

SHADOWBALL LAUNCH EVENT: ADAM EISENBERG

Like almost every boy growing up in New York, I loved to play baseball. I loved, and still do, the New York Yankees – who only just days ago won their 27th World Series Championship. The Yankees remain the leading Dynasty of the game we know back home as The National Pastime, and the players, and their exploits are legendary, defining each generation of Americans, passed down from parent to child, and for every boy or girl, and for those of us who never really grow up, the players, and the memories of them and the games we saw remain with us forever.

Baseball reaches down into the very core of the American experience. Ask virtually any American who was the greatest ball player of all time, and they will inevitably respond with one of the greats – like Babe Ruth, Lou Gherig, Ty Cobb, Cy Young, Ted Williams, Micky Mantle, Joe Dimaggio, or Shoeless Joe Jackson (most of those I might add – Yankees). But perhaps unknown to this audience - all white players.

About four years ago, when London to everyone's thrill won the Olympics for 2012, it occurred to me "What is HMDT going to do to celebrate the Olympics coming to London, and more importantly, how were we going to connect music to sport in a way which best represents what it is that we do – get students and communities involved in the creation of high quality performance art?" At the time, I didn't realise it, but I must have been having a mid-life crisis moment – I thought to myself why not do a project on baseball? The thought I presume was natural – the sport being so ingrained in my psyche as an American, that it represented the sport of choice. Several other options were tossed around over the planning table, but I was convinced that baseball was the way forward, so how was I going to convince everyone else?

So I sat down to revisit the history of baseball once again, in the hope that an answer would reveal itself. And it did.

Against the background of the epic history of baseball, one story stuck in my mind: In 1903, Ohio Wesleyan University was scheduled to play Notre Dame at South Bend, Indiana (yes that is the way WE say it). Branch Rickey, the 21 year old Ohio coach – who really took up the position in an effort to help himself to pay his school bills – had a star first baseman named Charles "Tommy" Thomas. When the first game was over, and the team retired to their South Bend hotel, the clerk told Rickey that while he and his team were welcome, Thomas was not. Thomas offered to go back home and forget playing, but Rickey, determined, convinced the management to allow Thomas to sleep in HIS room, threatening to take the team elsewhere if they would not agree. In later years, when Rickey recollected the story, he said that Thomas just sat on his cot and cried, "Black skin . . .black skin. If only I could make 'em white." Forty-four years later, Branch Rickey, defiant of the baseball owners, and against huge protestation, helped Jackie Robinson become the first Black player to take the field in the major leagues, as the first baseman of the Brooklyn Dodgers. So we had the epic story we needed to make this a show. Leading on from our international project, Hear Our Voice, which told the story of children during the Holocaust, this story of discrimination, at the heart of America's greatest institution, seemed a natural way forward.

So you may be asking yourself, why baseball? Why not stick with what we know here in London and do a project based on Football, or cricket, or dare I say it – rounders? And the answer is this – As I delved deeper into the story of black baseball and the history of the Negro Leagues, an amazing part of the history, not only of baseball, but of my country's heritage began to unfold. The link to baseball completely unique amongst sports - is Jazz. Louis Armstrong owned a baseball team, Cab Calloway played on one and Bo Jangles used to tap dance on the dugout roofs to excite the crowds of fans, They themselves combating racism and discrimination as they battled to create a new art form. Jazz and baseball shared a common history. Together, these two institutions, recognised today as what is unique about America's contribution to the world, were for a time, completely intertwined. The Negro Leagues was a vast business, the largest black owned business in America for decades, and even during the turbulent years of the Great Depression, when white teams in the major leagues were suffering their greatest downturn, the Negro Leagues were thriving, bringing baseball AND Jazz to audiences all over the country. It was more than music, and more than just a game – it had become for many, not only black, but white as well, a way of life.

So – it now seemed clear to ME at least, and when Jacqueline Bruton-Simmonds, the Executive Head Teacher of Gainsborough and Jubilee Schools came to our office to discuss a project for her year 5 and year 6 students, and I told her about Shadowball – and she looked at me and very politely asked “Why baseball?” I told her the story – and she understood and she was delighted, and then I knew we had the right project in mind. And when Tertia discussed the project with Louise from Kingsmead school in Hackney, the result was the same.

The title of our project - **Shadowball** - refers to a common pre-game feature in which players in the Negro Leagues staged mock games with an imaginary ball. So believable, were these performances, that people sometimes thought they were actually playing. Though unintended, this pantomime was an apt metaphor for the exclusion of blacks from major league play at the time.

Our project is designed to inspire young people to achieve despite the odds. Through the project, students will not only help to create a new Jazz Opera and experience the thrill of performance, have a great time together in the fun of what some might call “glorified rounders,” and share the experience with their friends and families, but they will learn about an extraordinary group of men – men like Satchel Paige (probably the greatest pitcher who ever lived), Josh Gibson (who people used to call “the black Babe Ruth” – though some used to say Babe Ruth was “the white Josh Gibson”), Rube Foster (the old-time trick pitcher from Texas who created the Negro Leagues), Cool Papa Bell, Pop Lloyd, and many, many others – the list is long!

Today, we take it for granted that everyone in music and in sport has an equal chance – but we need to be reminded from time to time that this was not always so.

Music and sport are amazing things. They can unite people regardless of their differences. Baseball Magazine, from an issue at the turn of the 20th century reads–

“Thomas Jefferson, when he wrote the Declaration of Independence made proper provision for baseball when he declared that all men are, and of right ought to be, free and equal. That’s what they are at the ballgame . . .”

We are fortunate to be partnering with Baseball Softball UK, the development agency for baseball in this country, as well as the London Mets, and I hope soon to be able to announce an official partnership with the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, who has already been providing essential advice and expertise for us. Our primary funder – The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation has, as we say, stepped up to the plate, providing a large portion of the needed funding for three years – and I’m going to thank them all again, because we cannot do it enough – Arts Council England, The Big Lottery, Garfield Weston Foundation, and the William Wates Memorial Trust – and of course, The Learning Trust, without which, we couldn’t do what we do. The great American artist Kadir Nelson has given us his permission to use his artwork, and we hope to perhaps be able to show some of his work up close as we approach the premiere of *Shadowball* next year. And most exciting – the project has recently been given the Inspire Mark by London 2012, recognising it as being inspired by the 2012 Games and as part of the Cultural Olympiad.

The next time we see each other together in one place will be at the premiere of *Shadowball* next year. There is still much to do in order to do justice to this story and help the project to achieve the greatest possible impact – 20 schools over the next three years should only be the beginning. To truly pay tribute these great athletes and musicians, the roll out of the project must be greater, so if you, or anyone you know may wish help us in some way, please do let us know. Now is the time.

For me this is a personal journey. It’s an opportunity for me to share with my adopting country something dear and close to me.

No, it’s not English sport, but there are people in this room who will say to you that baseball IS an English sport. They devote their profession to getting children and adults alike involved in the game, and we intend to help them to do that.

Shadowball, if anything, is an artistic project with a lasting legacy through sport. It focuses on the achievements of black athletes and musicians whose skill, pride and dignity in the face of adversity will inspire young people with the determination to achieve their dreams.

What better way for Hackney Music Development Trust to make its contribution to the 2012 games than with this courageous story about musicians and athletes – both through their art and the game they loved to play.

Thank you . . .