[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Throughout 2018, Brown's Department of Africana Studies has hosted a series of events commemorating the impact and legacy of the year 1968. The events brought scholars and artists from around the world to discuss the importance of that tumultuous year and where we are today, 50 years later. We sat down with visiting experts to discuss dance, reggae, jazz, and the connections between social protest and art.

Our first guest is Vicky Meek, who wears a lot of hats. She's an artist, activist, critic, curator, and more. Meek joined us in the studio before leading an interactive program on the tradition of black social dance in the US. She started by talking about her own experience way back in 1968, when she was just starting out at the Rhode Island School of Design as a sculpture major.

VICKY MEEK: Yeah, 1967, I enrolled as a freshman at RISD. And I was the only black female in the entire school. There were only two black males, and I didn't like either one of them.

[LAUGHS]

It was a very isolating experience.

INTERVIEWER: Meek remembers witnessing the turmoil of 1968 and feeling alienated from her classmates.

VICKY MEEK: And so it was a very tumultuous time in the country. And in 1968, when Martin Luther King was killed, I freaked out, because I was in this environment that was so alien. And I didn't grow up in a poor community. I just was not affluent. My parents weren't rich like these folks were.

And these kids, they didn't have a clue what I was going through, because they had no connection whatsoever to my experience.

INTERVIEWER: She eventually transferred to a different school. But she continued making art. And she says that in her art, she's always been compelled to address political problems.

VICKY MEEK: I can't speak specifically for anybody else, except as an artist, I have always felt that I had a responsibility to use my artistic ability to creatively work on solving problems in our social arena.

But then I was raised in a politically active, and I'm talking radical politics, not Democrat-Republicans. My parents were in the Progressive Party. So they were blacklisted during the McCarthy era. And they taught us that we all have a responsibility to the community. And so I never saw anything alien about blending my political beliefs with my creation of art.

Now, I started as a young artist, it was very in your face. This was the '60s, a very in your face kind of art. And then as I got older and had my children, it really kind of morphed into coming at the conversation through a more sort of humanistic way.

And then also, I began to think about what I really wanted to do was to educate African-American people and anybody else that saw the work about the cultural aesthetics of the black diaspora. And so there's a lot of symbolism that comes directly from the African experience, et cetera.

And then there's a lot of conversations around social justice issues, but using a kind of spiritual way of approaching the conversation. So it's not so much in your face symbols, raised fist, whatever, but more looking at it from the standpoint of what has this done to our humanity to live in an oppressive society. What has it done to us as a people in total to not acknowledge the humanity of any black group or whatever?

INTERVIEWER: Black social dance was one of the artistic traditions Meek began studying and teaching. It has its roots in Africa. But Meek says that, among enslaved communities, it developed into a unique art form.

VICKY MEEK: Well, a lot of people think when we talk about dance and black people, they say, oh, well, you go back to Africa, and that's what they-- no, the dancing in Africa was not what I would consider black social dance. It was done through ritual. It was related to ritual.

And so when people were enslaved and brought over here, we began to take elements of the movements, but they became ways of having a communal experience, because of course, we weren't allowed to practice our rituals. So the black social dance that began to develop, the first thing that I'm going to show them is the cakewalk.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: The cakewalk is sort of what it sounds like. It's austere, uptight even. The dancers parade

around, leaning back, their chins held high. Every movement is exaggerated.

VICKY MEEK: Which a lot of people don't recognize as what's really sort of a spoof on white dancing by black people. But the white people didn't realize that's what they were doing. So that started it.

And then I have a clip of 1914 couples dancing, which if you look at it, you can see the beginnings of what became the Lindy hop many, many, many years later.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: The Lindy hop is a couples' dance, and it's a lot faster. The couples swing around, flip over each other, and throw each other into the air.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

VICKY MEEK: And then I have a 1925 clip of Josephine Baker doing a Charleston, which we Charlestoned very differently than white folks Charlestoned.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Josephine Baker's Charleston is kind of like the Lindy hop, but it's a solo dance. The footwork she does is fast and incredibly complicated.

VICKY MEEK: Because so much of what our dance was about was improvisation. And the real test was how improvisational could you be? How original could you make your steps based on the standard steps?

There might be some traditional steps you learned. But then you would then improvise and hopefully make your steps a lot more intricate than someone else.

INTERVIEWER: The tradition of black social dance is really varied, Meek says. These are just a few examples of the dances Meek planned to introduce to her audience.

VICKY MEEK: Well, we're going to do the camel walk. We're going to do the boogaloo. We're going to do the popcorn. We're going to do the tighten up. We're all going to do the Madison.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what is the Madison?

VICKY MEEK: It is the very first line dance. Everybody knows the wobble and the Cuban shuffle and the

electric slide. Well, in the late 1950s into the early '60s, the Madison was what started that whole trend of having a person call out the moves and everybody doing them together and that kind of thing. So we're all going to do the Madison.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MAN: (SINGING) Reverse that bird. Step back over. Rock it back and to the--

INTERVIEWER: Racism and segregation meant that for years, these dances remained largely contained within black communities.

VICKY MEEK: These were not the dances that you necessarily saw on *American Bandstand,* which we're going to talk about that, because *American Bandstand* originated in Philadelphia and was segregated. So blacks weren't even allowed to do that show.

When you began to see black people was when they moved to Hollywood. And they started broadcasting out of LA. And of course, it was integrated in LA. And you began to see black people on the show. But prior to that, it was a very segregated dance experience in Philadelphia.

INTERVIEWER: For her program at Brown, Meek had the participants actually do all the dances, or shake a tail feather, as she put it. She says feeling the dances is crucial to understanding their legacy.

VICKY MEEK: The more you do, the more you feel. And it's very easy to sort of listen. And I don't even know how much people take in after a few minutes of hearing blah, blah, blah. It's like, what are you really getting out of that versus if you're doing it?

INTERVIEWER: You're embodying the experience.

VICKY MEEK: You're embodying it, yeah. I can talk about dance. But what does that mean if you can't feel the movement?

INTERVIEWER: This is especially important now, Meek says, as these dances are disappearing. She's found it hard to teach the dances to children.

VICKY MEEK: It's funny, because one of the reasons why I was showing my children at the center the dances that we did is because we found them incapable of doing-- they couldn't skip. They couldn't do certain things. They definitely couldn't double Dutch. They couldn't do that at all. They didn't understand any of that.

And they really didn't know how to do the kind of footwork that we did. So we were going to teach them. And they were struggling.

INTERVIEWER: So it's also cultural preservation in a way.

VICKY MEEK: I think it is. I think it's very much about cultural preservation, because black people are the only people in this country who people always say, well, why are you always looking back, we want to forget.

It's like everybody else is allowed to preserve their culture and be proud of that and not be charged with some sort of subversive reason. We're the only people who people question, well, why do you want to know that. Because we need to know.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Our next guests are Bo Cooper and Dermot Hussey they came to Watson to talk about reggae's role during the political upheavals of 1968. Hussey began the interview by talking about the connections between music and social protest.

DERMOT HUSSEY: Well, in any society, music is a mirror of the time, of any given time in the society's development. So music is constantly reflecting social conditions. And I think that's always been its history from the very beginning.

1968 in the American context is very important, because the music was being fueled by a lot of social events, the Vietnam War, the black power movement. All of those things were stimulating a response on behalf of the people using what, in a kind of last resort, is the one thing we have, in a way, to fight back, the popular music.

INTERVIEWER: But as Cooper explains, popular music in Jamaica wasn't always social protest. A lot of Jamaican popular music was also a way for working class people to just relax and have fun.

IBO COOPER: Because the Saturday night is a Saturday night. And there are times when you don't want anything too heavy. It was all about dancing, intimate conversation, trying to find a partner in life, other things that young people do, especially that were definitely there.

And that was driven by the sound system culture, even before we were independent, because the music evolved primarily at that time as dance expression for the poorer class of people.

However, now you have the people's attention, there are things you're not learning in school. There are things happening in the world that the media isn't carrying. So what better time to get that in there so that information can get out on song?

In Jamaica, a lot of the stuff about African rights and history started to emerge in the music first.

INTERVIEWER: Several styles of pop music emerged after Jamaica gained independence from Britain and reflect the turbulence of that period.

DERMOT HUSSEY: The first urban style was ska. Then, as Ibo intimated, you had up here the rude boy music, before you had rocksteady.

And one of the things that people perhaps didn't understand, that there was so much expectations on the part of Jamaica. And so that ska was a kind of euphoria. And then after people realized that, well, independence wasn't really a magic wand, reality set in. And so the music immediately reflected that.

And that is why, for instance, there's a song which is really one of the greatest songs that came out of that whole Jamaican experience. "I've Got to Go Back Home" by Bob Andy.

BOB ANDY: (SINGING) I've got to go back home.

DERMOT HUSSEY: It's a very personal song, because when he created this song, he was crying. He went to the studio with-- the lyrics are spontaneous, actually. And it's a classic.

And it also kind of reflects that feeling, the Rastafarian feeling of wanting repatriation, because the social context in which he was currently living in was not enough.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: After reggae emerged in Jamaica, it soon became a worldwide phenomenon. Cooper says that's because the music has the ability to speak to working class people almost anywhere. It's a form of political resistance.

IBO COOPER: Here come some people from not only Jamaica but from one of the poorest areas in Jamaica, not with guns or money but with a sound that somehow, the working class people in every country felt on their soul. And here comes something speaking for us.

That is what I meant. And I can quote an interview with a former commissioner of police. I did I radio program, and I interviewed him. And he said he went to Argentina, and he was in a disco. And they started to play Bob Marley's music. And the dance floor was empty until that music was played. And then, poof, it was full of people.

And he said he was amazed, because he was thinking of the language barrier. And he spoke to somebody from Argentina and said, what is it about this music. And the man said, this music embodies my struggle.

And interestingly enough, he said to me, being an upper class Jamaican financially, he said, I must admit that I didn't respect Bob Marley and his music before this. But here I am in Argentina, feeling a sense of national pride. So that's the kind of power that the music has.

And the pope of Rome at the time came during a concert. He went to Bob Marley's concert. I don't think there's ever been another pope went to a reggae concert in history.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

IBO COOPER: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And so how does that compare to today? How is music being used for social and political expression today?

IBO COOPER: A very good artist to listen to is Chronixx. Chrronixx's relatively recent release which speaks to now in the digital world. I love the play on words. He says he does it for the love and not for the likes. You see?

He's an artist. And lots of the artists now, how many hits? How many likes?

DERMOT HUSSEY: Yeah. And so he's kind of critical of the other artists who are doing it, as he said, for social media exposure, for the likes.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, interesting. Is he Jamaican?

DERMOT HUSSEY: Oh, yes.

IBO COOPER: Yeah, he's the biggest thing now. He's kind of the 21st century Bob Marley in a manner of speaking.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I will certainly--

IBO COOPER: Yeah, he's loved across the board. But you have songs like, "They Don't Know." Do you mind if I bring in my friend?

INTERVIEWER: No, sure.

IBO COOPER: Please come forward.

INTERVIEWER: At this point in the interview, Cooper asks Serena, another musician traveling with Cooper and Hussey, to sing the song.

IBO COOPER: She is a young lady who sang with us. She's a graduate of [? Moneague ?] College. And she has a new album coming out. And I'm going to ask her if she can just do a little piece of "They Don't Know" for us.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, please, please.

SERENA: (SINGING) They don't know. They see me smile, but they don't know how I feel inside. Only he knows. Only Jah knows, yeah. They see me smile, but they don't know how I feel inside.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my god. Thank you so much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CHRONIXX: (SINGING) Only you know, yeah. Only you know. They see me smiling, but they don't know what I feel inside.

INTERVIEWER: Reggae's global appeal has led to a huge number of reggae bands from outside Jamaica. Hussey says that while some people argue that reggae should only be played by Jamaicans, he thinks it's more complicated than that.

DERMOT HUSSEY: So there's a nuance that Jamaicans will always have, because they are Jamaican, and it's peculiar to them. But that, I don't think, is still an important criteria. The fact that because Bob Marley said this music is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger and find its right people.

IBO COOPER: Reggae is Jamaica's gift to the world.

INTERVIEWER: That's beautiful.

IBO COOPER: And one of my friends from Aswad, he was asked by Prince Charles, so what is this reggae music. And he turned to him, and he said, your reward for slavery.

Because musically, I keep quoting this taxi driver in New York. He said, you guys' music is about serious things all the time, and yet you're always laughing and joking. And I says, yes, because all we have been fighting for is our right to party.

[LAUGHTER]

INTERVIEWER: To end the interview, we asked Serena to sing one more song.

SERENA: Hey, everyone. My name is Serena. And this is called "Bad Guy."

(SINGING) I don't want to die is the cry of Mr. Bad Guy. When our next bad guy outfit done him. No, I don't want to die is the cry of Mr. Bad Guy. When our next bad guy outfit done him. But what a man don't want for himself, no, no, he should want it for someone else.

INTERVIEWER: Our final interview was with the legendary Boston jazz DJ Eric Jackson. He came to Brown to talk about jazz during the social upheaval of 1968. Jackson remembers witnessing the events of that year as a college student. Jackson was a college student when he witnessed the events of that year.

ERIC JACKSON: It was 1968 when I came to BU. And it was an interesting time. Certainly, especially on a campus like BU, and I'm sure on this campus too here at Brown, the counterculture movement was very active at that time. So you had the anti-war, people concerned about the ecology, all those kinds of things going on.

And also, to me, the counterculture represented mostly young white kids who were rebelling against some of the values that their parents held. So all of those things were active.

But I always say, well, I was a middle class black kid. So I certainly was aware of those things. But at the same time, I was very much aware of those issues that were affecting African-Americans at that time, the riots, the civil rights movement. We watched that on TV with interest. So I was walking in two worlds, you could say.

I came to Boston right after Martin Luther King had been assassinated. So there were a lot of thoughts on our minds. A lot of us were questioning why are we in a predominantly white

university. What is the education going to be like for an African-American in this environment?

And there were some classes where I thought I ran into problems, because I disagreed with the professor. They would say things. And I would say, well, no, I don't agree with that. It doesn't sound right for me as an African-American.

INTERVIEWER: He says he also related differently than his white classmates to a lot of the protest music that was popular at the time.

ERIC JACKSON: The music was very important. But again, coming from my background, I was very much interested in African-American music and trying to learn about this whole spectrum of the music. I was never a rocker. Well, for a hot minute. I think I bought two Beatles albums. And I never bought any other rock albums other than, I think, *Sergeant Pepper,* and I can't remember the other one.

But I was very much grew up in a house where my father was a huge jazz fan. So that's what I grew up listening to on that side. But I also listened to the same thing that most teenage African-Americans were listening to at that time, Motown and all of those kinds of things.

And I think I became touched early on when I started thinking about the plight of a number of African-American artists, how many of them had gone through so many hardships. Many of them, I didn't think, were getting the recognition that they deserved.

I thought in many cases and many different musical forms, they had been the innovators, the originators. And they weren't even known. People didn't even know who they were. And I think that bothered me a lot, which has something to do with why I decided to get on the radio.

INTERVIEWER: As a radio DJ, Jackson used his platform to spread the kind of music that moved him, to give it a wider audience.

ERIC JACKSON: Certainly, when I first started on radio, I definitely, very consciously had those thoughts in my mind, that I want people to hear this music. I wanted people to, as I used to say to myself even, I want them to hear the beauty that I'm enjoying.

INTERVIEWER: Jackson says that in 1968, jazz was going through some changes.

ERIC JACKSON: Miles Davis, who I've been a huge fan of ever since I probably was a teenager, just before '68, I believe it was '67 or so, he-- although I didn't hear this record till 1968, I think. He put out a

record called *Miles in the Sky,* which I always thought the back cover looked like some sort of psychedelic design on the back cover. I think it's his head in multi colors or something like that on the back.

And there was a tune on there called "Stuff." And Herbie Hancock is playing electric piano on there.

[MUSIC - MILES DAVIS, "STUFF"]

That was new, . Electric pianos were not being used very often at that time. So when I heard that, it was like, whoa, this is really different, because just about that time, he began using what are sometimes called jazz rock rhythms. But many of them are actually funk rhythms. And that would take the music in a whole different direction from that point on.

[MUSIC - MILES DAVIS, "STUFF"]

INTERVIEWER: While jazz from the '60s isn't often considered protest music, Jackson says the genre was deeply influenced by the politics of the time.

ERIC JACKSON: I think if you go back to the 1960s at least, you will start to find there were jazz musicians who were writing tunes like "Selma March, Freedom Rider." There was others who were recording spirituals, which to me, in many cases, those are freedom songs.

And I think it's continued, perhaps even grew more since 1968. I actually went through a number of discographies from record companies from the year 1968. And there were a number of things. It wasn't a huge number. But I believe after that, the number for jazz musicians began to increase.

Also in jazz, a lot of musicians started using vocalists, even not just in the role of sing a verse or two, but as a major part of the song. And many of those songs contained messages in their songs. So I think the role has increased.

I was just listening to something yesterday by the trumpeter Keyon Harrold. And he has a tune called "MB Lament." I think it may be lament MB. I think it's "MB Lament," which is for Mike Brown.

INTERVIEWER: Jackson says that during the '60s, a lot of jazz musicians began to focus more on issues of

spirituality.

ERIC JACKSON: For me personally, John Coltrane touched my life with his spiritual message. It was, as I've often said, a kind of revival of spirituality.

INTERVIEWER: It was when you heard *A Love Supreme?*

ERIC JACKSON: Right, yes, yes, yes. When I heard *A Love Supreme,* I used to carry the record around with me. And if you'd invited me to your house or to the dormitory, probably after I sat there for a few minutes, I would say, hey, could you put this on please.

INTERVIEWER: Because you just needed to hear it?

ERIC JACKSON: Well, no, not that I need to hear it. Everybody else needed to hear it.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, got it. Oh, interesting, interesting. That's a beautiful story. Well, OK, so that's my next question. So something in you when you heard *A Love Supreme* was changed, altered.

And so many people listened to you. Can you articulate what it is about jazz that is so special?

ERIC JACKSON: I think that jazz has the power to reach within someone and touch them in a much deeper way than what most pop music can do, which is not to say pop music can't reach someone.

INTERVIEWER: But people don't get quasi-religious about pop music. There's something almost magical or mystical about jazz. And I just don't--

ERIC JACKSON: I think that is part of the power of the music. I think there is some music that just strikes you. And there's some things, you don't need anything else except to hear.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: On November 1 and 2, 2018, Africana will partner with the Watson Institute to convene a symposium titled "1968, the Local and the Global." To find out more, check out the description of this episode on our SoundCloud page.

[MUSIC PLAYING]