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Gallery: Photographs of Black Americans: Southern Roads/City Pavements

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PHOTOGRAPHS OF BLACK AMERICANS

ROLAND L. FREEMAN

Southern Roads/City Pavements

These photographs are from an exhibition of a unique pictorial documentation of Black city/rural life by Roland L. Freeman, who has been photographer-in-residence/research associate with the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at Howard University since 1978. The exhibition of 107 photographs began its national tour in 1981 at the International Center of Photography in New York. It was recently on view at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and is expected to reach 20 cities in the United States by the end of 1986. A second copy of the exhibit just completed a tour of Denmark and Portugal, and will begin an extended tour of Africa in June, starting at the National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria. The American tour was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Support for the European and African tours came from the United States Information Service.



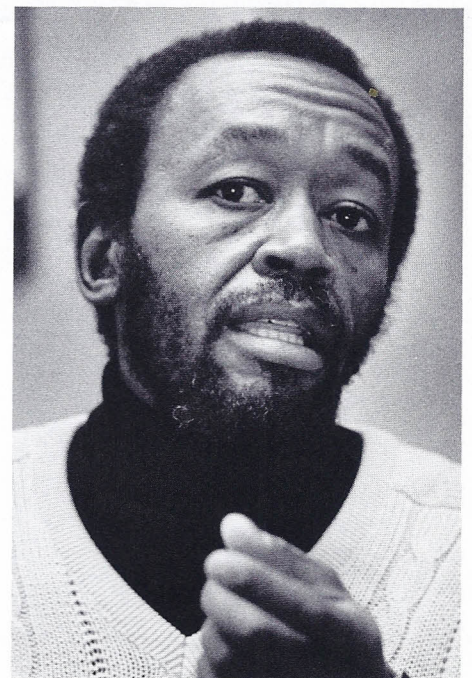
Photographs can be something of value. "Southern Roads/City Pavements" is a photographic exhibition which grew out of my research project on Black American culture.

Virtually any examination of the cultural history of Afro-Americans recognizes the strengthening and stabilizing force of significant cultural continuities—continuities which survive despite a series of migrations over generations. Perhaps the most pervasive of these migrations has been that from rural to urban settings. The roots of many Black urban traditions in the United States are planted in the fertile folk soil of rural experience. Wagons, mules and men have journeyed from dirt roads of the South to discover, finally, the dirty streets of the North. Blues cultivated on Yazoo-Mississippi delta plantations were shipped north to Chicago where they were electrified with city sounds, distilled by time and

tradition, and mellowed down like new wine in old wine skins.

However, as time goes on, and as both rural and urban poor Black communities establish longer and more stable traditions, many of the continuities become more subtle, more difficult to identify, more confusing when viewed independently of the traditions from which they evolved. And yet, it is this legacy of style which connects and reinforces the present and the past of Afro-American culture.

As the continuities become less clear, and as specific traditions which are the roots of current practices die out or become virtually unrecognizable, the role of photodocumentation and cultural interpretation of these traditions takes on added significance. The focus of my project is the recording and interpretation of the cultural continuity within the rural/urban migration of poor Black people in the United States.



Roland L. Freeman



The approach is to provide in-depth interdisciplinary interpretation to photodocuments of a specific set of Afro-American traditions, which I have taken in a series of contrasting rural and urban settings over the past 12 years.

I come from a poor Black family and spent my early childhood mostly on the streets of Baltimore, with an adolescence spent on a tobacco farm in southern Maryland. Building on early influences from photographers Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava, my first in-depth work focused on urban Afro-American expressive culture. The significance of this work was recognized in 1970 with the receipt of a Young Humanist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the first such grant ever awarded to a photographer. Work done under this grant led to an exploration of the urban cultural landscape, focusing on the everyday life of ordinary Black people

and highlighting, in particular, the folklife tradition of "Arabing" as carried out by the Arabers (fruit and vegetable street vendors of Baltimore, Maryland).

As part of its effort to help assure the preservation and cultural study of rural Black American expressive traditions, the Smithsonian Institution became interested in my work in 1972 and, in 1974, hired me as a "field research photographer" in folklore. Following my receipt in 1974 of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, I worked with folklorist Worth Long to carry out an in-depth study of traditional Black folklife practices in Mississippi. This resulted in the exhibition, "Folkroots: Images of Mississippi Black Folklife (1974-1977)."

As I developed professional relationships with individuals in the arts and humanities who were engaged in studies of Black American culture, my work took on broader and deeper

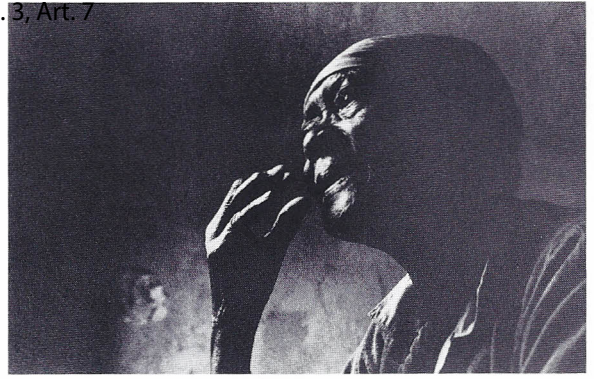
meanings. Rather than being "just" a set of interesting photographs of Arabers or folk art practitioners, what evolved was a continuing exploration of many of the basic themes linking and providing continuity to Black American culture in urban and rural settings.

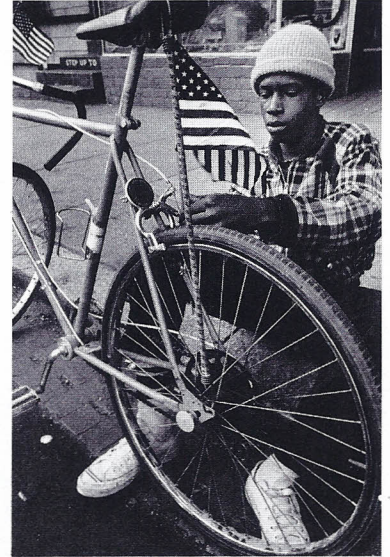
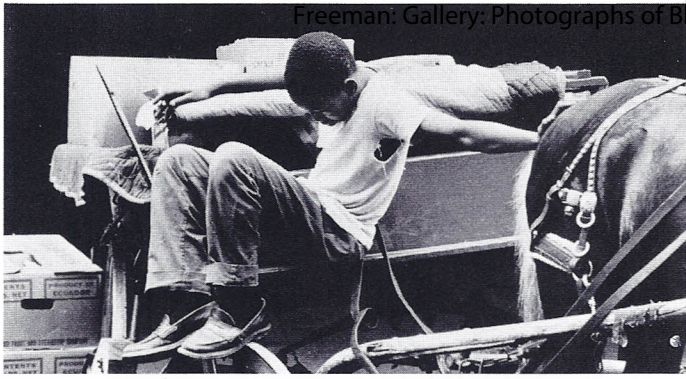
The consistency and universality of various elements of style became visible as the themes grew in number. Crafts and traditional practices remained, but the depth of cultural insight and organization developed. Other themes, such as rituals in play and in sorrow, were added and the initial contacts with interdisciplinary cultural historians, folklorists, literary critics and other humanists were expanded to help evoke the full meaning of cultural recordings. □

—Roland L. Freeman











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