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## **The Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center Celebrates Black History Month with Two Exhibitions Exploring The Construction of Race in American Society**

**BALTIMORE, MD** - The inauguration of the 44th president of the United States establishes yet another chapter in the long journey toward equality in this country. In many ways, the recent events reignited the national interest in pursuing honest conversations regarding American history, more specifically race and gender. As the leading contenders for the world's most coveted office battled toward the finish line last fall, dialogues on race and gender, for the first time in recent memory, became central to the nation's discourse, and often resurrect old wounds of past eras when hatred, segregation, oppression and the concept of racial stereotypes were more than typical, it was commonplace.

While today's cultural rhetoric is striving to reevaluate the truth behind the historical images, practices and life experiences of blacks and women from the perspective of a superpower in a contemporary global multicultural society, The Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center explores the construction and emancipation of a race in America in two concurrent exhibitions titled *The Golden Age of Black Broadway - 1890s to 1930s* and *Mammy's, Watermelon and Coons*. The exhibitions are featured at the Eubie Blake Cultural Center at 847 North Howard Street in Baltimore from Sunday, February 1 to Saturday, February 28, 2009; general admission is \$5, students and seniors \$2.

**The Golden Age of Black Broadway - 1890s to 1930s** is a timeless collection of images and artifacts produced by visionary artists during one of the most tumultuous eras in African American history. The period witnessed the vigorous leadership of people, including Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, and coincided with social events such as segregation, migration, racial uplift, and the Niagara Movement.

Despite the "coon song" craze and the continuation of blackface even on the part of black actors, *The Golden Age of Black Broadway - 1890s to 1930s* illustrates how the stage served as a platform on which black performers undertook the responsibility of presenting an alternative and more accurate image of the culture.

Paul Laurence Dunbar noted that the actors wore the mask, but they also revised the mask from behind it. According to Dunbar, black performers presented "hokum" and "played 'darker' roles," yet they still were clear that they were not that which they performed.

*The Golden Age of Black Broadway - 1890s to 1930s* showcases one group, The Frogs, which evolved out of self-pride and a passion for the classics and performing arts. The Frogs is the name taken from the Greek comedy with the same title by Aristophanes in which the element of

ridicule and seriousness sabotage each other. The conflict and competition between the two elements constitute a challenge for the comedic outcome.

At the beginning the 20th century, theatrical clubs formed to provide as sense of fraternity for members of the entertainment community in New York. However, the brotherhood was not inclusive. While there were black Broadway and vaudeville entertainers, no blacks were allowed in the membership of these theatrical organizations.

The second exhibition, Mammy's, Watermelon and Coons, is based upon themes expressed in American film director Spike Lee's 2000 controversial film release titled Bamboozled, which depicted minstrel shows with black actors in blackface and parodied a cast of stereotypical characters ranging from mammies to pickaninnies and virtually every other vile portrayal of blacks ever exhibited in the guise of accepted American entertainment. Mammy's, Watermelon and Coons investigates the collective stereotypes of black images that reinforce some of the shortcuts to character and cultural assassination that are crucial elements propitiated by mass media in a multicultural society.

Much of the contemporary media images of the "mammy" have evolved over time. Traditionally, the 20th century birthed Aunt Jemima as the prototype of blacks in American society. A domestic by profession, Aunt Jemima was usually a full-figured woman dressed in an apron with a red and white chignon (kerchief - a headpiece worn by women during the period of slavery as a device to demean individuals).

Other servants were characteristically typecast as con artists and deadbeats. Many scholars suggest that these stereotypes were necessary for the representation and legitimation of a racial order built on racism and white supremacy. While the ideal and most pervasive caricature manifested as trademarks, marketing and promotional images for a brand of pancakes called Aunt Jemima, other caretakers took on the male persona of Old Uncle Tom or Uncle Remus. Still other prominent depictions included "Mandy the maid," "Preacher Brown and Deacon Jones," "Rastus and Sambo" and "the ol' mammy."

The images and stereotypes were an integral part of American culture. They were so ubiquitous and customary that few people, black or white, challenge how denigrating they were to black Americans, particularly women.

Many of the artifacts assembled in Mammy's, Watermelon and Coons are original and replica pieces from the 19th through 21st centuries and represent formulaic and exaggerated images used by generations of Americans instilling prejudice to castigate an entire race and culture as inferior and undesirable beings. Still, much of the now highly prized and collected memorabilia was intentionally manufactured to promulgate injustice toward the basic tenets of American democracy. Many Americans fail to realize that the experiences of people from the African Diaspora residing in this society differ from the majority of American's lived experience because intolerance and discrimination in some form has profoundly affected almost all citizens of African ancestry.

During the month in addition to exhibition tours, the Center will host a series of movie viewing's and discussions. The viewing's begin at 3 p.m. and are free and open to the public.

Sunday, February 1 - Watermelon Man is a 1970 comedy-drama film based on the book The Night the Sun Came Out on Happy Hollow Lane, which tells the story of a 1960s, somewhat bigoted

white insurance salesman named Jeff Gerber who wakes up one morning to find that he has become black.

**Sunday, February 15** – Bamboozled is a satirical film written and directed by Spike Lee about a modern televised minstrel show featuring black actors donning blackface makeup and the violent fallout from the show's success.

**Sunday, February 22** – Brother to Brother is a docudrama about an art student Perry who befriends an elderly homeless man named Bruce Nugent who turns out to have been an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

On **Sunday, February 8**, the Center hosts a 126th birthday celebration/concert and scholarship program titled Memories of Eubie: Remembering the Past by Cultivating the Future featuring the Frederick Douglass High School Jazz Band. The community commemoration, which is free and open to the public, although a donation of \$10 per person is requested to support a scholarship benefiting a Baltimore-area graduating senior planning to attend college to earn an undergraduate degree in music.

The Exhibition titled, "Mammy's, Watermelon and Coons" is supported by a generous grant from the Maryland Humanities Council.

The Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center is open Wednesday 1 p.m. – 6 p.m., Friday from 12 noon to 6 p.m., Saturday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., and Sunday by appointment.

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For more than three decades, the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center has sought to bring creative expression and urban consciousness to Baltimore through visual and performing arts education and development opportunities for children, youth and adults in our community.