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MEMORIES OF THE SSO: DESCENDANTS SPEAK

JEFFREY GREEN

The reception given to black musicians in Britain was reflected in the reviews of their shows and acts, in recording contracts, billing in theaters of varying statuses, and the recollections of professional colleagues. The human side, where friendships were made with local people, led many foreign-born individuals to make their homes in Britain. By conducting interviews with descendants of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra performers, this often overlooked aspect of their history has been documented.

The interviews, conducted in 2007 and 2008, brought fresh information and encouraged more archival research.

Florence Gertrude Kelly, the daughter of SSO member Frank Bates, was born March 21, 1921 and was six months old when he died when the *SS Rowan* sank. Her birth certificate states that he was an “actor.” She mentioned a family legend that he had worked in the long-running London production of *Choo Chin Chow*, and recalled a framed photograph of a black male that had once graced the wall of her grandparents’ home. Her mother Esther “Fanny” Bates née Vivian was the only child, and it was in her parents’ home in Nunhead, southeast London that the widow and her colored

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daughters lived, even after she remarried ca. 1931 and had a new family. The Vivians and their two grandchildren lived upstairs and their mother, new husband, and two children lived on the ground floor.

In the 1920s Florence Bates often saw the African midwife who had delivered her and her older sister in the special room she rented in the Reynolds Road home of Violet Wall, a friend of Fanny Bates. Very small, “very black,” and “frightening,” the midwife wore a nurse’s headdress as she walked in the neighborhood. Her name is not recalled. Mrs. Kelly volunteered that her grandmother had told her that her father had been “a great friend” of a Dr. Moody, and that the doctor had children. She had always assumed that Moody was from Barbados, which was where her father was from according to her grandmother.

Discussing this it was clear that Mrs. Kelly had assumed that the doctor would have shared some of the aspects that she had long ascribed to her father, and was amazed to be informed that Harold Moody, a Jamaican, was a very highly respected physician who had won awards when studying at Kings College Hospital, London from 1904. Qualified in 1912, in 1913 he established his practice in Peckham, a mile from Nunhead (Killingray 2008). He was active in British Christian societies and was certainly unlikely to have formed a bond with a Barbados-born actor—who was to play the banjo with the Southern Syncopated Orchestra—in London.

Nor had he been the doctor consulted by the Bates family. Mrs. Kelly’s niece explained in detail what she had discovered about the present-day Bates family of Barbados when visiting that island (Jones 2008). They had fine educations and have professional status, with positions of power and influence in Barbados society. The rumor that Frank Bates had intended to study medicine in London and was rejected as he was color blind fits the history of the Bates family’s access to education, and, as there was a trolley car line between Nunhead and Kings College Hospital, explains why Bates first lived in the area. It might also explain how he made contact with Moody. The district was neither ideal for those who worked in the theatrical business, nor for his World War I employment in the merchant marine. Given what we know of the Bates family of Barbados, it would have been quite likely that Frank had violin lessons as a child, and when the Southern Syncopated Orchestra’s fame spread in London from mid-1919, he joined as a banjo player (the tenor or four-string banjo has strings with the same relationship as those of the violin).

Although the Vivians were Jehovah’s Witnesses they paid for both of their grandchildren to have music lessons—Florence studied the violin for a short while. When Dr. Judd, their physician, identified what today would be hyperactivity, both girls were sent for dancing lessons. Mrs. Kelly moves

like a dancer, an occupation she followed from World War II when she was in Stars in Battledress, a many-branched entertainment organization for British troops in various theaters of war.

Grandmother Vivian told her granddaughter that Frank Bates was a “dapper” fellow, always wearing a necktie and carrying a cane. He usually wore a top hat, even to the pub at the end of the road.

The first time that Florence Bates heard the name *Rowan* was in the 1930s when lawyers contacted the family over compensation payments for the loss of life. The two daughters were unable to have access to the funds until they reached twenty-one, but their mother was paid £500 (that would then have purchased a suburban house in London). Florence Kelly believes it was because of this that her mother was wooed, and so married her stepfather. Her sister, being older, was awarded £250 (\$1200) and Mrs. Kelly had £200. The funds were invested in shares in the Great Western Railway, and every six months the dividend payment was used to purchase items for the girls. When she went to the lawyers in London, around 1943, the shares were worth just £80. The financial legacy of the sinking of the *Rowan* in 1921 must have affected others.

A year or so ago Mrs. Kelly and her niece took part in a ceremony on the sea where the *Rowan* had sunk, placing a wreath on the waves from a lifeboat. The event was filmed and appeared on television. She said then, and repeated it at our interview, that it was “the end of a chapter.”

Juliet Ann Jones was born Juliet Ann Robinson in London in July 1956. Her mother was Esther Vivian Bates, and she was born in Nunhead (south London) on July 24, 1919. Esther Bates’s sister Florence was born in March 1921 in Nunhead. Their father was Frank Bates of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra.

Juliet had asked her mother about her grandparents, but just a few pieces of information had been passed down. She had been twenty years old when Juliet’s grandmother died. These snippets were: that Frank Bates was a singer, that he had been a member of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, that he had drowned when the *Rowan* had sunk, and that he had come to England from Barbados to train as a medical doctor in London but had been rejected because he was colorblind. That led him to take up work in the entertainment business, before war service in the merchant navy. Esther also recalled a picture of a black male, which her mother had pointed out, saying, “That’s your daddy. That’s why you are this color, he was a black man.” Other aspects of the family were known.

Frank Bates married Fanny Vivian, a Welsh girl born in Pembroke Dock in November 1898. She had been seventeen when she first met Bates, who

was renting the spare room at a relative's house in Peckham, near Nunhead. Close enough to King's College Hospital, which had long taken black students, this was also convenient to the activities in London's many theaters. There are no lists of would-be but rejected medical students.

Bates's death left his widow to provide for the two daughters, and she did this by working in a laundry. Her parents looked after their two grandchildren. Grandfather William George Vivian had been born in western England's Cornwall, and worked in Peckham with horses, as a farrier. It was his sister Nell who took in lodgers—including Bates. It was when the then-seventeen-year-old Fanny visited her aunt that she first met and fell for Bates.

William Vivian was a strong-minded man, who had conquered illiteracy by teaching himself and, when dissatisfied with Christian services in the area, joined the Jehovah's Witness church. He was very protective of the two Bates children—as Juliet's aunt was to say, they "only had each other." The three-generation home possessed a piano and the girls were sent to dancing classes. Fanny Bates could read music, and was an excellent singer, having come fourth, at the age of fourteen, in a contest involving four thousand.

English schooling in the 1920s and 1930s had pupils take an examination at the age of eleven. Esther passed and went to the grammar school, leaving to work in the office of Foyle's bookshop in central London. She married an army batman, and traveled widely in Britain including a spell in wartime Belfast. Her second marriage was to Wesley Cornelius Robinson, a Jamaican who had migrated to England in the 1940s. He was Juliet's father.

Britain's black population before the 1940s was quite small, and both her mother and aunt had told Juliet that they knew about only two individuals in the Peckham Nunhead district of London. These were an African midwife and a doctor. The doctor was certainly Jamaica-born Dr. Harold Moody, but the name of the woman is unknown.

Identified by their appearance, the two Bates girls were sheltered by the Vivians' protection and supported in their schooling. That their father had drowned was not so different to the many fatherless families of 1920s London, due to the attrition of World War I.

In hospital in September 2003, Juliet Jones was encouraged to read Suzy Kester's *Under My Own Colours* (published that year) and, through a drug-induced haze, noticed that it mentioned both the Southern Syncopated Orchestra and the *Rowan* disaster. After recovery from the surgery she made contact with Kester, and began a search for more information about her grandfather, which took her to Barbados and to London's Black Cultural Archives where director Sam Walker recommended she contact historian Jeffrey Green.

Ann Franklin Bowes was born in London on the last day of 1933 as Anne [sic] Viola Luleta James, the second daughter of Lushington Wendell Bruce-James and his wife Mary Clampitt. In her memoir she states that her father was born in Antigua in the then-British West Indies in February 1891, migrated as a child to British Guiana (now Guyana), and was awarded the colony's university scholarship which brought him to study at Keble College, Oxford, in 1910 (Bowes 2006). Bruce-James's father had been a music teacher, and his uncle a school inspector for the islands of St. Kitts and Nevis. Mary Clampitt ("of humble origin") was born in London in September 1905. The pair met when working at a movie theater in central London: Mary Clampitt showed people to their seats, and Bruce Wendell (as he styled himself after some time as Wendell Bruce-James) played the electric organ before the feature film. Bruce-James followed a musical career in Britain from the time he completed war service in the Royal Fusiliers, which was after he left Oxford where he had won a prize in Greek.

In October 1935 he took a boat to the Caribbean where he played the piano accompanying soprano Ekaterina Zorina. He moved to New York City where he died in August 1968—he never returned to England. Ann Bowes's memoir describes the life of his two daughters, the belief their mother held that he would return, and life without a father. She remembers one black friend of the family, a doctor from Africa named Tuvey who was her older sister's godfather, but the children never met him as he died early.

Her book is a valuable social document and tender memoir, throwing light on matters which were far from the spotlight and superficial images of musical entertainment.

The London-based journalist and historian Val Wilmer contacted Ann Bowes when she heard Bowes was in search of details of her father's life. Ann then contacted Jeffrey Green and Howard Rye, and so she became aware that her father had been associated with the Southern Syncopated Orchestra.

Reginald "Reg" Moores was born at 31 John Street, Brighton, on September 10, 1922. This was the home of the Macdonald family, and his mother Beatrice was one of four children (Moores 2008). She, her sister, and brother Albert were brown-skinned; so was her brother Charles Macdonald, who had been killed in the double collision that sank the *Rowan*. Reg Moores knew that his uncle had been a banjo player, and that he had died when his ship sank in the Irish Sea, and had put two and two together and made five, assuming that his uncle had been in an orchestra that played for the entertainment of passengers. He was aware that only ocean-going liners

had orchestras, and that many of those sailed from Liverpool, not Glasgow. He had heard family talk of the sinking of the *Clan Malcolm* and that the Hearts of Oak benefit or insurance society had not paid out when his Uncle Charles was killed.

Realizing that an orchestra with his “half-and-half” uncle killed in the Irish Sea before 1922 must have had some connection to the Southern Syn-copated Orchestra, Reg Moores sought more details. The *Clan Malcolm* was one of the other ships involved when the *Rowan* sank, which helped him understand when and why his uncle had died.

An absence of family photographs, in part due to wartime damage and also, as Reg suggested, due to an absence of a camera in his family circle, and without any recollection of his mother’s parents, Reg agreed that either his grandmother or his grandfather was black. Raised in Brighton, and apprenticed as an engineer working with electronics in local enterprises, Reg Moores recalled that the family doctor was from Ceylon (today Sri Lanka) and was dark skinned, and that at school there was a pupil—like his mother—who was “half colored.”

Beatrice Macdonald married Charles Moores, Reg’s father, when his wife died. The pair had met during the 1914–1918 war when Charles Moores came to Brighton in the army. He was from northern England (the southern spelling is always “Moore”). As a child Reg messed about with a harmonica, and in the 1930s his mother bought him a secondhand cornet, which he taught himself to play. He visited his Uncle Albert, who lived well in a handsome apartment in London in the 1930s, when he worked in films and show business, appearing with star Jessie Matthews. As his career declined he moved to a small flat. His aunt moved away to Dudley, an industrial town near Birmingham. In 1942 Reg Moores volunteered for service and served in Coastal Command of the Royal Air Force, on U-boat patrols operating from Nassau, Bahamas, with B24s and B25s, as well as playing the trumpet in a fifty-piece band. He joined the entertainers’ union Equity in 1949, and worked as an ice skater, magician, and as a theatrical agent. He was in Hong Kong when his mother died in 1951.

Reg’s inventions include suitcase wheels and pioneering electrical spectrometers. He still attends international gatherings as far away as Brazil and Japan.

Unable to recognize his Uncle Charles Macdonald in a fine photograph of the Orchestra outside the Dome, Brighton, we concluded that he was one of the two lighter-complexioned banjo players: there were six. We also concluded that if Reg Moores’ abilities and verve (at the age of eighty-six) reflected the Macdonald family, then the death of his uncle on the *Rowan* was more than a loss to the world of music.

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