

Rosa-Johan Uddoh

*Una's Voice*



Exhibition

1 May – 4 June 2022

Wednesday – Sunday, 12-5pm

THE  
BOWER

Rosa-Johan Uddoh has been working in The Bower throughout March and April, treating her time there as a writing and sound residency inspired by the work of Una Marson, a British/Jamaican activist, radio producer, presenter, and poet; the first Black woman to work as a radio producer at the BBC in 1942. She is commemorated with a blue plaque on Brunswick Park road opposite The Bower.

*Una's Voice* is an audio work broadcast in The Bower. It can be listened to in the gallery, with the curtained walls and original BBC world service clock alluding to the decor of the recording studio, or outside with wireless headphones in the park that Una Marson herself would have enjoyed. The work can also be accessed via our website and a full transcript is available for accessibility.

Uddoh's script and sound piece draws on the legacy of Una Marson's 'Caribbean Voices', a BBC radio programme produced by Marson which broadcast Caribbean writing. Visitors are invited to listen to recordings taken in The Bower and Brunswick Park of contemporary Caribbean voices, following a call-out to local residents and voices further afield. The work re-visits and re-presents Una Marson's poetry, interwoven with Uddoh's own writing and draws upon Bajan poet Kamau Brathwaite's key text 'History of the Voice' (1984), published by New Beacon Books, which asserted that the Caribbean voice is not an English dialect but a distinct nation language.

This project stems from Uddoh's research into Una Marson's life and work and exhibition at Black Tower Projects in 2019 when she began the *Una Marson Reading & Listening Group*. Later that year she recorded a pilot radio show at The Bower with Bolanle Tajudeen, Jasmine Uddoh and Star Tajudeen for Art Licks Weekend Radio in collaboration with TACO!, a precursor for this project which has been postponed since 2020.

A new book, *Practice Makes Perfect* (2022), co-published by Book Works and Focal Point Gallery, in partnership with Bluecoat, Liverpool and The Bower and designed by Rose Nordin is available from Book Works and The Bower. The book will be Uddoh's first and comprises a collection of scripts, pictures, poems, essays and songs, each aiming to trouble how a particular character in popular culture performs (and produces) 'Black British' identity.

There's something about Una Marson. Something about the power of hearing her strong, confident voice on the radio. I mean, she can tell she's going to be listened to before her words even leave her mouth. Imagine what you would say with that confidence.

I first saw Una Marson in a grainy phone photo of a photo during a lecture, that my old school friend Akil attended in 2017. It was a photo taken some time in the 1940s, of Una walking across a room to speak, script in hand.

'She looks like you.'

Akil said. And she does - it's uncanny. You can't see my face, so it's difficult for me to convey how uncanny the resemblance is between me and the first Black programme maker at the BBC; Una Marson and I have exactly the same jaw line. In profile: it comes down from the ear at ninety degrees, then swiftly takes a forty-degree turn - a line along which the bone travels for at least twenty centimetres before forming a chin. The effect is that both mine and Una's faces are about twice as wide in profile as they are from the front. In school, this characteristic used to prompt Akil and some others to taunt me with a 30cm ruler and the rhetorical question 'Why is your face so wide?'. Now, finally, over ten years later, my wide face is getting me some respect: 'My mum says she's a boss!' Akil said. This is representation. Or perhaps, since we are all Jamaicans, a more intimate entanglement - relation.

Maybe if we'd been shown photos of Black women at school things would have been different for me, Akil and the others - my brother and sister who've the same brown skin, and also the same jaw line (though admittedly to a slightly lesser degree). And perhaps, if I'd read Una Marson's self-published poems as a teenager, the words 'Black feminist' might have formed earlier on in my own cavernous mouth. Another's mouth might have formed another's voice.

I've found two short clips of Una's voice. One recording is two-minutes of audio from an interview with Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson, an early jazz musician from British Guiana. In this recording you can only catch snatches of her - Una's a good interviewer, saying just enough to prompt her subjects to tell their stories. The other recording is from a one-off televised dramatisation of her regular radio show, 'Hello! West Indies'. In this TV special we are returned to the image of Una Marson's wide face, as the film attempts to recruit West Indians to fight for the British in World War II. Una stands at the microphone and welcomes other British West Indians to share their experiences of being in the British army, navy or air force. In front of Una, an interracial dance is in full swing. British West Indian servicemen and women dance to a live calypso band, several of them emerging at the scheduled moment to stand at the microphone and tell their stories. Several of those who speak are entertainers in regular life, known to the audience as popular sportspeople or musicians. Sometimes the film cuts away to footage of other Black women and men training at outposts across the Empire. Una, the compere, ties the display together. But

at the same time, through the camera, Una's voice is pinned back down to a digestible image of a single, coloured mouth – visual representation becomes tokenisation, which becomes propaganda, which becomes control.

In 1943, Una instigated her final and most influential programme at the BBC: Caribbean Voices. It would run for fifteen years, long after the BBC sent Una herself 'back home'. In it, Una invited Caribbean writers to read their writing aloud on the international airwaves. One of those was the expert on the Caribbean oral tradition, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who'd later call Caribbean Voices:

'the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative and critical writing in English'.<sup>1</sup> In his lecture, *The History of the Voice*, Brathwaite describes how, during colonisation and slavery, the British imposed the English language on those indigenous to the Caribbean, and the enslaved and indentured they brought to it. This process, of colonisation of the mind through the voice, was continued after 'emancipation' through the school curriculum, where British sensibilities and rhythm – namely 'iambic pentameter' – were imposed on Caribbean children.<sup>2</sup>

Iambic pentameter might've been OK for the British and their temperate climate, but it wouldn't do for Caribbeans.

'The hurricane does not roar in pentameters'.

He charts a brief history of Caribbean poets attempting to break free from iambic pentameter (and the particular consciousness that came with it), to instead articulate the force of the hurricane that hit the Caribbean islands each year. These poets use 'an ancient form which was always there, the calypso,' which 'mandates the use of the tongue in a certain way.'

This is the development of what Brathwaite calls 'Nation Language': not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface.

He tells us that the language and, therefore, the culture of the Caribbean exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of its meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you think of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning.

Which is again, why I have a tape recorder for this presentation. I want you to get the sound of it rather than the sight of it. Unfortunately, and ironically, the audio recording

of Brathwaite's talk was destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert, when it hit Barbados, in September 1988.

Back in the UK, destruction of material relating to Black experience is as systematic and predictable as iambic pentameter. Despite Una's regular broadcasting for the BBC Empire Service for over five years, between 1940 and 1946, sometimes twice a week, despite boxes of her scripts diligently collecting dust in the BBC's Written Archives, there are no proper surviving recordings of Una Marson's voice, beyond those two little clips I mentioned earlier. The BBC has, for reasons un-articulated, scrubbed them.<sup>3</sup>

We have known the heights together  
I have known the depths alone.<sup>4</sup>

In the elusive BBC Written Archives in the suburbs of Reading, England is a locked office, recently named the Una Marson Reading Room. You can't go inside, but through the glazed panel on the door you can see a giant halftone digital image of a young Una, wallpapering the entire wall behind the desk. At the BBC Written Archives, you can access Una Marson's 'Left Staff File' – a file containing all correspondence between Una and her employer, the BBC. Included inside this file is, amongst other things: a letter of complaint by Una's colleague to management complaining that Una is difficult to work with, letters to and from the BBC and Una's doctor detailing their diagnosis of Una's psychiatric condition, concerned letters from Una's sister in Jamaica enquiring about Una's well-being and, finally, a report by one of Una's BBC colleagues detailing – day-by-day, hour-by-hour – how, in 1946, with the help of some of Una's family friends, he forced her onto a ship back to Jamaica.

Documents in Una Marson's 'Left Staff File' in the BBC Written Archives refer to the struggles with mental health that the BBC and doctors perceived Una as having, and their decision that Una should spend an extended time back in Jamaica.<sup>5</sup> The BBC made it a condition for her retaining her position that she be sent 'home', and oversaw her travel. But it's not clear from the documents that Una Marson wanted to go back to Jamaica.<sup>6</sup> As the NHS's first Black consultant psychiatrist, Aggrey Burke, comments in a recent interview with Kehinde Andrews in *The Guardian* (13 Jan 2022), it was common practice for psychiatrists to recommend their Black patients be sent 'home' to the Caribbean to alleviate mental distress 'under the coconut tree or a banana tree'. But, even with the ultimatum by the BBC issued, the BBC colleague involved in her transportation reports how, on the day of her scheduled return, Una refused to pack her bags, engaged in 'deliberate and sustained obstructionism' and that the car she was being transported to the port in to broke down 'chiefly by her interference'.<sup>7</sup> All this suggests an effort by Una to miss the ferry and to remain in England. Una was partially successful in this – the ship had left the

1 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 87.

2 This and the following few quotations can be found in the transcript of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's lecture: *The History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 8-17.

3 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 87.

4 'Tropic Reveries: Poems by Miss Una M. Marson', *Jamaica Times*, 5 July 1930, p. 5.

5 Memo from Establishment Assistant (Overseas Service) to BBC, Una Marson Left Staff File, BBC Written Archives, 16 October 1946.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

port by the time her taxi finally arrived – however, her BBC colleague arranged a pilot boat to collect Una and take her out to meet the main boat. He writes: ‘This was arranged and with firm handling we had little further difficulty in getting Miss Marson on board.’<sup>8</sup>

Nowadays, there’s an eerie silence from the BBC about Una Marson. Sometimes I think that, maybe, Una saved herself with her soppy love poems and depression. She made herself too volatile for the BBC to use.

Play bridge! When each fibre of my aching heart  
Yearned just for the touch of your hand<sup>9</sup>

What does it mean to be the first Black radio producer? What does it mean to be Black, if no one can see your face? Caribbean poets have long known the answer, for, coming from an oral tradition, Caribbean poetry is to be heard, not seen. Similarly, perhaps only through an oral delivery might we go beyond representation, beyond tokenism, beyond propaganda and control. Speech can demand attention. To look at a Black face might only take a second or two – from the time it might take to register that face, to the time it might take to decide to dismiss it. But to hear what that face has to say takes a little longer. And to listen? That would require even more engagement – to follow through the narrative at the speaker’s pace. To not know the line the story will follow. Una, a Caribbean poet and radio producer, tokenised within her institution, most likely knew this well. Who better than Una to hand the mic?

When you catch them, Una’s tones are: a rich alto, received pronunciation, with a Jamaican lilt; a pentameter shifting from Byron to Brathwaite, cutting through history like glass – the formation of a British subject.

An extract from *Practice Makes Perfect*, by Rosa-Johan Uddoh, co-published by Book Works and Focal Point Gallery, in partnership with Bluecoat and The Bower, 2022

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Una Marson, ‘Resignation’, *Heights and Depths*, (Kingston, 1931), p. 43.

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1 May – 4 June 2022

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Rosa-Johan Uddoh and The Bower would like to give special thanks to the following people who responded to a call out for Caribbean voices to participate in recordings which took place in Brunswick Park during April 2022:

Louis Brown  
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Sound recording and editing: John Brown

Rosa-Johan Uddoh is an interdisciplinary artist working towards radical self-love. She is inspired by Black feminist practice and writing. Through performance, writing and multi-media installation, she explores places, objects and celebrities in British popular culture, and their effects on self-formation. Collaboration is key to her work, often working together with children, activists and other artists to explore themes that impact our communities and share knowledge. Previous solo presentations include: ‘Practice Makes Perfect’, Focal Point Gallery, touring to Bluecoat, Liverpool (2021), ‘“She is still alive!”’, *Destiny’s* (Oslo, 2020), ‘Studies for Impartiality’, Jupiter Woods and ‘Sphinx at the Crystal Palace’, Black Tower Projects (both London, 2019). Group shows include: ‘Brand New Heavies’, Pioneer Works (New York, 2021), ‘Learning by Doing’, 68 Institute (Copenhagen, 2019), *New Contemporaries* (London & Liverpool 2018) She has screened work at East London Cable’s ‘TV Dinners E03’ at Tate Modern, 2019 and is a lecturer in Performance at Central Saint Martins. She was a finalist for Arts Foundation Futures Awards 2021, Liverpool Biennial and John Moores University Fellow 2018-2019 and the Stuart Hall Library Resident for 2020. She was a Sarabande: Lee Alexander Mc Queen Scholar.

The Bower is a gallery, publication studio and cafe, occupying a former park keepers hut and public toilet in Brunswick Park. The artistic programme is driven by a commitment to collaboration, feminist and sociopolitical practice. The Bower is a non-profit organisation which relies on earned income from the cafe, project grants and donations to deliver a programme which responds to the context of the building and the park locality.

The Bower, Brunswick Park,  
Community Interest Company No. 10932813  
Co-Directors Louisa Bailey & Joyce Cronin

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History of The Voice by Edward Kamau Brathwaite,  
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