



The Keskiddee

A community that discovered itself



Oscar Abrams at a rally in Holborn, London, 1968. (Photo: *The Times*, 21 March 1968)

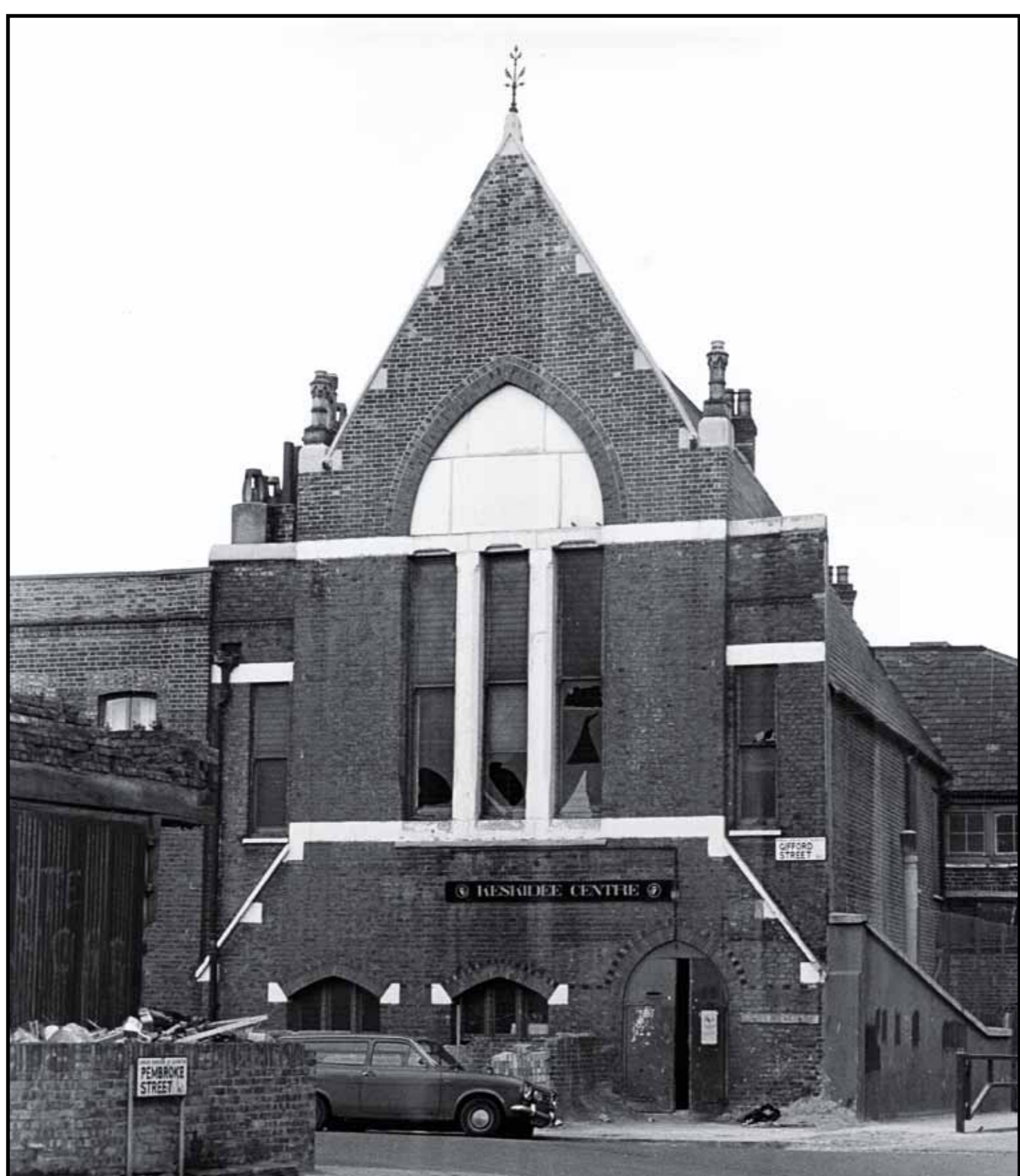
Islington Local History Centre celebrates the Keskiddee - Britain's first arts centre for the black community.

The Keskiddee Centre project was the vision of Guyanese-born architect and cultural activist Oscar Winston Abrams. Having arrived in Britain in 1958, he later became Chair of the Islington branch of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, which fought for better housing and education for newly arrived black Britons.

Abrams wanted to provide both self-help and cultural activities for the local West Indian community under one roof. Named after a bird native to his home country, the centre was to provide a unique and hugely influential cultural and political environment for the black community throughout the 1970s and early-1980s.

The Keskiddee's motto was 'A community discovering itself creates its own future'

"The Keskiddee Trust was formed to establish and run a centre providing educational, social and cultural activities for a disadvantaged and primarily West Indian community in the borough of Islington... part of the reasoning behind the project is that West Indians need a cultural centre where they can be proud to invite anybody, and that Afro-Caribbean culture has much to offer the wider society."
Keskiddee Trust, 1971



Keskiddee Centre, Gifford Street, Islington, 25 March 1975.
(Photo: Jim Connell/Islington Local History Centre)



The Keskidee

Early Days

Learn a new Skill
or join a Interest Group
in friendly Surroundings.

Open from 4.30 — 10 p.m. Monday - Friday
Junior Club 4.30 — 6.30 p.m.
Young Adults 7 — 10 p.m.

JUDO, COOKERY, T. TENNIS
JEWELLERY, ART, *EDUCATION
* DRAMA, TYPING & OFFICE ROUTINE
* DANCING & DISCO, DRESSMAKING and
* WEAVING
* Activities are Immigrant biased.

The Keskidee Centre
Gifford Street
Islington, N. 1

609 1296 607 0015

As well as hosting its own cultural and educational events, the Keskidee staged benefit events to attract funding, such as *No Cottonpickers* at the Mermaid Theatre on Sunday, 1 August 1971. This was described as 'a funky, soulful, jazz and blues explosion of life in the ghetto'.

Charities like the City Parochial Foundation, the Sainsbury Trust and the Pilgrim Trust also played a crucial role in helping to sustain the centre in its infancy.

Keskidee arrives on the cultural map

The Keskidee soon became a thriving cultural venue and, for many years, it was the only place to experience black theatre in London.

The centre also offered legal advice and practical classes on literacy and typing, yoga and cookery, as well as photography, painting and pottery.

It went on to attract celebrity visitors including Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, musician Bob Marley and singer Nina Simone.

The Caribbean Artists Movement

Oscar Abrams said he was "full of joy" when the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), which wanted to increase the recognition of West Indian art forms within British society, approached him to use the Keskidee for its own events. He knew John La Rose, one of CAM's founder members, and strongly believed that the centre would be enriched by hosting the movement's activities.

Education and leisure activities on offer at the Keskidee, c.1975.

(Image: George Padmore Institute)

THE KESKIDEE TRUST
in aid of The Keskidee Centre

Presents
THE PEOPLE'S ART COMPANY PRODUCTION
'NO Cottonpickers'

A Funky Soulful Jazz Blues explosion
of life in the ghetto. AT

THE MERMAID THEATRE
PUDDLE DOCK UPPER THAMES ST. BLACKFRIARS LONDON EC 4

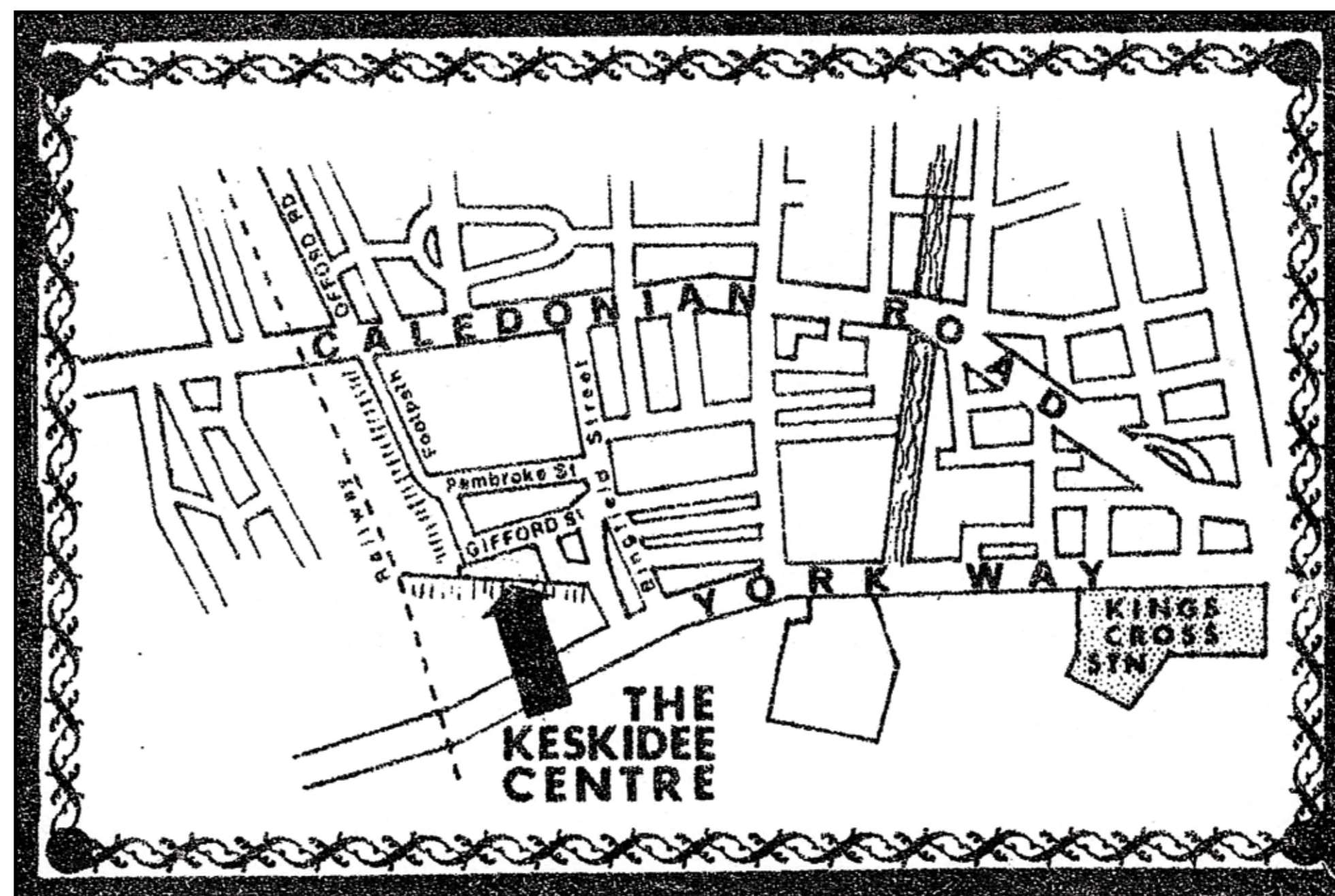
SUNDAY AUGUST 1st 1971 AT 7pm

Special Guest NADIA CATTOUSE

For this charity concert tickets are £2 — & £1 —

The only London Performance
Before appearing at the Edinburgh Festival
A Show not to be missed
For tickets phone following numbers

226 6836
607 7805
248 7656 [box office]
272 4889 New Beacon Book Shop
2 Albert Road, N4



The Keskidee Centre, a truly hidden treasure.

A self-produced map that adorned its publicity material during the 1970s.

Teething troubles

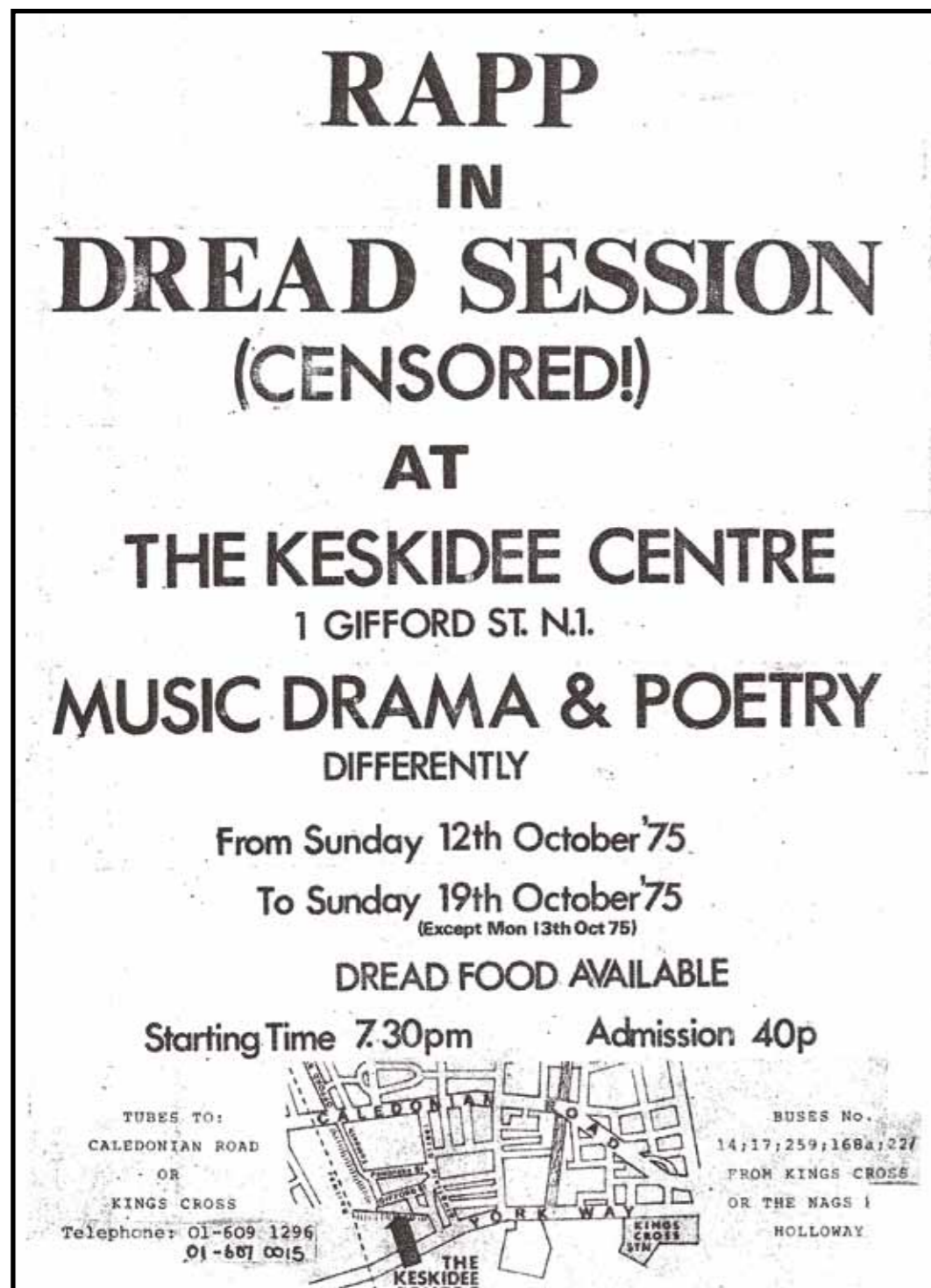
The building's obscure location was sometimes a drawback in the early days. Actor and director Anton Phillips recalls, "most of the people who came here to see plays had to come twice because by the time they'd find the building, the play was half way through. So, they had to come a second time to catch it from the beginning." Actor and director Yvonne Brewster remembers, "there was the train line that ran behind it. So during performances sometimes you had incredible competition from iron wheels."

'A show not to be missed'. Charity concert in aid of the Keskidee, 1 August 1971.



The Keskidee

Music, art and poetry



Week-long dread sessions, October 1975.

Music, art and poetry all played a vital role in attracting young black people to the centre.

Nigerian-born painter and sculptor Emmanuel Jegede was installed as Keskidee's artist-in-residence and worked from the building's basement studio. During the late-1970s, his son Tunde, a world renowned musician and master of the Kora (West African harp-lute), began his path as an artist at the centre and began to discover his appreciation of African diasporic culture.

Music

African and reggae roots music found a spiritual home at the building and provided many young black people with their first experience of live music.

Up and coming British bands such as Misty in Roots and Steel Pulse played to an eager audience and, in 1978, world-famous Jamaican musician Bob Marley used the centre to make a video for his song *Is this love?* Dances and discos were also regular features on Keskidee's musical menu.

Linton Kwesi Johnson

Linton Kwesi Johnson, who created dub poetry at the Keskidee, was also its first paid library resources and education officer. His poem *Voices of the living and the dead* was staged at the centre and produced by Jamaican novelist Lindsay Barrett, with music by Rasta Love reggae group, "it was fantastic, you know, having written something and having it staged with actors and musicians. That was back in 1973 before I had a poem published anywhere. That was before anyone had ever heard of Linton Kwesi Johnson."



Bob Marley performs at the Keskidee, 1978. (Photo: UrbanImage.tv/56 Hope Road Music/Adrian Boot)

"The Keskidee in those days was an important centre for black cultural activity and I began attending other events there and soon found myself at the centre of black creativity in London."
Linton Kwesi Johnson, 1992

Poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Keskidee's library resources and education officer during the early to mid-1970s. Seen here in recital in 2007. (Photo: Amir Zahani)



The Keskiddee

Centre of the Community

UNITED TEMPERANCE MISSION
 IN
KING'S CROSS & DISTRICT.
 Saturday, March 14, to Tuesday, March 31.

In connection with the above
A SPECIAL MEETING
 WILL BE HELD IN
GIFFORD HALL,
 GIFFORD STREET, CALEDONIAN ROAD,
 ON
Tuesday Evening, March 24th, 1896,
 WHEN ADDRESSES WILL BE GIVEN BY—
Roston W. BOURKE, Esq., M.L.S.B., F.E.I.S.
Mr W. SUTHERLAND, G. Sec., I.O.G.T.
Mr. S. HAWLEY, P.G.W.P., Sons of Temperance.
Mr. F. W. WHITTENBURY (Lay Pastor).

Part Songs, Solos, &c., &c., by the Gifford Hall Mission Choir.
 Miss **THERESA EATON** will recite "Only a Woman Drunk."

The Chair to be taken at **8 p.m.** by
MR. R. H. ROWE.

The Members of Star of St. Pancras Brass Band, with Banners, &c., will meet at Caledonian Road Baths 7.30 p.m., and march to the Hall.
 Chairman—Mr. T. W. ROBERTS, 166, Hornsey Road, N.
 Treasurer—Mr. KEMPTON, 28, Hermes Street, Pentonville, N.
 Hon. Sec.—Mr. FREDK. W. MANNING, 283, Gray's Inn Road, W.C., to whom all communications should be addressed.

[P.T.O.]

Gifford Hall Mission plays host to a special temperance meeting, 24 March 1896.



Combined activities at Gifford Hall Mission. A 'musical' exhibition, 1950s.
 (Photo: Dean Edwards)

Mission hall to arts centre

In 1971, Oscar Abrams bought the former Gifford Mission Hall, on Gifford Street, from the Shaftesbury Society for £9000. It was officially recognised as the Keskiddee Centre by the signing of a Declaration of Trust by Abrams and fellow trustees Norma Ashe and Irenaeus Rigsby on 25 April the same year.

The building was a fitting choice as it had served the local community since its opening by the Earl of Shaftesbury in 1871. For example, a former pastor, Mr W H Whittenbury, ran musical activities, talks, bible classes and other events at Gifford Hall for members and their families during the 1890s.

From brass to bass

There was also a strong musical tradition at the hall. In 1892, Islington-based organist and choirmaster James Procter-Harding composed a hymn tune dedicated to the building called *Morning Star* and, up until the 1960s, many young people were introduced to brass band music there. With the arrival of the Keskiddee, bass replaced brass and booming sound systems reverberated around its walls.

In March 1972, seventy-four year old Anne Kincaid, a local resident and member of the mission for over sixty years, gave a message to the newly launched Keskiddee, "I do hope that our hall will be as great a blessing to our West Indian friends as it was to us... may they have as much pleasure from it as all of us did in the past."

GIFFORD HALL MISSION,
 GIFFORD STREET, CALEDONIAN ROAD.
 Tuesday, February 28th, 1905.

—AN—
EVENING OF RECITALS
(Illustrated by Lantern Views),
 Arranged and given by
Mrs. W. A. Eaton & Miss Theresa Eaton
 Assisted by MISS BEATRICE GILBERT—
 (who will give BANJO SOLOS).
 Mr. RUPERT MONEY, *Lantern Operator.*
 Miss ANNIE FRANKLIN, *Accompanist.*
 CHAIR WILL BE TAKEN AT 8.15 PROMPT.

—* PROGRAMME. *—

RECITALS { "The Fireman's Wedding" ... }	Miss THERESA EATON.
BANJO SOLO "The Farmer's Fright" ... }	Miss BEATRICE GILBERT.
RECITAL "The Last Shilling" ... }	Mrs. EATON.
RECITAL "A Little Mistake" ... }	Miss THERESA EATON.
SOLO Selected ... }	Miss THERESA EATON.
RECITALS { "All the Winners" ... }	Miss THERESA EATON.
RECITALS { "Peter Perkins' Pudding" ... }	EATON.

CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS.
 COLLECTION.
 RECITAL "The Way to the City" ... Mrs. EATON.
 BANJO SOLO Miss BEATRICE GILBERT.
 RECITAL "Going to the Golden City" ... Miss THERESA EATON.

CLOSING HYMN.

ADMISSION FREE.
 Collection during the evening for the General Fund of the Mission.
 Children cannot be admitted unless accompanied by Parents or Adult friends.
 GHO. PEACHEY, Printers, 20, Chalk Farm Road, London, N.W.

A typical evening of entertainment at Gifford Hall Mission, 1905.



Conductor and local resident Jim Sharp leading the Gifford Hall Silver Band during the 1950s.
 (Photo: Dean Edwards)



The Keskids

Youth and Politics

The Keskids addressed the needs of local youth and gave a generation of black teenagers a space of their own.

Oscar Abrams wrote, “teenagers respond drastically to anything they call their own. The Keskids Centre aims to be their place.” This was echoed by a Keskids youth who experienced life at the centre during the 1970s, “for this area I think it was good, you know, not just the centre but as a young black guy growing up because when you’re young you ain’t got a lot of self direction. It helped me to grow anyway.”

Politics at the Keskids

The centre provided a forum for political discussion. It facilitated speakers from Grenada, Uganda and Zimbabwe, who often lectured about colonialism, national liberation and the evils of imperialism.

Linton Kwesi Johnson remembers the leaders of the main political gangs in Jamaica coming to meet Bob Marley at the Keskids to persuade him to go back to Jamaica to perform at a peace concert, “this was in the wake of the assassination attempt on Bob Marley and he was basically in exile in London and he subsequently went back to Jamaica and did the peace concert.”

MESSAGES FROM THE PEOPLE'S REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT

The following are messages sent to the rally held by the Alliance on March 25, 1979, at the Keskids Centre, from Prime Minister, Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard, Minister of Finance, Trade, Industry and Planning. These were taken over the telephone by Jessica Huntley for the Alliance.

From: Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, People's Revolutionary Government of Grenada (received March 24, 1979 at 11.10pm, British time)

On behalf of the Revolutionary Government of Grenada, I wish to extend to the Black Parents Movement, Black Youth Movement, Race Today Collective and Bradford Black Collective and all our brothers and sisters, warmest greetings. We appreciate the unstinting stand of the Alliance from the outset of our revolution.

Many collaborators have been arrested. There is a curfew in force. The army of the Revolution remains vigilant and on guard against all attempts at overthrowing the new Government.

Mass rallies are being held both in Grenada and other West Indian islands and we have been receiving messages of solidarity from all over the world including many West Indian islands.

We have been receiving support from the strongholds of Gairism among the agricultural workers.

Tomorrow, Sunday, we will announce the composition of the new government, which will comprise 23 persons and seven ministers.

The Revolutionary Government will

rule by proclamation until such time as the Constituent Assembly is held.

Other measures of an economic nature will also be announced tomorrow, Sunday. These measures will help to demonstrate that our revolution is irreversible. Any attempt made to overthrow the new Revolutionary Government will be repelled.

There is urgent need to change the economy so that the people who fight for the revolution will become the main beneficiaries.

Long live the people of Grenada. Long live the Revolutionary Government of Grenada.

From: Bernard Coard, Minister of Finance, Trade, Industry and Planning, People's Revolutionary Government of Grenada (received March 24, 1979 at 11.10pm, British time).

Greetings to the working people of Britain and in particular the oppressed racial minorities — the black people of Britain — from the New Jewel Movement and the People's Revolutionary Government.

We wish to thank you for your strong statements of solidarity with the Revolutionary Government of Grenada.

The people of Grenada see themselves as part of the Caribbean nation and other countries as fellow members of the Caribbean nation.

In this our moment of desperate need as a country plundered and ravaged by Gairism over the last 28 years, we strongly appeal to West Indians and working people as a whole in Britain and other countries abroad to assist the Grenadian revolution in whatever way and to whatever extent possible.

In Grenada today there are no medicines, there are hardly any sheets and pillowcases in the hospitals. School buildings are in an indescribable condition. Roads, water, electricity and other services are in desperate need of repair; and the general financial state of the country is desperate after 28 years of Gairism.

For all these reasons and more, we urgently appeal to you to provide us with material solidarity as we seek to reconstruct and build a new just and democratic society for the masses of Grenada.

All power to the working people of Britain and One Love.

Support The Grenada Revolution Festival

2pm - 8 pm CULTURAL EVENTS & FOOD FARE
DANCING TILL LATE
£2 entrance for whole event
£1 entrance for dance alone.
At: KESKIDEE CENTRE, GIFFORD STREET, LONDON N.1.

Cover photo of People's Liberation Army taken by Anwar Thameem. Bulletin No 3 will contain an assessment of the revolutionary process to date.

Political debate and benefits were commonplace at the Keskids. Support the Grenada Revolution Festival, March 1979.

West Indian children face special problems. Cut off from their parents society and values, they are only partly integrated into British life. Often, they suffer a crippling lack of identity. The Keskids Centre aims to show them that they are part of an Afro-Caribbean history and culture which has survived great adversity; of which they can be rightfully proud; and which has something to offer other groups. For example, instead of merely dancing to the music of Jamaica (reggae) in a commercially owned club, they can learn how the music evolved and about the culture from which it springs, plus how to play its instruments.

Books, films, lectures and exhibitions will give them the chance to discover who they really are.



Local school children enjoy an event at the Keskids, 24 September 1977. (Photo: Eric and Jessica Huntley Archive)

“A chance to discover who they really are.” Abstract taken from the Keskids Trust Policy Statement (page 3), 1971. (Image: Institute for Race Relations)



The Keskiddee

Theatre

THE ARTS

Brilliant portrayal of changed roles

Keskidee
Pantomime

Irving Wardle

Twenty years ago Derek Walcott founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. "We began", he says, "with this malarial enervation: that nothing could ever be built among these rotting shacks, barefoot backyards... the self-inflicted role of the martyr came naturally." As a poet, dramatist, and practical theatre man, Walcott took on the task of recording "the anguish of the race", and his 1972 play collection *Dream on Monkey Mountain* suggests the work of a West Indian Synge.

To judge by Henry Muttoo's production of *Pantomime* at the Keskidee Centre, in Gifford Street, Islington, Walcott has eased up a good deal since those days. Here, on a lonely golden beach, is a middle-aged white hotelier desperately rehearsing a one-man show to justify his brochure's promise of nightly entertainment. The show is *Robinson Crusoe*, in which he hopes to involve his reluctant manservant Jackson, to whom, as a bait, he offers the white role, with himself as a white cannibal called Thursday.

Jackson grudgingly complies, tries out his employer's lines and improves on them, improvises Crusoe calypsos, and works out a novel fate for Crusoe's parrot ("choked by prejudice"). The tourist show is still far from complete at the end of the evening, but by then the two men have formed a

bond, and worked their way through every conceivable meaning of the word "pantomime".

The play is a brilliantly extended set of variations on the master-and-servant relationship, in which the two partners continually switch roles and show that it is often the servant that enjoys higher status: as where the haughty Jackson refuses to serve breakfast until the master has put his trousers on. Their relationship is a pantomime of authority and subservience, but the harsh voices of the colonial past keep breaking through. When drunk, the master resumes his authoritarian bark and racial insults, just as Jackson slips back into dumb insolence and takes his revenge.

Walcott calls the play "an entirely human drama between two people", and this is what holds it on the rails. Their actual situation is extremely artificial and develops not through narrative but as if by stripping successive skins off an onion.

But, as played by Lloyd Anderson and Eric Richard, the characters have enough individual vitality to survive the successive masquerades. Also, their routines amount to a life-saving game, allowing each side to act out their post-colonial aggressions without doing each other any damage.

Walcott's master-stroke is to allow Jackson to come on wearing a photo-mask of the boss's estranged wife, thus releasing a flood of hatred against a displaced enemy. Thanks to the Keskidee group we are at last getting an introduction to this fine writer.

"Thanks to the Keskidee we are at last getting an introduction to this fine writer". Irving Wardle's review of Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* at the Keskidee.

The Times, 19 December 1979.

The Keskidee Theatre Workshop was a full-time pioneering drama company totally dedicated to black theatre.

The Workshop's first major play was *Sighs of a slave dream* by Eseoghene (Lindsay Barrett) in November 1972, with direction by Pat Murray.

Attracting black and white audiences were some of black theatre's leading talents. Directors such as Rufus Collins and Howard Johnson, playwrights Lennox Lewis, Derek Walcott and Edgar White, and actors like Yvonne Brewster, Anton Phillips and T-Bone Wilson all contributed to the centre's creative process.

Backstage technicians were selected from the black community, including one of the Caribbean's leading theatre designers, Henry Muttoo. Sets were often very innovative. For example, the auditorium became part of a supermarket for Jimi Rand's *Say Hallelujah* (1977), with shelving packed with groceries extending into the audience.

Equally groundbreaking was the Keskidee Community Theatre Workshop, which concentrated on developing work directly influenced by the experiences of the black community in contemporary Britain.

Distant shores

By the late-1970s, the Keskidee's reputation reached distant shores, resulting in theatre tours of Europe and the cross-cultural *Keskidee Aroha* tour of New Zealand in 1979, where the company met and performed to remote Maori communities. During this period, the Keskidee Theatre Workshop was also selected to represent Britain at the New York Lincoln Center Fringe Festival, performing Lennox Brown's *The Throne in an Autumn Room*. These overseas tours were a timely reminder of just how far the Keskidee had come in its short existence.


Flyer for Derek Walcott's 1977 play *Remembrance*.



Edgar White, 1970s. One of many playwrights to have work showcased at the Keskidee throughout the 1970s and early-1980s.

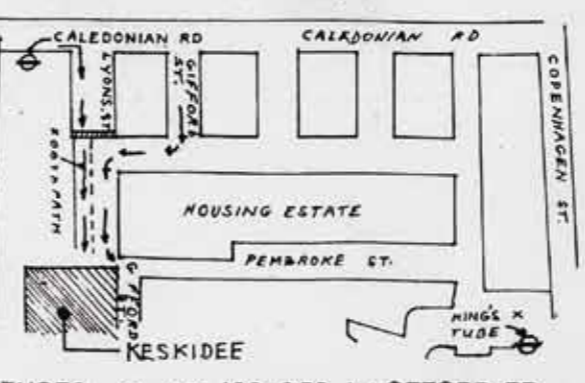
(Photo: Rudy Atwell/Methuen London Ltd)

THE KESKIDEE THEATRE WORKSHOP PRESENTS
DEREK WALCOTT'S
REMEMBRANCE



DIRECTOR:
ANTON PHILLIPS
DESIGN:
OSCAR ABRAMS
WITH:
RUFUS COLLINS,
YVONNE BREWSTER,
CHRIS GILBERTS,
AMANDA LEIGH,
MALCOLM FREDERICK,
GEORGE LASCELLES

KESKIDEE THEATRE
GIFFORD ST LONDON. N.1.
TEL. 01 609 4262/3



PREVIEWS Feb 14 to 20
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Feb 21 to March 22
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TICKETS £1.25, 80p
TIMES: 8pm (Feb 21 only, 7pm)

BUSES 14, 45, 168, 259 to GIFFORD RD



The Keskidee

Final Curtain



The former mission hall reverted to religious use as the Christ Apostolic Church. Pictured here in June 2009.

(Photo: Paul Burton/Islington Local History Centre)

The Keskidee Centre reached its peak in the mid-1970s but, by the early-1980s, it had fallen into decay.

Diminishing funding and the pressure of combining so many activities under one roof led to crippling debts and, consequently, its demise; the costly 1979 tour of New Zealand was later identified by Oscar Abrams as the origin of the centre's financial difficulties.

Reinvention

By the late-1980s, under the guidance of playwright Jimi Rand and Abrams, the centre attempted to reinvent itself as a theatre crafts training college for black youths. However by 1992, the venture had proved only marginally successful and closed, and the property subsequently sold off.

The former mission hall has now come full circle and has reverted to religious use. Currently, it is home to the Christ Apostolic Church and the Power-Age Christian College.

Legacy

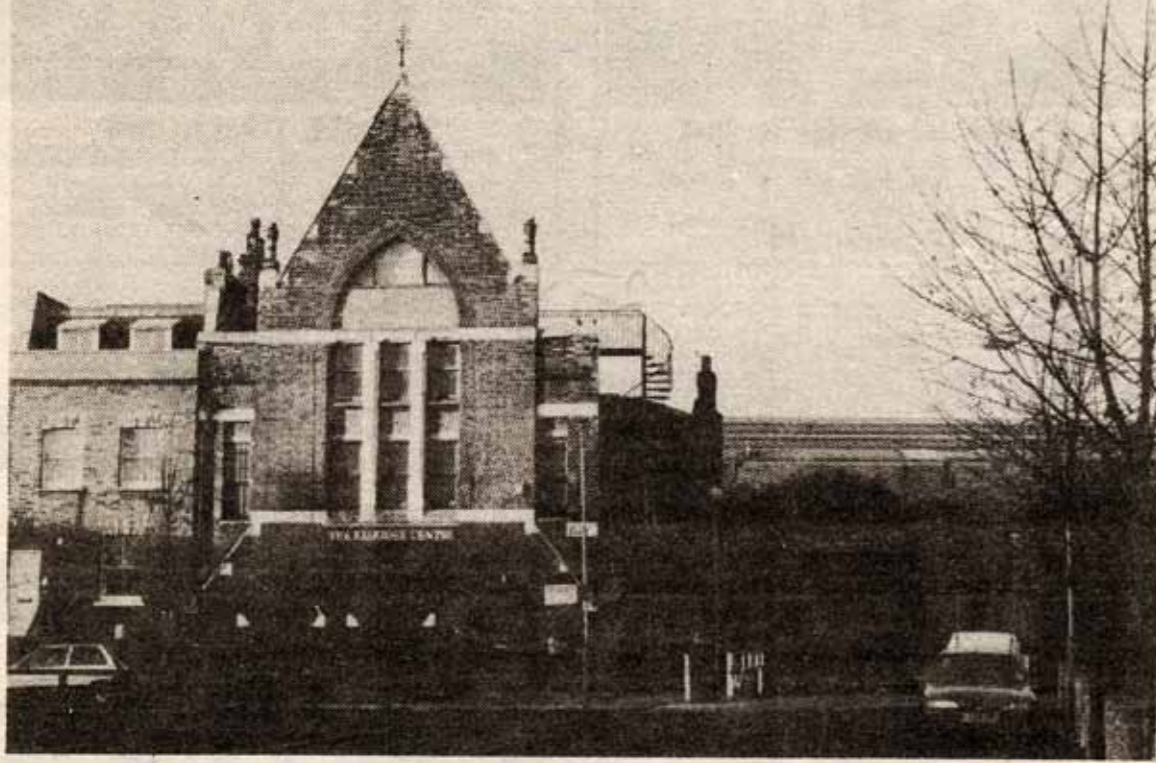
In 1987 Oscar Abrams said, "the most outstanding achievement for me personally is the consciousness the Keskidee brought to the black community and groups that subsequently became interested in the arts."

This remains a fitting epitaph to his and the Keskidee Centre's inspirational legacy and the critical role it played in Britain's recent social history.

Oscar Abrams died on 15 February 1996 aged 58.

**"Oscar should be remembered as someone who made a tremendous contribution to the development of arts and culture in this country from the black community as proved. Someone who provided a space, he allowed us to make a contribution in terms of the arts."
Linton Kwesi Johnson, 2009**

THE KESKIDEE CENTRE
64 GIFFORD STREET, LONDON N1




FREEHOLD FORMER CHURCH/CHAPEL CONVERTED TO FIVE STOREY COMMUNITY CENTRE
2nd and 3rd Floor Approx. 1,829 sq. ft. 1st Floor Theatre Approx. 1,711 sq. ft.
Ground floor Reception Area, Bar Area, Offices, Kitchen.
Approx 1,537 sq. ft. Basement. Individual workshops Approx. 1,411 sq. ft.
Gas central heating to all floors (system not tested)
Total Floor Area 6,518 sq. ft.
Suitable for a number of other uses, subject to consents

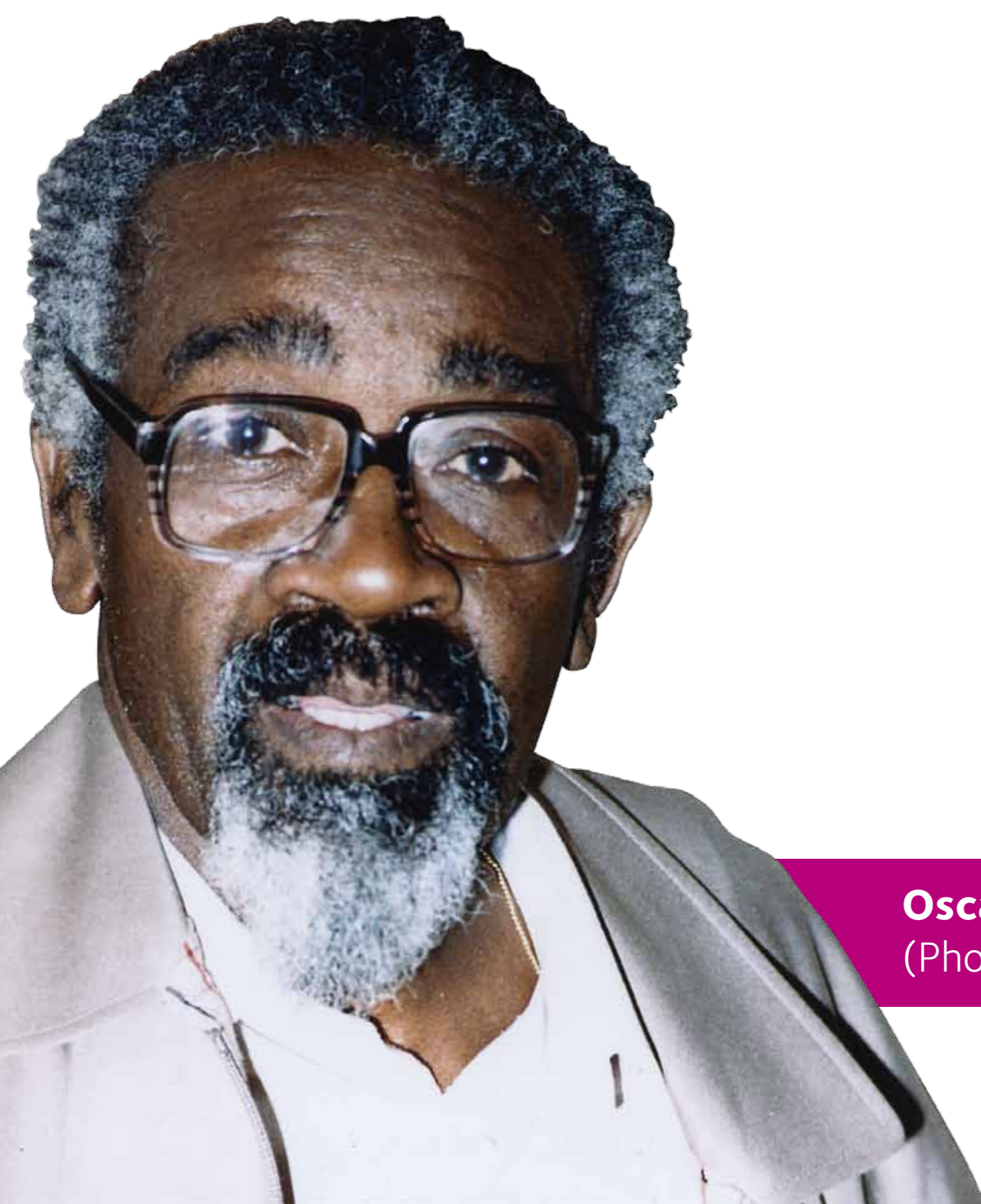
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Tel: 071-607 5001
Fax: 071-609 5031



Keskidee for sale but its legacy lives on.
Islington Gazette, 2 December 1992.



Oscar Abrams in later years.
(Photo: Eric and Jessica Huntley Archive)

Acknowledgments

Islington Local History Centre is indebted to oral historian Alan Dein for much of the background history appearing in this display. Many of the featured quotes were sourced from Alan's excellent BBC Radio 4 programme *The Keskidee*, produced by Neil McCarthy and originally broadcast on Thursday, 7 May 2009.

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Islington Local History Centre, 2009