the police people but we couldn't really do because obviously we were now in a very very dangerous situation in terms of who you film. Filming that bit I just said look we have to make, we have to follow up this, we had to make this film. And <i>People's Account</i> was another one that we had an experience with television censorship issues there. So Channel 4 came back to us and said you know edit needed some changes or there was some things they were concerned about and we made a number of changes. But there was one change that we were not going to make which was they there was a comment in the commentary which says. Because the film also not only talks about the Broadwater Farm it also takes us back to what happened in Brixton with Mrs. Groves who was shot by police officers and so on and that caused the Brixton riots and so on. And s the comment was that she was a victim of police racism and they objected to that. But we stuck with our guns with that because we said there was no legal reason why that cannot be said. Cause we went through all the legal stuff and and er they still didn't show it and they've never shown it and will never show it and er so um that film was again our voice being represented but the mainstream having difficulty swallowing the voice. Much more so with the <i>People's Account</i>. I mean the people in it were very strong and very radical and very angry. And so it had a power to it which er you will never see on TV</p>
	<p><i>Time and Judgement</i>, 1988 and the end of the Channel 4 workshops</p>

	<p>Time and Judgment is probably the most radical film that's been made on television from a black perspective ever. And it had people that were banned that Farrakhan it had Kwame Ture who was banned. And it had a lot of radical voices. It was a film that was a kinda I call it a Sci Fi Doc because it has kinda spiritual symbolism with a kinda diary, a diarist looking back at a period of time 1980 to 80/87. It was shown on Channel 4. It was a very powerful piece and an MP got up in parliament the next day and complained about film. I think that may have triggered the movement to start to close down the workshops. I can't, I'm not sure but I just think that erm that you know that whole era where you know Alan Fountain was supporting independent voices and so on, and showing radical cinema and all of that was a landmark, and what really helped to build Channel 4. But then at this time it all changed. Where they stopped funding that department. Closed it down, and then Channel 4 became a different beast.</p>
	<p>Establishing Black Filmmaker Magazine</p>
	<p>After I did <i>Burning an Illusion</i> I thought the way was going to be open for me. Cause everybody was saying you know once you make a feature film dadada anyway. So I did all that and I thought that I would then be able to make a lot more drama. But it didn't work out that way. A number of projects were developed but never green lighted and I was getting frustrated with that process. I was ending up in a place where I was doubting myself and that is a most dangerous place you can ever be in. And so I decided no I'm going to stop. So I kind of said I'm not making any more films. And and I was very frustrated. And decided to channel my frustration in doing a magazine, of sorts, I mean initially it was just a little thing, then it kind of grew. And that's how the Black Filmmaker Magazine came about. It was a kind of channel for my anger and frustration. I thought let me create something that could pass on some of my experience to the next generation. And the magazine was a vehicle for that. At the Black Liberation Front we had a newspaper called Grassroots and and I became the editor of that. You know it was when I was about 18 or something. And so that was key in it to enable me to think that I could do a magazine. And then it developed over the years until it you know for about eight/nine years it went on and then while I was doing the magazine, early years of the magazine. I was in Paris for a film festival and one organisers said to me oh Menelik why don't you do a film festival in London? There's no film festival in London eh? So then I started think about it. And then eventually I decide OK let's do a film festival. I connected with the ICA. They gave us a weekend. What enabled me to do the festival as well is that I had been travelling with <i>Burning an Illusion</i> to festivals around the world. I'd been meeting filmmakers and so I had a network of filmmakers. I knew the films so it wasn't difficult for me to find films. So yeah I was in a position to do the festival and so that's again how the festival came about and that went on for what nearly 11 years.</p>
	<p>Where's Your Voice? Filmmaking today</p>
	<p>Now things have changed for the better in terms of technology, without a doubt. That's what's enabled me to even get back in the game. Because I came out of it and cos when I went to Nigeria and I was seeing what they were doing with very little equipment but it was digital equipment and then also with the digital cinema side of things coming into play. It opened up things that I wouldn't have been able to do previously. So the technology has really accelerated and made filmmaking open much more than at my time. So I think it's a very good time for filmmakers. The only difference now I think is that filmmakers don't seem to have the voice, the strident or the strong voices to to say something that's kind of to me missing. So you have the irony of all this equipment, all these facilities, but where's the voice? And so that to me is what I kinda reflect on nowadays with filmmakers is that you know a lot of talent. But I need to hear your voice.</p>
	<p>Credits card</p>