



Tour posters, ticket stubs and photographs from concerts by artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Jimi Hendrix, Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and Duke Ellington feature in the exhibition.

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Student's exhibition shines light on Newcastle's unsung history of African American music

A new exhibition at Newcastle City Library is taking visitors on a journey back in time to celebrate the rich, yet often overlooked, legacy of African American musicians who performed in the city in the 1950s and 60s.

Curated by Northumbria University final-year [History](#) student Lily Usher-Unsworth, *CROSSTOON TRAFFIC: A Celebration of African American Musicians in*

Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1957–1970 opens this month as part of a new public engagement initiative linked to the university's final-year dissertation module.

The exhibition showcases rare and fascinating archival material from Newcastle's City Hall performances, including tour posters, concert programmes, ticket stubs, and signed photographs of legendary artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Jimi Hendrix, Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and Duke Ellington.

Lily, 22, from Whitley Bay, uncovered the materials during research at the City Library's Local Studies Centre – home to the Newcastle City Hall Archive, compiled by local volunteers.

With guidance from her dissertation supervisor Professor Brian Ward, a historian of popular music, the African American freedom struggle, and Martin Luther King's ties to the UK, Lily approached the library about turning her findings into a public exhibition.

"It started as a small idea for a final-year project," said Lily. "But with the library's support, it's become a full two-week exhibition. I'm thrilled to share these stories with the public—it's a celebration not only of incredible music but also of the cultural exchange that happened in Newcastle during the civil rights era."

The exhibition builds on Lily's written dissertation, titled *Performing Politics: British Media, African American Touring Musicians, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1956–1970*, in which she explores how the British press responded to African American musicians during a turbulent time in US history.

She discovered that, in contrast to the discrimination many artists faced back home, they were often warmly received by UK audiences – particularly in Newcastle, a city with a deep love for jazz and blues.

As part of the immersive experience, visitors will be able to listen to music from the featured artists via headphones and an MP3 player, and access curated playlists via QR codes. Another QR code invites attendees to share their own memories of the concerts or reflections on the music. A memory box will also be available for handwritten stories and memorabilia

contributions.

One item featured in the exhibition is a rare photo booth strip from Club A'Gogo, a legendary Newcastle nightclub of the 1960s that hosted many iconic performances

“My parents introduced me to Hendrix and rock, but discovering jazz through this project has been amazing,” Lily added. “There’s just so much depth to this era of music, and Newcastle played a bigger role than I think people realise.”

The exhibition opens with a nod to the recent MOBO Awards held in Newcastle, drawing a powerful line from the past to the present in celebrating Black music-making in the UK.

As Brian Ward said, “On the back of the MOBOs, Lily’s Cross Toon Traffic exhibition does a great job of reminding us of the richness and the diversity of Tyneside’s musical heritage.”

Cllr Abdul Samad, Cabinet member for Culture, Music and Art at Newcastle City Council added: “I am delighted that Newcastle City Library is hosting this iconic exhibition, celebrating this lesser-known legacy of the African American musicians who performed in Newcastle in the 1950s and 1960s.

“It brings to life the fascinating and rarely seen parts of the collection which highlight the impact and popularity of these musicians and is very timely as we have recently hosted the MOBO Awards and very successful MOBO Fringe in the city.

“Lily has done an amazing job pulling the material together, telling an important story that many people may not know. Well done to her.”

Event Details:

Exhibition Title: *CROSSTOON TRAFFIC: A Celebration of African-American Musicians in Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1957–1970*

Dates: 14th - 28th April 2025

Location: Newcastle City Library, Third Floor Landing

Admission: Free

Public Contribution: Visitors are welcome to bring their own memorabilia or share stories of concerts they attended.

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