

CULTURED

Artist Akeem Smith Pens Open Letter to Photo Morris



Photographer Unknown, chromogenic print, date unknown, OUCH Archive, Bequeathed to Akeem Smith.

Photo Morris discovered his love for the camera later in life but still spent thirty years documenting the Kingston, Jamaica dancehall scene, until an injury slowed him down. Before he passed away, Morris shared his photographic legacy with artist Akeem Smith, who grew up in that same dancehall community in Kingston's Waterhouse district. On the occasion of Smith's exhibition, "No Gyal Can Test," at [Red Bull Arts in New York](https://redbullarts.com/newyork/) (<https://redbullarts.com/newyork/>) and Detroit—and to accompany the following suite of images selected for our pages— Smith pens an open letter to Morris, whose fast-shooting lens helped the artist bridge the distance between memory, subjectivity and history.

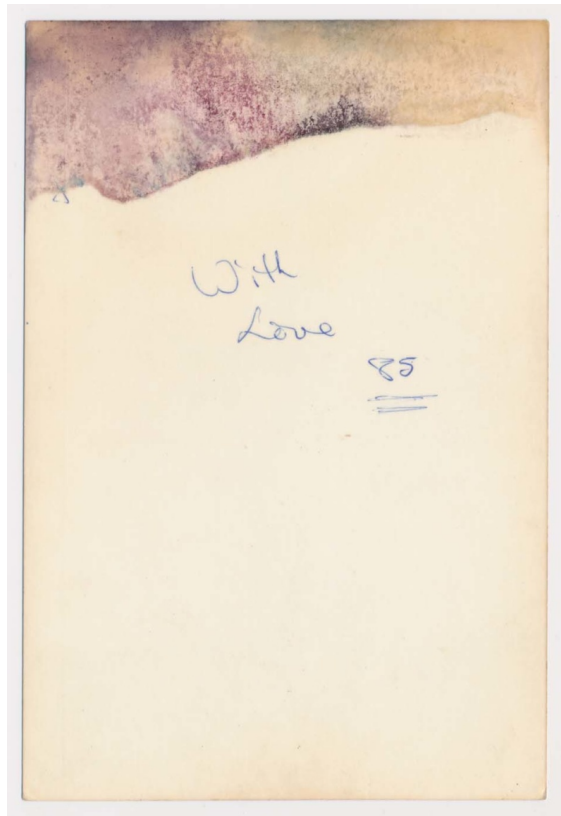


Photo Morris (1939 - 2016), chromogenic print, 1985; Bequeathed to Akeem Smith / No Gyal Can Test Archive.

OMG Morriissss!!!!

I can't believe I'm writing this letter. Although you're not in the physical realm, I know your spirit is witnessing this all unfold. I remember the way your eyes lit up when I first told you about this idea: I knew I was on to something. You weren't even feeling well that day, but I guess having some company and going through your photos had cheered you up a little.

Our conversations about women, and the psychology of dancehall women specifically, stuck with me. Coming to chill with you over the years, going through so much of your amazing material— my biggest regret today is not having recorded those moments, like you insisted. I didn't have the foresight that you did.

Even through all the times of discouragement, you kept telling me, "It ago work out man." The endless WhatsApp voice notes— "How the project ah come along?"—between you, Paula, Doreen and Barbara, you all kept coming and forced me to be more diligent with "No Gyal Can Test" whenever you thought I was putting too much energy elsewhere.

The pursuit that you started so casually, and grew as you took joy in it, is now an important part of Black history that allows us to write our own.

Your death started to make me think about the nature of my own existence and its limits, my own expiration date. What if something were to happen to me? Would any of this material ever be shown?

Or, worse even than disappearing, could these precious artifacts of Black history become part of some rewriting of the truth, used to create an alternate story that better served an agenda outside the experience of the people? Your photos of those years stand for the realities that should be known about that time and place in culture and entertainment.

I can ensure you that these images won't be chopped up into an empty-headed brand promotion or woven into a story about people in power intentionally creating this unique space for a culture to thrive. The imagination and situation of the real people who we knew, who you captured—our community—created this culture and then it flowed out to the world. Your work speaks to the truth of what it meant to be there. When you passed, I knew I had to honor what you'd shared in witnessing and recording this historical moment.

With you as my foundation, I was able to connect with the other dancehall media juggernauts and assemble even more pieces to tell this story. I will keep my promise and do my best to make sure that you are immortalized and that your work will never be lost to the world.