

KENDRICK SCOTT

UNEARTHED

World Premiere

FRI.
MAY 12

8 PM

Cullen Theater,
The Wortham Theater
Center

Kendrick Scott, composer and drums
Deborah D. E. P. Mouton, text
Robert Hodge, visuals

Walter Smith III, tenor saxophone
Gerald Clayton, piano
Joe Sanders, bass

HARLEM QUARTET
Ilmar Gavilán, violin
Melissa White, violin
Jaime Amador, viola
Felix Umansky, cello

Kendrick Scott (b. 1980)

Unearthed (2023) (DACAMERA commission)

Unfree: Sweet and Bitter

Untold: The Promised Land

Unbound: By Another Name

Unfurled: There's Moore

Unmemorialized: Give Them Their Names



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Sugar Land. Could there be a happier name for a city? When Kendrick Scott was a boy in Houston, he dreamed of moving to Sugar Land when he grew up. “My mom would take us out there, 16 miles down the freeway. She would tell us, ‘Look at these beautiful houses,’” he says. “I thought, ‘If I make it, I’m going to buy a three-bedroom, two-story house in Sugar Land!’ It was like the Promised Land.”

And for many of the 100,000-plus current residents, presumably it still is.

But what young Kendrick did not know was that predating the upscale subdivisions and shopping malls, there lies a dark history. And beneath the sweet suburban surface, the land held a bitter secret.

Sugar Land takes its name from the Imperial Sugar Plantation, which in 1876, following the contested election that ended the Reconstruction Era in the former Confederate slave states, began leasing African-American prisoners to work in the fields. Many of the prisoners had been arrested for violating the so-called Black Codes, petty violations such as vagrancy aimed at former slaves that came with fees few could afford so they were forced to work them off.

In 1908, the State of Texas purchased some of the land owned by the sugar plantation and established the Imperial State Prison Farm. This is the prison where Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, was incarcerated from 1918 to 1925. He later added a couple of verses to the traditional folk song *Midnight Special*, referring to a train from Houston passing by the prison and shining a light into his cell, which became the song’s best-known version.

In 1930, the prison was renamed the Central State Prison Farm. The prisoners remained strictly segregated well into the 1960s. In 1991, some of the land was transferred to the State Department of Transportation for construction of the Grand Parkway. By 2007, the prison was surrounded by residential development and the Sugar Land Regional Airport. It finally closed in 2011 during a severe budget shortfall.

Left behind and nearly forgotten in the metropolitan sprawl was a small cemetery containing an estimated 33 graves of prisoners, most presumed to be white. Reginald Moore, a former Texas Corrections Officer designated as the caretaker of the cemetery by the Texas Historical Commission, criticized the city of Sugar Land and the state of Texas for attempting to cover up the history of the Black Codes and the convict leasing system. Moore insisted that there were more graves to be discovered in a separate cemetery for black prisoners and urged the Fort Bend Independent School District, which owned nearby land, not to build where he suspected the graves were located.

In 2018, an employee doing excavation for the school district discovered a human bone that appeared to have been in the ground a long time. The school district notified the Texas Historical Commission that a new burial ground had been found. Eventually 95 bodies—thought to be African-American prisoners from the early 20th century—were located.

When Kendrick Scott, who grew up to be a world-class jazz drummer and now lives in New York, read about Reginald Moore and his advocacy for these long-forgotten prisoners, he felt an immediate connection. “As a black man, we get ignored a lot. This was a black man being ignored talking about other black men who had been ignored,” he says. “I feel like it was the spirit of God moving through me.”

Scott promptly contacted DACAMERA artistic director Sarah Rothenberg, who had previously booked his band Oracle in 2015, and told her he had an idea for a multi-media presentation combining music, spoken word and visuals based the story of these prisoners, “the Sugar Land 95.” For the text and delivery, Rothenberg suggested Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton, a former poet laureate of Houston who collaborated with the Houston Grand Opera on *Marian*, about opera singer Marian Anderson, as well as creating her own presentations for other theater groups. For the set design and other visuals, Scott called on Robert Hodge, a classmate from the 1998 graduating class at Houston’s High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, who has created albums, videos and multi-media presentations with Houston artist, story teller and jazz historian Tierney Malone, keyboardist (and class of ’97 HSPVA alum) Robert Glasper and Texas blues and country singer Charley Crockett.

As for the music, Scott is bringing a superb band that includes pianist Gerald Clayton, bassist Joe Sanders and tenor saxophonist Walter Smith III (yet another class of ’98 HSPVA alum). They will be joined by the Harlem Quartet—Ilmar Gavilan, violin; Melissa White, violin; Jaime Amador, viola; Felix Umansky, cello—making its first DACAMERA appearance since 2017.

The program is titled *Unearthed*, the first in a series of un-words employed by Mouton to describe the fate of the Sugar Land 95: Un-free, Un-memorialized, Un-identified...

Kendrick Scott was born in Houston 42 years ago. His earliest musical experiences took place in church. His parents were active in the Baptist music ministry, and the family sometimes attended three services a week. One of the reasons he auditioned for HSPVA’s jazz program was because Chris Dave, a church drummer he admired, had enrolled in the program. (Dave subsequently has toured with numerous jazz, R&B and gospel artists and has released several albums with his band Drumhedz. He was an original member of the Robert Glasper Experiment and played on Glasper’s Grammy-winning albums *Black Radio* and, most recently, *Black Radio III*.)

At HSPVA, Scott joined a lineage of nationally-respected jazz drummers taught by retired jazz program director Dr. Robert Morgan that includes Herman Matthews, Sebastian Whittaker, Mark Simmons, Eric Harland and Chris Dave in the graduating classes before him and, among others, Reggie Quinerly, Jamire Williams and Jeremy Dutton, some of whom graduated after Morgan retired in 1999 and saxophonist Warren Sneed assumed directorship of the program.

“There’s definitely something in the water in Houston,” Scott told me in an earlier interview. “I wish I knew what it was.”

Scott credits the competitive spirit at HSPVA, as well as Morgan’s guiding presence, with instilling in him the discipline required to maximize his potential. “Doc wouldn’t let me slide, at all,” he says. “He really made me go home and practice.”

Morgan attributes Scott’s success in large part to his upbringing. “I can’t imagine a young person better-mannered, more polite, sincere and hardworking than Kendrick... If there’s such a thing as karma, I’d like to know more about his previous life, or maybe better yet, his next one.”

Upon graduating from high school, Scott enrolled in Boston’s Berklee School of Music, where his classmates included Smith on saxophone and Mark Kelley, who is now the bassist with the Roots.

“I wanted to go to New York. My mother wanted me to go to North Texas. She wanted me to get a music education degree,” Scott says. “Boston was a happy medium. I was on the \$10 bus to New York every weekend. But it turned out to be a blessing in disguise when I started playing regularly with the musicians in [Boston]. I learned so much from them.”

Not long after he graduated from Berklee in 2002, Scott got a call from Terence Blanchard, the New Orleans trumpeter who had replaced Wynton Marsalis with Art Blakey in the 1980s. Eric Harland (HSPVA, 1994) was leaving the band and had recommended Scott as his replacement.

“I came into Terence’s band trying to play like Eric, my idol since I was a kid. It was horrible. I don’t see why he didn’t fire me,” Scott says. “I asked him, ‘How can I make it better? What can I listen to?’ He said, ‘You don’t need to listen to anything. You just need to play.’ Music is about truth. He taught me that lesson right when I joined the band.”

Scott’s 2005 debut recording with Blanchard, *Flow*, is now considered one of the definitive jazz albums of the 21st Century. Along with Blanchard’s previous release, *Bounce*, the album charted a course for a futuristic groove-oriented approach to contemporary jazz that incorporated influences from funk and hip-hop, as well as African music, while steering clear of the clichés of smooth jazz and 20th-century fusion. Several of the musicians from Blanchard’s band have gone on to successful careers as leaders, including Glasper (who played on *Bounce*), bassist Derrick Hodge, guitarist Lionel Loueke and keyboardist Aaron Parks. Of course, it didn’t hurt that the producer of *Flow* was Herbie Hancock, who knows something about groove and who added a couple of memorable piano solos.

Scott remained with Blanchard for 11 years and recorded on four of his albums, including the 2007 Grammy-winner *A Tale of God’s Will (a requiem for katrina)*, which features Scott’s first string arrangement. He left in 2014 to focus on his career as a leader.

“Kendrick Scott is a jazz drummer conversant in an ultramodern sense of propulsion; lightweight, yet heavy-gauge, with room for tumbling accents and textures,” wrote *The New York Times*’ Nate Chinen. “He has brought this feeling to a few contemporary groups, notably the one led by the trumpeter



Terence Blanchard. Now he has planted it at the center of Oracle, a cohort of smart and sympathetic players.”

Scott says he tries to think more from the point of a view of a composer than a percussionist when leading a band.

“To be honest, I’ve never really thought of myself as a soloistic drummer,” he told *Drum! Magazine*. “I’ve always thought of myself as an orchestrator and as a color in the band. If you listen to the song ‘Conviction’ [the title track of Scott’s 2013 album], that is probably some of the crazier drum stuff that I’ve played, but for some reason, it doesn’t come out all the time. I’m in the practice room ‘shedding some really crazy drum stuff but if it’s not there in the moment, I won’t force it out, because then to me it just becomes a drummer record instead of a musical statement.”

Scott has recorded six albums as a leader, the last three for Blue Note. His latest album, the just-released *Corridors*, is a trio recording with Smith on tenor saxophone and Reuben Rogers on bass. Scott conceived of the album while cooped-up in his apartment during the pandemic lockdowns. He says his apartment resembles a railroad car, with a long corridor and all the doors on the right.

“I wanted to create music that had that vibe, a Polaroid of that moment,” he says. “One of the titles is called *What Day Is It?* So I thought, ‘What do I love the most? The piano and guitar.’ So I took that away,” he says. “I got my best friend Walter, who I have been playing with since 1992, on saxophone, and Reuben, who I have known since Berklee and play with in the Charles Lloyd Quartet, on bass.”

The album could serve as an overdue coming out for Smith, the chair of the Woodwind Department at Berklee. He has been an outstanding player through six albums as a leader or co-leader, including the most recent three with guitarist Matthew Stevens, and a dozen albums as a sideman since his 2006 debut with Christian Scott, without fully receiving the critical or commercial

attention accorded to several of his peers. The trio format has long been a proving ground for tenor saxophonists, and Smith steps forward, at times pensive, at times more animated, but always in control of his flawless tone and sly melodic invention. Of course, Rogers and Scott are right there with him, and each has his own moments to come forward.

Since 2021, Scott has been a member of the SFJAZZ Collective, an all-star ensemble that comes together once a year to record and twice a year to tour. The latest tour began in March, immediately prior to the DACAMERA debut of *Unearthed*. Scott is also on the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music. He says one of the lessons he learned from Blanchard – who would be composing movie scores in the hotel room while on tour with his band—is that it all works together: “Your teaching informs your writing, your writing informs your playing, your family informs your writing and playing and teaching. I love teaching, not more than I love playing, but I do love it.”

Scott admits that there were moments during the seemingly endless days, months and years of the pandemic, with the ever-rising death toll and the recurring in-person school closures and cancellations of concert tours, when he started to doubt himself. He wondered if maybe, with *Unearthed*, he’d bitten off more than he could chew with the string arrangements and the multi-media presentation and the historical imperative to tell the story. He credits Sarah Rothenberg for believing in the project. “She told me, ‘Do it!’” he says. He also benefited from the example of Jason Moran (HSPVA, 1993), whose multimedia concerts dedicated to Thelonious Monk and James Reese Europe offered a blueprint for *Unearthed*. “I was just at his house last week, asking him questions,” Scott told me in February.

It all started to come together in January at a workshop in Houston arranged by DACAMERA. For the first time, the various pieces – the musicians, the set designer, the story-teller—were in the same place at the same time. “It was the first time I heard the music set with the poetry,” Scott says. “You have to make the music in service of the poetry, and you also

have to make the music in service of the musicians. There needs to be space for the musicians to shine, improvisation. It helped me to see how I am going to fit everything together.”

Hodge, the visual artist, says the rehearsal was essential to his creative vision. “You have this idea,” he says. “I was going one way, but it wasn’t the right way until I heard the music and the words. I changed my whole direction. I went to the Rice University library, scanning images of Sugar Land, making silk screens, drawings, paintings... I also want to use an animator.”

Mouton, the poet, says she was deeply inspired by the theme of bitterness beneath the sweetness. “Kendrick does a good job of curating the mood shifts between the bitter and the sweet, and sometimes there’s not a clear delineation,” she says. “There are intervals where I’m just speaking, and moments where it’s all working together.”

Some of Mouton’s verses are delivered from the point of view of the caretaker, Reginald Moore: “I tried to tell them... Every legend has a little fact/But no one had ears for the numbers, gone missing by roll call/For the weight of the bodies, sweat swatted by the blistering sun/For the groundswell of loose-mound dirt chests trying to rise from the broken earth...”

Moore won’t be there to speak for himself. He passed away in 2020 at the age of 60, his mission only partly fulfilled. Fort Bend ISD has sponsored the Sugar Land 95 Memorialization Project, with a link on their website accepting donations, though it remains to be seen what that might lead to. Meanwhile, the process of identifying the remains through analyzing the DNA of possible descendants continues.

Scott feels an obligation to carry the story forward, on behalf of Reginald Moore and also on behalf of those “loose-mound dirt chests trying to rise from the broken earth.”

“As a black man, so much of my history has been erased,” Scott says. “This story needs to be told. I mean, talk about reinstating slavery under a different name. This was the epitome of that. This is an opportunity to give back some of that history to the community of Houston.”

—Rick Mitchell

**DACAMERA THANKS THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR SUPPORT
OF KENDRICK SCOTT’S UNEARTHED**

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Exploring Uneathed

In early 2023, DACAMERA's Education and Community Initiatives department undertook a collaborative partnership with Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD) and Writers in the Schools (WITS) to present in-depth residencies in two FBISD middle schools, with students learning about the Sugar Land 95 and Post-Civil War convict leasing in their community.

The residencies were inspired by DACAMERA's 2022-23 season closing event; Kendrick Scott's *Uneathed*, a new production memorializing the Sugar Land 95. Like Scott's *Uneathed*, the residencies brought together original music, poetry, and visuals as a way to express understanding of the Sugar Land 95 discovery. The in-school residencies occurred several months prior to the first public performance of *Uneathed*, therefore a custom curriculum was created which focused on art-integrated instruction that supported FBISD's curriculum and state standards. Throughout the residencies students acted as historians as they acquired information from a variety of sources to interpret local history, apply critical thinking skills, and undertake creative writing.



1
2

1. Students respond to historic sources and respond using creative writing prompts.
2. Marilyn Moore speaks to 7th grade students at Dulles Middle School about the advocacy of her late husband, Reginald Moore a local activist and historian who first raised concerns about the Sugar Land 95 gravesite.



3



3. A student rehearses with DACAMERA Young Artist Jalen Baker during the performance workshop at the James Reese Career and Technical Center.



4

DACAMERA partnered with two 7th grade classes at Dulles Middle School and Missouri City Middle School where over six weeks, students learned about the Sugar Land 95 through critical historical review led by Chassidy Olainu-Alade. Students participated in firsthand conversations with Marilyn Moore, the wife of the late Reginald Moore, a local activist and historian who first raised

concerns about the Sugar Land 95 gravesite. WITS Teaching Artist Alinda "Adam" Mac led reflective writing exercises. After several weeks of writing, DACAMERA Young Artists Jalen Baker and Gavin Moolchan set the student's spoken work to music. Their five-act work, written and performed by the students, was presented at the James Reese Career and Technical Center, the burial site of the Sugar Land 95 on Sunday, February 19, 2023. It was five years to the day to when building crews discovered the first human remains. In this innovative partnership, FBISD, WITS, and DACAMERA accomplished the mutual goal of using the arts to illuminate classroom lessons, while also inviting young people into the creative process and civic engagement.



Students from Dulles Middle School and Missouri City Middle School visit the Sugar Land 95 grave site.

Students from Dulles Middle School and Missouri City Middle School visit the James Reese Career and Technical Center, the burial site of the Sugar Land 95, to explore the exhibit, visit the grave site, and participate in a creative music and art workshop.



From “ACT I: Discovery” written through collaborative writing prompts by 7th grade students at Dulles Middle School and Missouri City Middle School.

Five years ago: February 19, 2018
A crew breaks ground to construct a school,
Unearthing a piece of the past.

Persons from beneath the soil,
Unearthed, unidentified, unknown
And *unremembered* by the state that buried them.

The bones are analyzed,
And are only 100% humanized upon a second test.
It takes 2 years and 87 people,
Exhuming and excavating till the buried are found:
94 men and 1 woman.

The story is told in pieces—
Through artifacts, archives, and DNA,
Which say the 95 were re-enslaved by
America’s convict leasing system.



Student Writing Reflections on the Sugar Land 95 and learning about local history by 7th grade students at Dulles Middle School and Missouri City Middle School.

“Learning about history makes me want to speak up for myself and talk about issues.”

“History is important because those who don’t learn are doomed to repeat it. The winners decide what stories get to be told, because there’s no one else who can challenge them. But we should learn about all history, because with that information we can change our futures.”

“As a young Black child, I think we should know what went on with our ancestors back in the day... I don’t feel like the things that happened to our culture back then was right. We were treated different just because of the color of our skin. But today, things are different. We have rights, we are educated, and we can live with other people in peace.”

Education and Community Initiatives for Kendrick Scott’s *Unearthed* are supported in part by The Summerlee Foundation.

4-6 The student performance at the James Reese Career and Technical Center, the burial site of the Sugar Land 95 on Sunday, February 19, 2023, five years after the building crews discovered the first human remains.

