



Kwame S. Brathwaite
with photographs by Kwame Brathwaite

and **Fashion Consciousness**

The Grandassa Models and the “Black is Beautiful” Movement

On January 28, 1962, fashion, music, and politics converged in a groundbreaking showcase called *Naturally '62*, held at Harlem's Purple Manor. Subtitled *The Original African Coiffure and Fashion Extravaganza Designed to Restore Our Racial Pride and Standards*, the presentation sought, according to historian Tanisha C. Ford, to “prove to the world that ‘Black is Beautiful’ by promoting natural hairstyles and soul fashions as tools of liberation.”¹ The event was initiated and organized by my father, photographer Kwame Brathwaite, his older brother, Elombe Brath, and the organization they co-founded with other like-minded artists in 1956: the African Jazz Art Society and Studios, or AJASS. Jazz greats Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach headlined *Naturally '62*, which was initially planned as a one-time event. The first show proved so popular, however, that a second sold-out presentation was held that same night to accommodate the crowd.

Naturally '62 marked the debut of AJASS's Grandassa Models. The name nodded to Carlos A. Cooks, founder of the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, who referred to Africa as “Grandassaland.” Transcending established cultural and fashion norms, models in the group were darker-skinned and committed to wearing their hair in natural styles and showcasing African-inspired fashion and jewelry. The show featured clothing that was colorful, textured, and versatile, flowing with the same grace and style as the models themselves. The women were chic, stylish, bold, and unapologetic. “By wearing African-inspired garments,” Ford has noted, the Grandassa Models “were communicating their support of a liberated Africa and symbolically expressing their hope for black freedom and social, political and cultural independence in the Americas.”² *Naturally '62* was a pivotal moment in fashion—a cultural statement about embracing one's heritage and self-pride. The message was clear: “Black is Beautiful.”

Grandassa model Pat Bardonelle during the Garvey Day Parade, August 17, 1968.



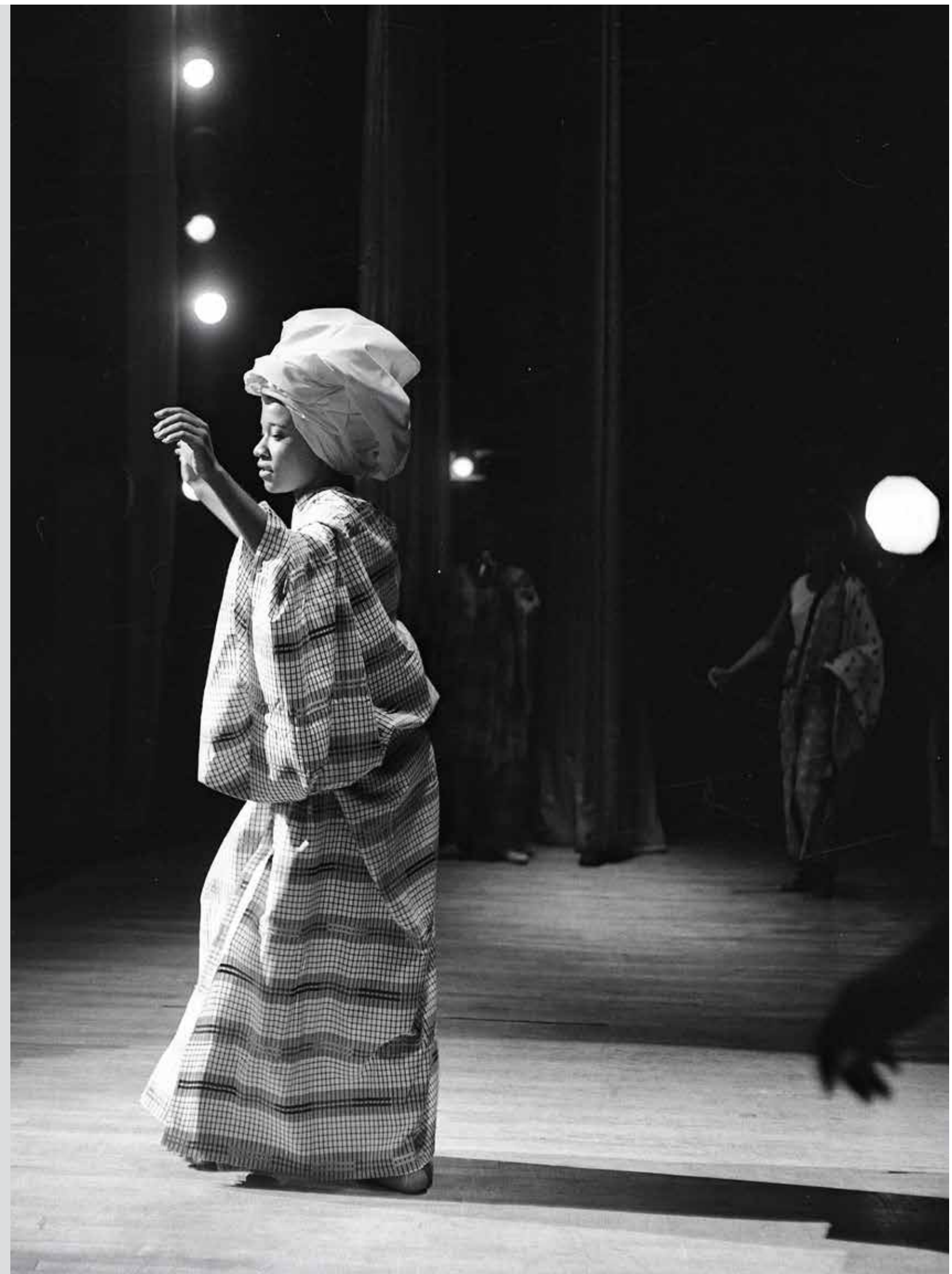
Garvey Day at Renaissance Casino Ballroom, c. 1966.

Pat Bardonelle on the Apollo Theatre Stage during a performance by the Grandassa models and AJASS Repertory Theatre.

Inspired in part by the writings of political leader and writer Marcus Garvey, Brathwaite, Brath, and AJASS popularized the phrase “Black is Beautiful” through the *Naturally* fashion shows and the Grandassa Models. Traveling nationally for concerts, AJASS members Lincoln and Roach helped spread the “Black is Beautiful” theme and made contacts with other progressive organizations that led to *Naturally* show bookings in other cities. In February 1963, for example, AJASS presented shows at Robert’s Show Club in Chicago and Mr. Kelly’s in Detroit. “Black is Beautiful” became one of the most important political and cultural ideas of the twentieth century and the Grandassa Models the visual representation of the idea.

Kwame Brathwaite’s photographs capture this revolutionary time and were specifically intended to shape American visual discourse. His photographs testify that fashion, as well as artistic and political vision, can effect change in popular culture—and that popular culture can effect change in society at large. Many of the subjects of Brathwaite’s carefully crafted photographs invoke the power of objects, such as books, musical instruments, jewelry, headpieces, and artwork. The dress and hairstyles of his subjects emphasize their sense of themselves, while the environs of his subjects convey a community of artist-activists—writers, painters, playwrights, fashion designers, and musicians.

This aesthetic is evident in Brathwaite’s photos depicting the marriage of fashion and jazz. Grandassa Models graced album covers for various





Noumsa Brath at a photo shoot in the AJASS studio, c. 1965.

Photo shoot at a school for one of the many modeling groups who had begun to embrace natural hairstyles in the 1960s.



Naturally '68 photo shoot in the Apollo Theater featuring Grandassa models and AJASS founding members (except the photographer, Kwame Brathwaite), at center from left: Frank Adu, Elombe Brath, and Ernest Baxter.



Grandassa models after the *Naturally* fashion show at Richland Palace, c. 1968.



Grandassa models,
Merton Simpson
Gallery, c. 1967.



Jean Gumbs, Brenda Deaver, Noumsa Brath, and Clara Lewis photographed in Minars furniture store on West 125th Street, c. 1964. They are holding three Blue Note albums featuring Grandassa models, including Black Rose (Lou Donaldson), Clara L. Buggs (Freddie Roach), and Noumsa Brathwaite (Lou Donaldson).

Blue Note Records artists, including Freddie Roach and Lou Donaldson, and were featured on album covers with names such as *Brown Sugar* (1964) and *The Natural Soul* (1962). These covers and their titles were a marked departure from traditional record covers featuring the artists alone, and they signified that the visual rhetoric the Grandassa Models represented was being embraced and celebrated. The presence of the Grandassa Models on these album covers also signaled a shift in attitudes toward fashion, the black image, and beauty standards. American culture was embracing change and challenging social norms through artistic expression.

One artist-activist depicted in Brathwaite's photographs is Carolee Prince, who was one of the era's most innovative designers of jewelry, headpieces, and clothing for the Grandassa Models. Vocalist Nina Simone was one of her clients, and Prince created many of the headpieces Simone wore at her performances. This type of entrepreneurship blossomed, as many of the Grandassa Models made their own clothes and used the shows as an organic way to display their craft and create opportunities to design for others. Consequently the "Black is Beautiful" movement opened economic opportunities for the African-American community as they embraced their creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, starting their own fashion-related businesses and boutiques. The movement also created a demand for magazines such as *Essence* (first published in 1970), which

Brenda Deaver, c. 1965. She modeled with AJASS from 1964 to 1966 and appears on a Blue Note album cover titled *Oh Baby*. The photograph was taken in a space that AJASS opened from 1965 to 1967 called Grandassa Land, located on what was

known as Seventh Avenue (Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd.) between 126th and 127th Streets. Grandassa Land was a small café-style gathering place where meetings, lectures, poetry, and mini skits by AJASS Repertory Theatre took place.

Sikolo Brathwaite wearing a beaded hairpiece by designer Carolee Prince, c. 1967.



were established to represent women previously overlooked in fashion, art, and culture. Beauty standards were being challenged, and the fashion industry reflected that. By the late 1960s, African-printed textiles mainstreamed into the lively vocabulary of Seventh Avenue's bold and ethnic prints, while the iconic faces of black supermodels Donyale Luna and Naomi Sims graced the covers of *Harper's Bazaar* (January 1965), *British Vogue* (March 1966) and the *New York Times* fashion supplement, *Fashions of The Times* (August 1967).

The "Black is Beautiful" movement and the Grandassa Models demonstrated the power of visual representation and fashion as essential cultural tools in the dissemination of new political ideas, their power to stage visual rhetoric, and their ability to make language visible. That rhetoric remains relevant to this day.

Fashion designer
Carolee Prince
wearing her own
clothing and
earrings, c. 1966.

