If you say Horace Ové in Port of Spain, chances are only a few would recognize the name. Horace Ové, you see, was born in a nation of saga boys and star girls where everyone is preoccupied with the work of becoming their own constellation. For some, the only way is out - to leave the tiny island that buckles under the weight of so many big dreams. Yet Ové’s history and trajectory are linked to Trinidad, its epic and still unfolding story of resistance, of masking, of transformation, of magical realism and dread irony. His story is Trinidad’s story, shining with a most un-self-conscious brightness.

His extensive filmography includes over 30 fiction feature films, documentaries, and productions for television. His piercing focus on racism and the Black Power movement in Britain makes him “controversial” but impossible to ignore. He has for decades given visibility to and helped define for his generation a vision of Afro-Caribbean identity that is no victim narrative.

Ové’s story is the hero’s quest - in which we are any or every possible star - protagonist or anti-hero, an incarnation of the trickster god Anansi or manifestation of the warrior god Hanuman, love interest or the deepest most sinister of villains. The prize is self-discovery. The opponent is defeated with knowledge of his own obeah; the hero emerges triumphant and glorious in his Blackness.

Horace Ové by Attilah Springer & Ubikwist contributing writer

GIVE THEM PRESSURE

Horace Ové by Attilah Springer & Ubikwist contributing writer
Belmont, at its genesis, was known as Freetown - a place of the enslaved who bought their freedom, indentured Yoruba and Dahomey people who created a hotbed of cultural activity. Every other narrow lane was jammed with masquerade bands, percussive groups that later gave birth to some of the popular early steelbands, Shango yards, poets, prostitutes, researchers, bandits, bolstered by migrants from India, China, and up the Caribbean islands.

Ové was born into the Jones clan - a successful Belmont family. The patriarch Frederick owned a flourishing business that was part hardware store, part repository of spiritual implements for the practice of surviving African spiritual forms that were at the time outlawed and labeled by the British as obeah. The Jones name was not theirs originally, but Ové's grandfather changed it when he wanted to open a business in downtown Port of Spain; Indian-sounding places of business were not acceptable at that time in colonial Trinidad.

Ové spent his formative years running through those lanes packed tight with gingerbread houses and mango trees. Up into the hills of Laventille, he moved from yard to yard, each one a whole world unto itself created by migrants from far-flung places.

In any given family, a variety of languages were spoken: from the French Kreyòl of Haiti and St. Lucia to the Spanish/Amerindian inflections of Venezuelan peons to Hindi to Yoruba. Art and protest were close friends and allies in those yards. Culture was and still is the weapon danced, sung, and played against all attempts by colonial authorities to control minds and bodies in the post-Emancipation period.

Added to that was the American occupation of Trinidad during World War II and a sudden proliferation of cinemas across the country where boys like Horace could see everything from French art films to cowboy classics. On the corner of Erthig Road was Olympic Theatre and the projectionist, nicknamed with the cruel precision of Trini language “No Teeth Harry,” frequently held lively discussions with the young Belmont boys on the latest blockbuster. This is where Ové gathered his eclectic knowledge of cinema and his fascination with the art form.

In 1960, Ové left Trinidad to study art in London. Independence was a looming prospect in the islands; while in London, Windrush dreams had given birth to racist nightmares for Afro-Caribbean migrants coming to the “mother country” in a postwar effort to reinvigorate England’s battered economy.

Soon after he arrived, he was cast as a Roman soldier in the epic historical drama Cleopatra starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. But when Taylor complained that England was too cold, they moved the filming to Rome; Ové got re-cast as a slave, the only imaginable role for a Black person in a Hollywood film at that time. Perhaps there was something about being a slave in a Hollywood historical drama that switched on the Freetown in Ové’s mind. That and the access to the classic works of Italy’s film artists De Sica, Antonioni, and Fellini inspired him to change his focus from art to film.

Channeling his Trini roots, Ové’s first attempt was a surreal feature called Man Out, chronicling the mental breakdown of a West Indian novelist, but its completion never came to fruition. In 1966, The Acupuncture Association commissioned him to direct the short film “The Art of the Needle.” Emboldened and seeking ascendancy in craft, he followed this effort with the much more personal short “Baldwin’s Nigger” (1969), a conversation of Black identity between the beloved African-American novelist James Baldwin and the insightful comedian-activist Dick Gregory.

Ové’s first commercial success came in 1971, when Reggae was released - the first in-depth film on reggae music, identifying the new sound as a revolutionary movement that would soon transform world music. It was the first feature-length film bankrolled by Black Britain (the film was financed by Jamaican-born record producer Junior Lincoln), enjoyed favorable audiences at cinemas and was also shown by the BBC.

The documentary, which focused on a reggae concert at Wembley Arena in 1970, featured performances from The Pyramids, The Pioneers, Black Faith, Millie Small, Toots Hibbert and the Maytals, and Desmond Dekker who were then at the frontline of the burgeoning reggae scene, making its way to London via the Caribbean population. Their culture flourished in bleak London, even as the prospects for qualified Black boys remained dim, thanks to discriminatory employment practices.
It was a story to tell. And out of the real experiences of the first generation of Black British youth, born to Caribbean parents, holding on to memories of color in the grey of their London lives, *Pressure* was born. The first feature film to deal with contemporary Black life in Britain, it follows the story of Tony, who graduates top of his class but is unable to find a job to match his qualifications. Tony comes to the Black Power movement out of frustration with continued humiliation at work.

In one scene that proved too real for the British Film Institute who were funding the film, police officers raided a Black Power meeting, armed with bats and dogs. Activists were beaten up and arrested without reason, while the story as told by the media describes how six policemen were violently beaten up in a demonstration, and three were seriously injured and hospitalized. The glaring contradictions were grossly evident, and the hypocrisy reigned supreme.

Completed in 1974, *Pressure* was banned for over two years, fearing that it would prove incendiary to the already disgruntled masses of Black British youth. It was eventually released in 1976, to wide acclaim, and Ové was named by the Guinness Book of World Records as the first Black British filmmaker to direct a feature film.

Ové’s films were the first to address that initial generation with familial links to the Caribbean but little else to anchor them in a society that continues to categorize them as “other.” The idea of home is a keenly contested and largely unresolved conversation. And as another generation of English youth confront ideas of migration, home, and identity, *Pressure* retains a stark and startling relevance.

The films are only one part of the story. Ové was also a central part in documenting the growing civil rights movement in London. He was on hand for key moments in the unfolding Black Britain story: He helped chronicle the experiences of Darcus Howe, Althea Jones-Lecointe, and other members of the Mangrove 9 in their standoffs with police at the Mangrove restaurant on All Saints Road. An alliance formed between Jamaican novelist Andrew Salkey, Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, and Trinidadian writer and publisher John La Rose among others that came to be known as the Caribbean Artists Movement.

Ové photographed champions of justice like Linton Kwesi Johnson when he addressed a crowd outside a police station in the early 80’s. LKJ captures the moment in reggae poetry about the “accidental” death of his nephew in “Reggae Fi Bernard”: “We still don’t get no proper explanation/ no witness at the station/ no police investigation/ as to how you come fi end up on the wrong side of track/ how your face fi get turned from front to back.” His photos of defiance and calls for accountability hauntingly remain resonant, particular in the contemporary political climate.

Documentation of the donation of a bag of hair by John Lennon and Yoko Ono to support the infamous Black House - a black power commune on Holloway Road run by the questionable and charismatic Michael X – also fleshed out Ové’s extensive photographic oeuvre of historic revolutionary figures. Eventually in 2005, these candid works were exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London as well as the esteemed Victoria and Albert Museum, the Tate Liverpool, the Whitechapel Gallery, and the Barbican Centre.

Their generation defined a culture in transition and transformation, and Ové’s visual storytelling saved those moments from being lost to Britain’s continued whitewashing of its history.

In 1973, Ové directed the documentary *King Carnival* for the BBC’s *The World About Us* series, covering the history of the pre-Lenten festival, which has spawned over 170 Trinidad-styled carnivals throughout the year and across the world. This cultural cornucopia provided a platform upon which civil unrest and protest could flourish.

He was also a central figure in the documenting of the Notting Hill Carnival, a space of continued clashes between London’s Caribbean population with the rest of the society. The confrontations that occurred there as part of that demand for visibility in a hostile environment remain a lasting and significant part of Ové’s archive.

Ové’s feature films also include *A Hole in Babylon*, based on the Spaghetti House restaurant hostage incident in 1975, in an upscale part of London. The film
was slammed for humanizing the main characters, who had been described in the UK press as a bunch of “black hooligans.” Yet again Ové challenged social mores that see all situations as either right or wrong. The trauma of racism was being processed, internalized, and reflected back by young Black people, and Ové used film as the medium to show British society to itself, whether or not they liked what they saw.

Playing Away (1987) remains one of Ové’s best loved works. Starring Guyanese actor Norman Beaton, well-known and lauded for his work on the TV comedy series Desmond’s and scripted by Kittitian novelist Caryl Phillips, the film depicts the events surrounding a cricket match in commemoration of “African Famine Week” when the “Caribbean Brixton Conquistadors” (from South London) are invited to the fictional countryside village of Sneddington to compete. The film is another nod to the confrontations and the pain, anger, and hilarity they inspired in their communities.

Ové has managed, even in the midst of a career marked by controversial political art, to feature other less-than-visible subcultures that weren’t being noticed by mainstream society. In 1978, he directed The Skateboard Kings, a documentary about pioneering Californian skateboarders Tony Alva and Stacey Peralta.

Ové’s television work has included four episodes of the cutting edge series Empire Road in 1979, an episode of The Professionals (“A Man Called Quinn,” 1981), and The Equaliser (shown in 1996), a drama about the Amritsar Massacre in Punjab when the British Indian Army fired on nonviolent protesters in 1919, garnered two Indian Academy Awards.

In the face of a nascent, popular movement for civil rights in Black Britain, the artists become the frontline of the struggle - using pen, voice, hand, camera, and paint brush to articulate the rage of their communities. Ové is part of a quickly disappearing generation of that first wave of Caribbean migrants who were at the forefront of a movement of artists, intellectuals, and documenters of their generation. As another incarnation of Caribbean and Black British artists emerges, attempting to find a voice and a place in British society, Horace Ové’s archive of images and films is a crucial part in bridging that gap of understanding.

His personal legacy is also another generation of Ovés, blazing individual trails in their respective creative fields. His daughter Ezana is a makeup artist, while Indra began her long and successful acting career starting with The Latchkey Children, a series directed by Horace in 1980. His son Kaz is an up-and-coming director, while his eldest son Zak is a film maker, photographer, and sculptor.

In its retrospective documentary Reflections: 100 Years of British Cinema, the British Film Institute (BFI) declared, “Horace Ové is undoubtedly a pioneer in Black British history, and his work provides a perspective on the Black experience in Britain.” For his decades of toil, Ové has received an impressive list of accolades including being named Best Director for Independent Film and Television by the British Film Institute in 1986, the Scarlet Ibis medal for service to culture from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in 1992, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Visual Arts in 2006, a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 2007, and a Film Pioneer of Trinidad and Tobago by the 2012 t&t film festival.

How important is the media (film, television) to defining the Black British, Caribbean diaspora identity? - to marking a space for Black experience in a world where Whiteness is not just the norm but the expected standard? These questions still vex a new generation of filmmakers, visual and performing artists, actors, and media practitioners. The films themselves provide the possible answers, or at least force the maker to create a possible forum for analysis.

What is different for this generation is that there is a foundation to build on. A critical look at Ové’s archive reveals a lifetime of creating out of a void that was not really empty. He was building on centuries of stories, epic dramas, narratives of the streets played out in the everyday conversations he observed or engaged in. With the hopeful unshackling of cultural barriers and subsequent garnering of recognition of talent over preference, the future appears unbound for those that possess vision and fortitude, much in the same way Horace Ové has exemplified over the course of his prolific life.