

Black Community Mixtapes uncovers lost Canadian history



By Nate Smelle

Award-winning Canadian filmmakers, Allison Duke and Ngardy Conteh George recently launched a new five-part docu-series they co-produced called Black Community Mixtapes. The series shines a light on many life-changing moments in Black Canadian history, while following host KhaRá Martin – a filmmaker, musician, and actor from Toronto – as she rediscovers a missing chapter in Canada's history. By taking a deep dive into the community's previously lost cultural archives, and speaking with Black Canadian archivists, musicians, artists and culture change makers, Martin provides insight into Canada's past, present, and future.

Last Saturday Bancroft This Week had the opportunity to speak with Martin about her experience of hosting Black Community Mixtapes. Recognizing that a lot of Black Canadian history remains hidden away in boxes and photo albums stored out of sight and out of mind in peoples basements and closets, Martin is on a quest to preserve and document these precious remnants of Canada's national heritage before they are gone. Reflecting on how special and enlightening the process of making the series was for her personally, she explained why Black Community Mixtapes is so important.

‘It’s really important to learn about Black Canadian history, because Black history is Canadian history,’ said Martin. ‘If we don’t learn about these things, we are stopping ourselves from learning about a large part of our history, of our community of Canadians, and how we came to have all of the things we know and love today.’

The first two episodes of the new docu-series aired back-to-back on CityTV Toronto on Sept. 24 at 7 p.m.; whereas the rest of the

series will be broadcast on the same station on Sundays starting at 7:30 p.m. In episode one, Martin said they look at the origins of the hip-hop scene in Toronto. In episode two, she said they looked back on the evolution of Toronto's Caribana festivities. Acknowledging how Caribana is such a huge festival that brings in millions and millions of dollars to the city every year, sees it as a perfect opportunity to learn about Black Canadian history through understanding the festival's roots and how it came to be.

‘It’s the same with the hip-hop community,’ added Martin. ‘There’s so much of its culture that has spilled over into the food that we eat, and the way that we speak. So diving deep into it, and how it all came to be the way that it is in Toronto, in Ontario, and all of Canada is really important. My biggest take away from this series is that I hope that once people watch it they will want to learn more.’

Discovering all of the community activists who are collecting and preserving the archives without any support while she was working on the series, was ‘really beautiful,’ Martin said. The experience was so rewarding, she said it inspired her to dig into her own family archives and history.

‘I was able to go to my grandfathers house and in his basement he has hundreds and hundreds of VHS tapes, all of Caribana and beyond; and that’s just my own lineage,’ Martin said. ‘I was able to archive five of the tapes, and they were all old archival footage from the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s that no one had ever seen before. I just thought that was such a beautiful thing. And it goes to show that we are all mini archivists and activists in our own way. All the people who are putting in the legwork to be able to do these things are really admirable.’

Overall, Martin said she really hopes that the series will educate people, and bring about positive change in some way shape, or form. She is also hopeful that the archives they have uncovered through the series will be collected and curated in a way that results in a national museum. Another sign of progress, Martin said, would be for the government to fund the preservation of such significant cultural archives.

‘Canada sometimes feels like America’s little sibling, but there’s so much culture here, there’s so much history, there’s so much nuance,’ said Martin. ‘We have all of these cities that are just as historically relevant as the cities we see in the states. I really do look at Canada more homogeneously now. Before when I would think about Canada, because it’s so big ? Vancouver is so far to the west, and Nova Scotia so far to the east ? it felt like they were vastly far away places. But when you look at the history of it all, and all of the things we had to go through, and the things that we’ve experienced, and how similar they are, we really are just one big place. There is a large community that feels the same and feels a sense of togetherness.’

‘This is a Canadian story,’ she added, ‘and there are plenty of cities and towns and places that want to see these stories be told. A place like Bancroft, I would love to travel there. That would add the traveling aspect to the series, of really uncovering and discovering what history, lies in the small towns and places of Canada.’

In the next season, Martin said she would like to start unearthing archives of Black Canadian history from across the country. To watch this season tune into CityTV Toronto on Sundays at 7:30 p.m.; or, online at: <https://www.citytv.com/shows/black-community-mixtapes>.