

Quilting

Gee's Bend. William Arnett. Underground Railroad. Spirituals.

Words Andy Thomas Portrait Janette Beckman

Photographs courtesy of Souls Grown Deep Foundation soulsgrowndeep.org

IN THE SPRING of 2013 drummer Jaimeo Brown took a journey from his home in New York to a small corner of the deep south. There in Gee's Bend, where the Alabama River curls through Wilcox County, a rural collective of women have been creating brilliantly improvisational quilts for, perhaps, 200 years. They follow in a tradition of African-American quilting that reaches back to slavery.

The quilts of Gee's Bend transcend folk art. Following an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, New York magazine art critic Mark Stevens proclaimed: "The strikingly beautiful quilts just might deserve a place among the great works of 20th-century abstract art." But it's not just their beautiful quilts that inspire, because as these women sew, they sing. And it is these spirituals that were used to such stunning effect on Brown's *Transcendence* LP. "At that time, for my own spiritual fulfillment, I needed music to be something other than just for the purpose of performance. It has

so many other functions," says Brown. "Going back to the roots down at Gee's Bend and seeing how these spiritual songs were interwoven into their daily activities and the craft of quilting that really inspired me." In Mario Tahí Lathan's documentary that follows Jaimeo Brown to Gee's Bend, we meet some of those women whose craft has only recently gained recognition.

The term quilt comes from the Latin for a stuffed sack, an incongruous name when you consider the beautiful art to emerge from Gee's Bend. The stitching together of layers of padding and fabric known as quilting has been traced back to ancient Egypt where it was used in various garments. The quilt as we know it today is purely utilitarian, a means to keep families warm. Arriving in the New World with very little, early European settlers in America pieced together old blankets and clothes to make bedding. In their desperate efforts to survive the harsh winters, they weren't thinking

about art – but in the mid-19th century, quilting became creative. A variety of techniques and styles were developed: the medallion quilt consists of a central motif with multiple borders; the log cabin is made of arrangements of a repeated single block pattern. Quilting also became a communal activity: women came together in what became known as quilting bees. Artistically and socially important, it spread quickly. As early as the 1850s, in Amish society remarkable quilts were created using modernist style abstractions as advanced as they were prescient. Native Americans fused their own artistic and spiritual traditions with the European to create designs like the star quilt, using symbolic patterns for ceremonies and other cultural activities.

As well as sewing and stitching for plantation owners, slave women made quilts for their own use, recycling old clothing, flour, tobacco and sugar sacks. One of the best resources on art from the African-American South is the Souls >





Quilts by members of Moultrie Kennedy's family, 1970s **Photograph** Matt Arnett

Grown Deep Foundation, which has co-published a number of books on Gee's Bend with art collector William Arnett. In *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* art historian Joanne Cubbs points to the practical roots of African-American quilting: "The tradition was born of scarcity and resourcefulness, arising in times where shortages of cloth called for the inventive salvaging of fabric scraps and remnants." The practice of recycling shares similarities with the use of found objects in African-American art through the 20th century. It also has echoes of the ancient Japanese textile tradition of boro. In black US communities, the use of old clothing to make quilts also had a deeper symbolic meaning. "Old clothes carry something with them. You can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit," Gee's Bend woman Mary Lee Bendolph told Cubbs.

Slave women learned techniques from owners, but quickly established their own syncretic traditions. "It's a culture that grew out of white European, Native American and African culture and produced something totally unique,"

says Arnett. It took improvisation from African culture, as interpretations of traditional American styles created a constantly evolving design aesthetic. Writer and art historian Robert Farris Thompson points to the juxtaposition of

'THE QUILTS DESERVE A PLACE AMONG THE GREAT WORKS OF 20TH-CENTURY ABSTRACT ART'

strong colours as something other than decorative: "The Bakongo (a tribal group of Congo and Angola) believe breaks in pattern – terraced shifts from white to red to black, for instance – can symbolise

passing through two worlds, the quest for the superior insights and power of the ancestors." Other African traditions were used as quilting developed as an art form, such as: the use of strips known as "men's weaving" but taken on by women in the plantations; large shapes and bold colours to distinguish tribes; complex multiple patterning often used to stop copying; and appliqué techniques to tell stories. It is even debated whether quilting was used to send codes for the Underground Railroad. One thing is for sure: in the art of quilting, there resides a strong visual language passed down from slavery.

Probably the most famous quilter to emerge from slavery was Harriet Powers. Born a slave in Athens, Georgia in 1837, Powers used appliqué to record historical legends, Bible stories and astronomical events. She was the first former slave to gain recognition beyond her community when white artist Jennie Smith bought one of her quilts and entered it into the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. At one time, there were hundreds of little communities like Gee's Bend with deep quilting traditions.

"What contributed [to the depletion of this culture] was the breakdown of the whole small farmer system in the South," says William Arnett. "It had changed significantly as agribusiness set in and small farmers had to go elsewhere for employment. So these little communities broke up in the migrations to the cities."

Quilting in Gee's Bend began at the Pettway cotton plantation, and following abolition, the small, poor community of tenant farmers became geographically isolated. "This river has acted more like an ocean, separating Gee's Bend from the rest of the world," explains Arnett in *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*. This might have complicated travel and modernisation but it created a strong cultural identity and continuation of ancestral arts. This is reflected in the unique quilting styles. "The compositions contrast dramatically with the ordered regularity associated with Euro-American quiltmaking," wrote African-American art historian Alvia Wardlaw. "It's a brilliant, improvisational range of approaches that is more often associated with the inventiveness and power of leading 20th-century abstract painters than it is with textile-making." Like other African-American quilters, the women of Gee's Bend were known for their improvisations, resulting in a variety of hybrid patterns. "A Gee's Bend star quilt, for example, is completely different from traditional star pattern, instead yielding an offbeat, pulsating rhythm," says Wardlaw. Robert Farris Thompson has compared these movements and multiple patterns of African-American textiles with the rhythms of African music and jazz.

Spiritual song is central to Gee's Bend quilters' creativity. The spirituals, hummed vocalisations and moans are used both for praise and meditation, as well as to energise and give rhythm to their craft. "Quilting is mostly singing," quilter Nettie Young told Arnett. "So it sound like it ought to be music in that quilt, because that sure the way we make them. Sewing, singing, sewing, singing. It's in that quilt because that's what I do when I quilt." It was these songs that brought Jaimeo Brown to town.



Quilt by Lola Pettway, 1970s **Photograph** Matt Arnett

"When I first heard those spirituals it became extremely important music to me," he explains. "But it was very hard to track them down. I had made 40 or 50 phone calls. I remember when I finally heard China [Pettway] on the other end of the phone it really was a dream come true. She was up there with Coltrane on the impact on my life." He met the collective at a crucial time. "It was very refreshing and inspiring to watch them sing and work," he says. "I've rarely seen such close connections between the visual and sonic side. There are so many things I discovered from how the quilters work. There are different rules in how a quilt is designed and the purpose of the quilt. Some of those rules that I saw visually, I also heard in the music." What he saw in Gee's Bend related directly to his own capacity as a bandleader. "Improvisation that happens when you are working with someone else and creating something collectively with cohesion for a singular purpose: they really are masters of that. The way they sing and sew together and the language that was unsaid in how they would interact with each other; that was something that inspired me greatly."

The women of Gee's Bend also take inspiration from what's around them.

"Most of my ideas come from looking at things," Mary Lee Bendolph explained. "I can walk outside in the yard and see ideas all around the front and back of my house." The patterns and shapes of their environment are reflected in their abstract geometric designs. Steps, windows, roofs and doorways become sources for their art. Quilt names like housetop, chicken coop, bricklayer and rail fence confirm those architectural connections. William Arnett sees a precursor to the abstractions of the great modernists. "We tend to base our art history on the first white person to do something with paint on a canvas. That's not always where that style or aesthetic started. Mondrian looked out and saw the line between the horizon, water and sky and reduced it to primary colour – but the women of Gee's Bend had been doing that long before. I went around taking photographs of what the women see when they walk out the front door: roads, buildings, the lines between the roof and the doorway – that's what they extracted onto these quilts. These women got their ideas from what they saw, not from art books. Why would they need to? They have prototypes in their own community that predate modernism." >



Sewing a quilt, Gee's Bend, Alabama, 1937 Photograph Arthur Rothstein

The Gee's Bend women also make comparisons between quilting and the construction of homes. "You can start with a bedroom over there, or a den over here, and you add on until you get what you want," Mensie Lee Pettway said in *Gee's Bend: The Women and their Quilts*.

The family lineage of quilting is also a significant part of the craft, as skills and styles are passed down from generation to generation. "I recall I was about five or six years old when I was introduced to sewing," Loretta P Bennett said. "We were only allowed to thread needles for the quilters in my grandmother and mother's quilting group. The leftover scraps are what we got to sew and piece together, practicing on how to make a real quilt." Connecting past to present quilting in Gee's Bend has also been part of the ongoing struggle throughout the turbulent history of the South.

At the height of the civil-rights movement and inspired by Martin Luther King's visit in March 1965, the Gee's Bend women took the ferry to nearby Camden to demand voting rights. The response from the authorities was calculated and vindictive. Some women were thrown in jail and the ferry service was immediately cancelled, leaving the

community isolated further. "As Neil Armstrong was walking on the moon, in 1969, Gee's Benders were walking 15 miles to the nearest telephone," wrote Arnett. "If they needed a hospital or medical treatment they had to drive at least 50 miles." One of the most poignant works from that period is Irene Williams's beautifully intricate

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variation on the housetop style with the word "vote" running through it. A year after the march on Camden, episcopal priest Father Francis Walter came across some quilts on a line while driving through Rehoboth, a small town north of Gee's Bend. The Freedom Quilting Bee

he helped form acted as a co-operative for local black women. The publicity that followed in the New York Times led to the group making quilts for department stores like Bloomingdales and Saks Fifth Avenue. But these assembly-line pieces were a long way from the beautiful art Gee's Bend became known for.

While the women may have been unique as a late 20th-century collective, they are not the only African-Americans to make a name with their quilts. Born Effie Mae Howard in Arkansas in 1936, Rosie Lee Tompkins created designs that were perhaps even more abstract. Her work was discovered in the 1980s when quilt scholar Eli Leon met her by chance at a flea market in California; "completely and utterly flabbergasted" by the display of quilts at her home, he introduced her pieces to museums and galleries. Always a secretive figure, she would not give interviews or let people photograph her. She believed God directed her quilting hand, and was troubled by paranoia until her death in 2006. But she left behind work that deserves its place at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art alongside the modern masters. As curator Lawrence Rinder said when her pieces were displayed at Berkeley Art Museum: "Tompkins's quilts make an eloquent case for a more inclusive view of contemporary art [that] transcends the boundaries between art and craft and European and African traditions." There are many more such quilters scattered across America but most of the small communities they were part of are gone.

By the 1990s, quilting in Gee's Bend had also declined somewhat, as younger residents moved to find work and left an aging population to uphold the tradition. Enter William Arnett, who had been collecting southern African-American art for years. "I had spent a number of decades researching and documenting the black culture of the South, which had been totally unrecognised," he says. "A woman working with me had written a book on African-American quilts and



Jorena Pettway and her daughter making chair covers out of bleached flour sacks and flower decorations from paper, Gee's Bend, Alabama, 1939 Photograph Marion Post Wolcott

had become interested in the work we were doing. And she had been trying to convince me to go into the investigation of the black southern quilts. I assumed it had already been done as thoroughly as it needed to be. She was telling me "no, it hasn't" so I looked into where quilts were made and stumbled across Gee's Bend. I realised I'd found a place that, while not unique in black culture, was unique in today's history, because communities like this had died out and disappeared in the most part. But this was an isolated little place, almost like a time capsule."

He bought many quilts in Gee's Bend and in 1996 held an exhibition and launched the two-volume *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South*. The Gee's Bend quilt collective became an important part of this story of forgotten southern African-American

art. A number of books and exhibitions followed, including one of over 70 Gee's Bend quilts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in partnership with Arnett. "When these things were finally shown, people all over the world were like, 'Oh my God, where did this come from?' They assumed there was just a little one-off community making these things that looked like Mondrian or whatever. The truth was that, at one time, there were thousands of little communities – they just died out. I have no doubt that it will be recognised as one of the great art traditions in world history. It already is by people who bother to look at it."

Thanks to people like Arnett and Jaimeo Brown, this collective is finally getting the recognition they deserve. And they are leaving a lasting impact on those they touch. "Now I am starting to

interact visuals into the live show," says Brown. "They have really opened my mind to working with as many mediums as I can. I would say the visual aspect and the vibrancy of the colour within the quilts has really inspired what I want to project on stage. And we are planning a tour with them – a real collaboration with music, but also a way of presenting their stories that reflect a bigger story of American history. It will also include an exhibition of their beautiful quilts. So, I am really excited about that." ■

Mario Tabi Lathan's documentary *Transcendence* is touring film festivals. Jaimeo Brown's LP *Transcendence* is out on Motéma/Proper Note. jaimeobrown.com, soulsgrowndeep.org, propernote.co.uk