

How music, television, movies and the arts are shaping Atlanta

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Standing in the perfectly appointed living room of her intown Atlanta home, author Tayari Jones picked up a handful of copies of her latest novel, “An American Marriage.”

The book, about an Atlanta couple navigating love and incarceration, ascended to New York Times’ Bestseller status in 2018 after it was selected earlier that year for Oprah’s Book Club and former President Barack Obama’s Summer Reading List.

So far, it’s been reprinted in Italian, Hebrew, Polish, French, Russian and other languages.

“It has been exciting to travel the world and to feel that this book about Atlanta is an international story,” Jones said. “This book has been published in 22 countries, and they are reading about people living in southwest Atlanta.”

Much will be said about Atlanta’s past during February, as Black History Month is celebrated. And rightfully so. The city is the birthplace of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and was a home base for the civil rights movement. But, more recently, it’s been Atlanta’s black artists — like Jones, Pearl Cleage, Fahamu Pecou, Tyler Perry, Outkast, T.I., Migos and others — that have served as the face of the city and primary architects of black culture throughout the world. Writers, artists, filmmakers and musicians who hail from Atlanta are creating art that has come to define the city’s brand globally in 2020.

Pecou, whose art been featured at the High Museum and prominently on television shows like “Empire” and “Black-ish,” said that, internationally, Atlanta’s cultural influence is undeniable. “I’ve been in countries where people barely speak English, but they can recite the lyrics to a song by T.I. or 2Chainz verbatim. And, believe me, everybody loves Outkast!”

The Georgia Council for the Arts said the state’s creative industry had a \$62.5 billion economic impact, generated \$37 billion in revenue and employed an estimated 200,000 people statewide in 2015. It’s inarguable that black artists play a huge driving role in those statistics.

“We are the epicenter of black culture,” said Bern Joiner, co-owner and creator of Atlanta Influences Everything, a civic-minded creative consulting firm. “The Grady Babies, the natives, tilled the soil and helped build the foundation. Then black people came from St. Louis, Queens, Florida, Mississippi, and they brought their culture here and it mixed in.”

Even the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce is selling black culture — the city’s irrefutable influence on the country’s hip hop scene, but also its reach in other arts arenas — as a reason to move to or visit here, telling consumers: “Come for the Hustle — Stay for the Culture.”

“We recognize there is no discussion about Atlanta culture that doesn’t include black culture,” Deisha Barnett, the chief brand and communications officer for the chamber. “When promoting Atlanta, we are often talking about music and art and how they influence business, higher education and even government. We do have a mayor named Keisha.”

Still, there are those who worry that some of the culture being exported offers a very narrow view of black life.

“We have to be careful about selling our souls to present narratives that are not always accurate,” said Maurice Hobson, a professor of African American Studies at Georgia State University. “The popular culture that is produced here is not always articulating what black people are actually experiencing, but championing more stereotypes.”

### ‘The South got something to say’

As far back as Reconstruction and the creation of iconic black colleges, through the Civil Rights movement and the historic 1973 election of Maynard Jackson as the city’s first black mayor, Atlanta has always maintained an image as a place with powerful black representation.

Before Ebony Magazine called Atlanta the “Black Mecca of the South” in 1971, African Americans were relocating here because it was where educational, political and economic aspirations and achievements could be met.

“The civil rights movement is the most recognizable form of Southern black identity — even resistance if you will,” said Regina Bradley, writer and researcher of African American Life and Culture at Kennesaw State University. “It’s something that non-Southerners can immediately recognize Southernness with.”

Hobson, author of “The Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta,” said Atlanta’s past and current claims as a “black mecca” were built on four pillars: “black education, black economics, black politics and black expressive culture.”

In 1974, one of the first things Jackson did as mayor was set up the Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs.

“He was able to see and understand that, with black power, one of the things that come out of it is an expressive arm,” Hobson said, “which is black art.”

When Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds and LA. Reid formed LaFace Records in Atlanta in 1989, following the blueprint established by Berry Gordy a generation earlier at Motown in Detroit, they filled their roster with young musicians like TLC, Usher and Goodie Mob. But, at the same time, rap artists from New York and Los Angeles were dominating the charts and shaping the culture, while rappers here were dismissed.

So in 1995, after the duo known as Outkast — Atlanta rappers Andre “Andre 3000” Benjamin and Antwan “Big Boi” Patton — was named best new artist at the Second Annual Source Awards in New York City, the crowd booed lustily.

Andre 3000 tried to drown out the boos with animated claps and was clearly irritated.

On stage, he complained about “close-minded folks,” who thought of rap as only an East Coast and West Coast thing, before proclaiming, “The South got something to say.”

He stormed off the stage, with Big Boi, wearing a gray Atlanta Braves jersey, trailing him, giving the black power salute.

Jones, who had graduated from Spelman College in 1991, was living and teaching in Texas then. She said it was the first time she had heard people from Atlanta speak so forcefully about themselves.

“People think the South as being about grandmothers and mules and here was Outkast, so unbelievably Southern, yet so modern and so eccentric,” Jones said. “So often, the South is used as a backdrop to which other parts of the country can feel better about themselves. This time, the poster children, literally, were people that we could be proud of and aspire to. And see that everyone wishes they could be like us.”

### Building their own

Since Outkast’s declaration, dozens of Atlanta-based artists have hit the Billboard charts, while the television and motion picture industry has exploded here.

Trap music, pioneered by T.I., and initially offering street tales of drug dealing and strip clubs, influences everything from dance to country, while being perfected by the likes of Migos, Young Thug, Future, Gucci Mane, Lil Yachty and Young Jeezy. There’s even an interactive museum here that gives a nod to the city’s trap music scene with artwork and exhibits.

On television, for better or worse, Bravo and VH1 have taken slices of Atlanta’s black culture — the wrong slices, some would argue — and turned them into modern soap operas like “The Real Housewives of Atlanta,” “Love and Hip Hop Atlanta” and “Married to Medicine.”

“I felt really proud that everyone was listening to music from Atlanta. I was even briefly proud that we had our own Housewives show — briefly,” said Jones, who grew increasingly frustrated by the portrayal of black women on the show. “I remember when it first came on, I would watch it all the time just to hear Kandi’s accent. It made me feel so at home, wherever I was. Kandi (Burris) was from southwest” Atlanta.

On average, about 40 film and TV projects are happening at any given time in Georgia. While a recent state audit suggests that the economic benefits of Georgia’s popular and lucrative film tax credit have been greatly inflated, the economic impact was still close to \$3 billion in 2016.

All of that also has an impact on local businesses. Sometimes restaurants like Midtown’s 26 Thai Kitchen, which has only been open for three years, reap the benefits of being on reality shows.

“We have been told from several customers that they heard about us from ‘Love and Hip Hop,’ and we are so grateful for the added awareness that these shows bring us,” said Niki Pattharakositkul, owner of 26 Thai Kitchen, who has also been featured on “Growing Up Hip Hop Atlanta.”

In the scripted realm, Stone Mountain’s Donald Glover has taken a darker, more cynical look at fame in a city packed with wannabe rappers and actors through the lens of his critically acclaimed FX show “Atlanta.”

But if anyone has painted a particular vision of Atlanta’s black culture to big ends, it’s Tyler Perry, who, in 1992, spent his first three months in Atlanta homeless and sleeping in his Geo Metro.

The 50-year-old mogul channeled his faith and prolific storytelling skills into successful comedies and dramas, raking in more than \$1.1 billion in domestic box office gross from his 22 films and generating more than 500 episodes of TV.

His gleaming new Tyler Perry Studios is a 330-acre testament to his ambition.

“While everybody was fighting for a seat at the table talking about #OscarsSoWhite, #OscarsSoWhite, I said, ‘Y’all go ahead and do that,’” Perry said at the 2019 BET Awards. “But while you’re fighting for a seat at the table, I’ll be down in Atlanta building my own.”

### ‘Do you know Luda?’

But some, like GSU’s Hobson, are cautious. When he travels, people always note that he lives in Atlanta.

“They always ask, ‘Do you know Luda? Do you know NeNe?’” Hobson laments, referring to rapper and actor Ludacris and NeNe Leakes of “Real Housewives of Atlanta.” “There is no conversation about the Atlanta University Center. They don’t ask if I know Fahamu.”

Hobson’s fear is that Atlanta’s black cultural contributions will become narrowly defined. Take trap music, for instance.

“Trap comes from crack cocaine and the militarization of the police. It is not a beautiful thing, but we glorify it and go over to the Trap (Music) Museum like it is cool, but it is not cool. That has harmed our people.”

Scholars like Hobson are trying to bring attention to the city’s rich art, literature and theater scene, in addition to its music industry.

“The influence of Atlanta is more complex than people realize. (Black) music is considered Atlanta, but the other fine arts are not,” said Jones, who returned to Atlanta in 2018 to teach creative writing at Emory University. “The fine arts are associated with formal education, even though you don’t need a formal education to appreciate Radcliffe Bailey’s work or to read my novels. Music is a lot more democratic.”

The city is home to an untold number of black authors, playwrights and artists, including Fabian Williams, a visual artist who is a North Carolina native but has more than 20 outdoor murals in town.

As great as Atlanta is, Williams said, it would be “even more dominant,” if funding sources and support were available for artists.

“On the one hand, you have complete freedom. You don’t really have people who say you can’t do something,” said Williams, who moved to Atlanta in 2001. “So we make up things as we go. We have unrestricted creativity.”

But Williams said the downside of that is that with so little support, things don’t “blow up as quickly as they should.”

“What was happening during the Harlem Renaissance is happening here. We just don’t have the critics to write about it,” Williams said. “I get a lot of love in Atlanta, but I got told ‘no’ so much that I just started doing stuff on my own. Opportunities came my way because people around the world were talking about me.”

### ‘I am returning to that world’

Between 1997 and 2018, Jones lived in Iowa, Tennessee, Illinois, Texas, Las Vegas, Washington D.C., New Jersey and New York. Every move for Jones, whose first novel was “Leaving Atlanta,” was an effort to get back to Atlanta.

When she was living in Brooklyn, people acted as if she got there on “the Underground Railroad,” she said. She constantly had to defend her status as a Southern writer.

“A friend read the draft of ‘American Marriage’ and said to me, ‘Why are you still writing that world?’ You live in New York now, you know all kinds of people,” said Jones, who grew up in the Cascade area. “I felt like she was saying that the world that means so much to me, which is Atlanta, isn’t cosmopolitan, isn’t sophisticated like New York. I took that into my heart, and I thought not only am I writing that world, but at the very first opportunity I am returning to that world.”

When Oprah announced that “American Marriage” had been selected for the book club, Jones started packing her bags for Atlanta.

“I moved home, ultimately, for my art,” Jones said.

Last week, before the cold weather set in, she sat on her porch and weighed her dinner options. Ella Fitzgerald cooed gently out of her sound system.

A Fahamu Pecou hangs on her wall.

Upcoming trips to Portugal and Dubai are on her calendar, following similar jaunts to Sweden, Italy and the United Kingdom to promote “An American Marriage.”

Her latest, an Audible called “Natural Light,” is due out this month.

“Atlanta is a cultural beacon,” she said as Ella gave way to Sarah Vaughn. “You think about Stacy Abrams and the fact that she was the first black woman to be a gubernatorial candidate of a major party in any state. People like to look at the fact that she didn’t win as evidence that this is still the South. But the fact that she was the candidate was also the South. We are in many ways are on the cutting edge of progress.”

**Staff writers Rodney Ho and Scott Trubey contributed to this article.**