

Tavis Smiley's exhibit 'America I Am: The African American Imprint' comes to L.A.

Part of a national tour, the display shows blacks' influence throughout American history.



Jeffrey Rudolph of California Science Center, left, and Tavis Smiley stand by the Door of No Return from Ghana, Africa, through which captive Africans passed in and out of a dungeon before being taken on slave ships to the New World. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

By Mike Boehm
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Never underestimate the power of talk, especially in a media-centric age.

For Tavis Smiley, the juice and goodwill that come with hosting national talk shows on public radio and television enabled him to turn a brainstorm into an ambitious, nationally touring reality.

"America I Am: The African American Imprint," the historical and cultural exhibition he conceived and oversees, arrives in L.A. on Friday for a 5 1/2 -month run at the California

Science Center in Exposition Park. It is ballyhooed by its creator as "the biggest, baddest and boldest exhibition ever to tell the African American contribution to this country."

Smiley said the idea dawned on him early in 2007, after he had taken part in events surrounding the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Jamestown colony, the first British outpost in America -- and the arrival point for its first African slaves. It got him thinking about the sweep of American history, and how he'd never seen an exhibition that showed how African Americans were not just a part of that history, but at its core from the very beginning.

"I was burdened by this feeling I had: How could this story be told more comprehensively and compellingly?" he recalled over the phone from his L.A. home.

Having been impressed by the "Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs" exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Smiley approached Arts and Exhibitions International, the company that handles logistics for the touring King Tut show, and got an enthusiastic response. Asking around about who would be most qualified to curate such a show, he kept hearing about John Fleming, vice president of museums at the Cincinnati Museum Center. Smiley says he talked Fleming out of that job and onto his team, which, by the summer of 2007, included an 11-member advisory board of scholars and cultural luminaries including Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., Princeton's Cornel West and the actress-playwright Anna Deavere Smith.

As a guiding concept, Smiley says, they seized upon a question posed more than 100 years ago by the author and black activist W.E.B. Du Bois: "Would America have been America without her Negro people?"

"I told the team, 'This is the question I want this exhibition to answer.' "

Assembling the story

Smiley and partners also recruited big-name sponsors, including Wal-Mart and Microsoft. Rather than stepping back and taking a figurehead role, he says, he plunged into the nitty-gritty work of making calls to help secure loans of some of the nearly 300 artifacts that tell the story.

Among the highlights are the stool Martin Luther King Jr. sat on in the Birmingham, Ala., jail cell where he'd landed in 1963 for defying an anti-protest injunction. There he composed his "Letter From Birmingham Jail," a crucial document of the civil rights movement. The key to King's cell is on exhibit as well -- as is the fingerprint card that police in Montgomery, Ala., took from Rosa Parks upon booking her for refusing to give up her seat at the front of a city bus in 1955.

Smiley said he's seen young people gathered "four and five deep" in front of a display of notebooks that the doomed rapper, Tupac Shakur, filled with lyrics and poems, including one called "In the Event of My Demise."

Fun stuff abounds as well -- the robe Muhammad Ali wore while training for his landmark "Rumble in the Jungle" boxing match with George Foreman; the purple-and-gold, arrowheaded guitar Prince played in a knockout halftime performance at the 2007 Super Bowl; and a No. 42 jersey that Jackie Robinson wore during his last season with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

For Smiley, the most emotional artifact tells the very beginning of the saga: visitors file through the Door of No Return, the nearly 400-year-old wooden gateway from a stockade in Ghana, on the west coast of Africa, through which thousands of captives passed to be shackled in slave ships bound for the New World.

In Philadelphia, where "America I Am" premiered in January, a few days before a climactic moment in African American history -- the inauguration of President Obama -- and in Atlanta, its other stop before L.A., Smiley says he's seen the reaction: "People stand at those doors and just break down."

"There is an emotional pull that overcomes you when you stand in that door and are reminded what that doorway represents," he added, remembering when he stood between the same two pieces of wood 25 years ago, as a young man visiting Ghana with the poet Maya Angelou. "I communicate for a living, and have never found a way to verbalize what it feels like."

Smiley, 45, said there was one disappointment along the way: his inability to strike an alliance with, and obtain loans from, the Smithsonian Institution, which plans to build its own National Museum of African American History and Culture by 2015.

"Because they're working on their own facility, they were not as helpful as I would have liked. I think they were being a bit territorial," Smiley said. Fath Davis Ruffins, a curator from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, did serve as a consultant for "America I Am."

Asked for a response to Smiley's criticism, James Gordon, a spokesman for the Washington museum, said, "We spent months in negotiations so that we could be a part of this endeavor. We are saddened that we were not able to make this happen but we congratulate Mr. Smiley on his important contribution to America's history."

Telling the local tale too

As his exhibition proceeds along its 10-city tour, Smiley said, the goal is to tailor it so local black history and culture are represented. Artifacts from Lakers great Magic Johnson and from Serena Williams, who first played tennis as a small girl in Compton, are expected.

A New York Times review of the tour's Philadelphia opening faulted the exhibition for painting in "broad strokes" without developing its themes more deeply -- "what's missing

is the complexity of the struggle, some sense of the political movements at work in different periods, and . . . some sense of how those debates have evolved in the present day."

To intensify Angelenos' experience, Charmaine Jefferson, executive director of the California African American Museum -- the next-door neighbor of the California Science Center -- is aiming for synergy between "America I Am" and her museum's current exhibitions on the Tuskegee Airmen and the San Francisco jazz scene, and with three other shows on civil rights-related art and photography that will open Nov. 17, in collaboration with the Skirball Cultural Center.

Also, the African American Museum will provide docents for "America I Am" capable of drawing connections between its nationwide themes and L.A. and California black history. The African American Museum also will offer monthly talks and activities at the Science Center to complement Smiley's historical extravaganza.

At the Science Center, "America I Am" will dovetail with "Race: Are We So Different?," a free exhibition on the science, sociology and history of race that opened earlier this month.

"No other city is going to have the convergence we'll have here," Jefferson said, even though these thematic overlaps were a matter of luck rather than planning -- just as, Smiley notes, he began work on "America I Am" without any notion that its four-year tour would coincide with the term in office of the nation's first African American president.

The Science Center is conservatively estimating that at least 300,000 people will attend the exhibition, which, like the touring King Tut show, is a for-profit venture involving a nonprofit co-organizer -- the Cincinnati Museum Center -- and booked into nonprofit venues.

Science Center President Jeffrey Rudolph said the deal, like LACMA's with the King Tut tour, is structured to minimize any financial risk for the science center.

Would it be appropriate, Smiley was asked, to include such sobering, controversial and complicated aspects of L.A. black history and culture as the gang warfare between Bloods and Crips, and the rise and impact of L.A.-spawned gangsta rap?

"I can see how an exhibition could be very compelling in convincing [youths] not to get into gangs . . . but I can pretty much say we're not going to, at the risk of glorifying" the gang phenomenon, Smiley said. "This exhibition is a celebration of our contribution."

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