

Filmmaker uses music to explore civil rights



By: [Randall King](#)
Posted: 3:00 AM CST Monday, Nov. 30, 2020

The film *How High Is the Moon* packs in a windfall of cultural references in its 45-minute running time, starting and ending with movie clips from Nigerian filmmaker Tunde Kelani's 2002 feature, *Agogo Eewo*, and pivoting to other clips of mid-20th-century jazz greats, including vocalists Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone, and the legendary drummer Max Roach.

The film, currently for rent via Cinematheque at Home, is about much more than music, to be sure. It's a freewheeling allegory of cultural history and Black activism, encompassing the civil rights movement of the '60s and current activism in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minneapolis police in July of this year.

It's all the work of 25-year-old Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, a Nigerian-born multidisciplinary artist who came to Winnipeg in 2015 to study mechanical engineering at the University of Manitoba.



JOHN WOODS / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS Filmmaker Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, 25, originally came to Winnipeg from Nigeria to study engineering.

"But I switched to the school of fine arts in 2017," he says in a phone interview from his downtown apartment. "I've always been someone who is curious about the arts, and I think moving to Canada gave me more liberty to pursue that."

"I work in various mediums. I work in painting, sculpture and performance. Film and video gave me a way that I could document my performances."

But soon, he saw film as "a medium where you can explore things.

"I think that film and video are the preferred language to express particular political ideas."

Ukaigwe worked on this project before his residency at Video Pool, as the 2020 recipient of the Scott Leroux Fund for Media Arts Exploration. He allows that music is its driving force — "the bedrock and the spine of this film."

"I am a music connoisseur in a broad sense," he says. "I listened to a lot of stuff for this particular film. It rests heavily on jazz music and other forms of music."

The music often reflects the activism of the artists, especially when it came to Simone and Roach.

"Music is an art form that has documented struggles in different and unique ways," Ukaigwe says. "Max Roach is somebody who was really outspoken and created albums about the struggle. Nina Simone was active with her music and outside her music. She was very affiliated with the civil rights movement in a very intimate manner.

"It was something about their music (that) captured the civil rights movement like a camera," he says. "But also what you see is the kind of music I listen to. The sound from the film is almost like a self-portrait."

In segments filmed especially for the project, Ukaigwe uses Black women to give contemporary voice to the film's commentary, a deliberate choice to celebrate those who have led the new protest movement, in Winnipeg and around the world.

"I think it was beautiful and powerful to see that; there is a shift away from colonial heteronormative patriarchy amongst the front-runners of the civil rights movements globally," he says. "I think that was an important shift in the conversation that I wanted to capture."

Ukaigwe also pointedly used footage of more recent artists and events, to capture the frustration of this seemingly perpetual struggle.

"The film reaches way back into history, but it also attempts to hypothesize the future," he says. "Present events cannot be discussed in isolation from past events. They are as a result of the same imperial systems that presently rests on the precipice of an accumulation of Black grievance and wrath.

"So, I think it's important to see that right now."