

CRAVE

Gary Simmons is “Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark”

Crave fave Gary Simmons creates a magical tribute to Lee “Scratch” Perry’s legendary Jamaica recording studio.

By, Miss Rosen April 11, 2017



Photo: MJ's Brass Boppers.

The Black Ark. The name alone evokes memories of yesterday, of the spirit of the 1970s when originality and innovation was at the heart of music and culture. In 1973, reggae and dub producer Lee “Scratch” Perry built the Black Ark behind his family’s home in the Washington Gardens section of Kingston, Jamaica.

Also: [Bring the Beat Back: Gary Simmons in Detroit](#)

As with the D.I.Y. spirit of the times, the Black Ark made due with what was available—providing the genius is in the mind and not in the equipment. Perry understood the nature of recorded music existed in harmony between man and machine. In order to create

“the living African heartbeat,” he once buried microphones at the base of a palm tree, then thumped on the grounds to create a mystical bass drum effect.



Dubblestandart and Lee “Scratch” Perry at Popfest 2015; Karlsplatz in Vienna, Austria. Photo by Manfred Werner – Tsui. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

It was not the rudimentary set up or the dated equipment that gave the Black Ark its sound, but the wisdom of Perry to incorporate life into the creation of his art. He would later songs with subtle effects that spoke to his truth, the sounds of broken glass, crying babies, falling rain, and cow noises simulated by Watty Burnett.

“I see the studio must be like a living thing, a life itself. The machine must be live and intelligent. Then I put my mind into the machine and the machine perform reality. Invisible thought waves – you put them into the machine by sending them through the controls and the knobs or you jack it into the jack panel. The jack

panel is the brain itself, so you got to patch up the brain and make the brain a living man, that the brain can take what you sending into it and live,” Perry told Roy Ascott for the book *Art, Technology, Consciousness: Mind @ Large* (Intellect, 2000).



Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark. Installation view, Prospect 3, New Orleans, 2014.

The Black Ark became the locus for top artists of the time, including Bob Marley and the Wailers, Junior Byles, The Congos, Junior Murvin, Max Romeo, and Mighty Diamonds, as well as UK bands like The Clash and Paul McCartney and Wings.

In 1979, the Black Ark came to an end, when Perry covered the studio with illegible writings in black magic marker before allegedly burning it down. In 2009, he explained to [Clash Music](#), “Too much stress in Jamaica, all the time. Everybody want money, everybody want paid. Everyone got problem and want me to solve their problem. Nobody gave me anything, people just took everything. Everybody take this, and take that. So the atmosphere in the Black

Ark studio was changing; it wasn't like it used to be. Then I decided to make a sacrifice as the energy wasn't good anymore."



Gary Simmons. Photo: Micael Alago

Nearly four decades later, the Black Ark legacy lives on, inspiring new generations of artist, musicians, and performers. In tribute Crave fave [Gary Simmons](#) has created ***Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark***, a sculptural installation for music and performance, currently at Southern Exposure through April 29, 2017.

The installation features a series of performances by Bay Area musicians including XUXA SANTAMARIA, Chhoti Maa, Beast Nest, and The Creatrix. Performances are curated by Vreni Michelini Castillo, Sofia Córdova, Chris Duncan, Mik Gaspay, and Valerie Imus throughout the month.

To create a series of hand-built speakers for the installation, Simmons went to the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans following Katrina to scavenge vintage parts and wood. The speakers are set up so that musicians can reconfigure them according to their needs, in the same way that the mobile DJ collectives of Jamaica that define Perry's formative years



MJ's Brass Boppers

The Black Ark may be gone, but it is far from forgotten. It lives in the memories of artists and musicians who honor Perry's contribution to the culture. It is all too easy to forget the past but once we do, it can be rewritten, distorted, or erased by the powerful. In an era where people expect immediate results with

minimal effort, where they decry “fake news” without doing any research, keeping history alive is more important than ever before.

Simmons is best known for his “erasure” series of partially erased chalk drawings of chalkboard walls, a literal and metaphorical reference to the erasure of black voices and bodies throughout history and well into the present day. He evokes this sense of erasure in *Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, using a looped video presentation of the musicians’ performances—a powerful reminder to the immediacy of art and the limitations of memory.



XUXA SANTAMARIA (performing April 29)

All Photos: Courtesy of Southern Exposure.

Miss Rosen is a journalist covering art, photography, culture, and books. Her byline has appeared in *L'Uomo Vogue*, *Whitewall*, *The Undefeated*, *Dazed Digital*, *Jocks and Nerds*, and *L'Oeil de la Photographie*. Follow her on Twitter [**@Miss Rosen**](#).