

What Is Black Innovation and Entrepreneurship?

From the beginning, humankind has been endowed with creativity. Yet in the New World, Black creativity would be uniquely shaped in the cauldron of unexpected circumstance. From this cauldron emerged an extraordinarily innovative expression. Unexpected: because those humans who were stripped of their freedom, identity, family, homeland, and dignity brought forth innovation despite the odds, and even in slavery, Black entrepreneurs succeeded in buying their own freedom and that of others. Extraordinary: because the United States today would be unimaginable without two centuries of the richness and character of what Black innovation and expression have given, and continue to give, to our culture--through music, dance, dress, the church, language, poetry, prose, sports, entertainment, research, science, technology, and, most exquisitely, a nonviolent and inclusive leadership that wholly repudiates the inhuman nature of those oppressors who kept Blacks down for two hundred years.

Who could not be moved and inspired by the uniquely Black idiom? The Black experience clearly exemplifies the capacity in all of us to defy all odds to innovate, to create, and to share in our expression. So we celebrate this Black idiom in order to inspire and energize the innovator in all human beings.

Entrepreneurship is the individual impulse to overcome all barriers to convert innovation to practice. The examples of Black innovation and expression celebrated above didn't just happen. Each example of creativity was forged through the wits and energies of an individual entrepreneur to produce utility, with or without remuneration. The inventor of the hydrostatic lubricator for powerful locomotives referred to as "the Real McCoy," the innovator and promoter of completely unique cosmetic and hair products, the creator of the singularly sublime saxophone sound of "A Love Supreme," and the preacher-politician whose scrappy and dramatic organizational genius in Birmingham, Alabama set the stage for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement—Elijah McCoy, Madam C.J. Walker (born Sarah Breedlove), John Coltrane, and Fred Shuttlesworth, respectively—were all entrepreneurs who transformed their innovations to reality in ways that moved the world.

From forbidding bleakness to creative expression is more than just an amazing story of Black innovation and entrepreneurship. It reveals a metaphorical silver lining for how all humans can transcend their bonds, imagine a better world, and then make it happen. If the role of a museum is to inspire, the Museum for Black Innovation and Entrepreneurship aims to share this story in order to spark the impulse of innovation and entrepreneurship in all people and for all people.

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