**Northview: A Snapshot of Multiracial London during the Second World War**

As Europe lurched towards war through the crises of 1938, workers in North London were finishing yet another building as the city’s interwar construction boom neared its conclusion. Northview, a low-rise development of flats on the corner of the Tufnell Park and Holloway Roads in Islington, reflected the desire among constructors and residents to find more spacious and modern accommodation away from the built-up city centre and overcrowded East End. Mock-Tudor semi-detached houses still dominate much of the city’s periphery, but flats and apartments were less commonplace but important ways for interwar planners to appeal to younger aspirational Londoners. With two brick-built blocks placed around a central grassed lawn, the design attempted to bring a flavour of the country into harmony with the town, echoing principles expressed in the turn-of-the-century garden city movement. Northview’s understated art deco touches, including curved bay windows, chrome pipework and Egyptian-influenced balustrades, bore further testament to its 1930s pedigree.

Yet almost as soon as this forward-looking development was completed, Northview and its residents were plunged into war. When hostilities began, the government quickly conducted a mini-census to survey the population. The picture of life the 1939 National Register produced in Northview was revealing: 77 people lived in its 41 flats, with an average age of just over 30. Young married couples were common, such as the Nichols at number 24 – a laundry manager and a book keeper who lived with a young child. Many did skilled manual work or had lower-end professional occupations: there were milliners, fur finishers, stationers, watch repairers and post office clerks.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Yet as much as the Register produced a portrait of Northview – and indeed Britain-at-large – coloured by class, it told a less familiar but important story about race. At number 21 lived Nigerian-born ‘Dance Hall Pianist’ Fela Sowande, his wife Mildred (who carried out ‘unpaid domestic duties’) and their two young children. At number 33 lived Clara Deniz – a mixed-race Briton originally from Cardiff – and her fellow-musician husband Frank, whose father hailed from the Cape Verde Isles.[[2]](#footnote-2) This chapter examines how the Sowandes and Denizes came to Northview and what happened to them in the war and its aftermath. The result is a snapshot of an often overlooked multiracial dimension to wartime London that focuses on a suburban enclave and the wider city, but reveals in the process the connection of these local worlds to international cross-currents of empire, migration and war.

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Imperialism was an unsurprising but crucial force that carried Sowande from Lagos in Nigeria to Northview. His father, Emmanuel, was a musician in the Nigerian church, an institution bound up with the development of colonial rule in the nineteenth century. Yet although the imposition of music in the European classical tradition on the Nigeria Christian church was a symbol and tool of British rule, African ‘subject peoples’ found some ways of retaining or incorporating their own musical traditions. Fela Sowande was a case in point, who grew up receiving both formal training in European classical and church music as well as acquiring a deep-rooted knowledge of traditional Yoruban styles.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Sowande’s virtuoso musical ability was obvious during his adolescent years in 1920s Lagos, but by the 1930s it became clear that London – the imperial metropole – was the best place to receive the level of training his talent deserved. Born into a comparative Nigerian elite, Sowande also had ability in the sciences: he taught at the Lagos Grammar School before joining the Lagos Survey Department to study mathematics. When he arrived in London in 1934, it was originally to study civil engineering, but music soon took over.[[4]](#footnote-4) He became part of a burgeoning black student community from west Africa centred around the university district in Bloomsbury. He was acquainted with Ladipo Solanke, the founder and president of the West African Students Union (WASU), whose hostels in Camden were another hub of student-intellectual black life. Within six months, Sowande abandoned his engineering course at Regent Street Polytechnic to pursue his career in music. This choice created both objections from some family members, as well as the real-world problem of how to fund his studies.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The answer lay in the musical form that dominates views of interwar black life and that of the age more broadly: jazz. As Sowande later recalled, the move to playing in London’s growing number of musical clubs and theatres was both an outlet of expression and a way of making ends meet to fund formal musical training. He solicited help from white jazz musician Jerry Moore, while capitalizing on his church music expertise to become well known on the London stage as a jazz organ player and pianist.[[6]](#footnote-6) Upon joining the *Blackbirds* revue in 1936 – the most successful American jazz import on the interwar London stage – one reviewer reported Sowande ‘really shines in accompanying blues singers and hoofers … he has loads of technique and loads of swing’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Sowande’s success was down to talent and background. Mixing and adapting national musical styles was part of his upbringing. Colonial Nigeria was part of a wider Atlantic world and American jazz reached a young Sowande who listened to famous Harlem band-leader Duke Ellington on a small crystal radio set.[[8]](#footnote-8) Years later, Sowande found it easy – and expedient – to adopt an American identity as his London career took off, as did many West Indian musicians with whom he often played. Jazz allowed connections to form between American, Caribbean and African musicians, but American-inspired identities predominated.[[9]](#footnote-9)

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Yet while it might not have been obvious to the white audiences flocking to see ‘American’ jazz, black London was tremendously diverse. The Denizes journey to Northview demonstrated this clearly. Clara Wason (later Deniz) was born in 1911 in Grangetown, Cardiff. Her father was a sailor from Barbados who died when she was eighteen months old. Her mother, a white woman called Louise Bryant from Somerset, subsequently moved with Clara into the home of a Mrs Knight, herself a mixed race Briton originally from Bristol. The community they were part of in Cardiff was one of several growing multi-racial communities in Britain’s port cities. Like Sowande, Wason’s talent grew from an early age as she learnt piano and played her late father’s guitar.[[10]](#footnote-10) Despite their different upbringings in Lagos and Cardiff, music also offered Wason a creative outlet and the hope of material advancement.

In 1936, Wason joined other Cardiff musicians who decided sensibly that London’s – or more precisely Soho’s – jazz scene offered better prospects for a successful career. Francisco (known as Frank) Deniz soon had the same idea. The Deniz family, which included musician brothers Joe and Laurie, hailed from the other side of Cardiff Bay in Butetown. Their father, Antonio, was a merchant seaman originally from the Cape Verde Isles – a Portuguese colony that was a key staging post for the trans-Atlantic slave trade – while their mother Gertrude was reportedly of Anglo-Afro American descent. Frank was taught violin by his father and played Portuguese-inspired music before following his path into the merchant navy. Frank travelled the world, visiting China, India, Australia and the Soviet Union where his father, on the same ship, died in 1931. During these journeys, Frank experienced adventure and freedom but also racial discrimination in various forms, including visiting the southern port of Jacksonville, Florida, during the heyday of ‘Jim Crow’ segregation.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Clara first moved to London to play with Joe Deniz but soon returned to Cardiff to marry Frank.[[12]](#footnote-12) When the couple returned to the capital, they began playing in Soho’s notorious ‘bottle parties’, places that served alcohol without licenses and stayed open until all hours. Clara was the first to get a more official gig, playing piano for Ken ‘Snakehips’ Johnson’s popular West Indian band. Soon after, Frank established himself as a guitar player at the same place: the Old Florida Club – an establishment in Bruton Mews in Mayfair owned by African American singer Adelaide Hall and her Trinidadian husband Bertram Hicks.[[13]](#footnote-13) The pianist at the Florida, meanwhile was Fela Sowande, beginning an acquaintance between them all that lasted over a decade.[[14]](#footnote-14) The *Melody Maker* took notice, reporting the band wore ‘white suits with black shirts, white ties and shoes, and red carnations in their button holes’, often playing until five in the morning.[[15]](#footnote-15)

We do not know who moved in first or if they were both tipped off about the opportunity together, but it was clearly no coincidence that both the Sowandes and Denizes ended up as neighbours. Shared historical forces, musical interests and abilities, and financial incentives brought them together, despite their diverse backgrounds from the British and Portuguese empires. These connections were forged not just on the London stage, but in a more domestic setting just a short journey up the Northern Line to a symbol of middle-class advancement at Northview.

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The blocks’ residents experienced a mixture of high drama and humdrum semi-normality when war came. The Nichols at number 24 took up posts as Air Raid Precaution (ARP) wardens, responsible for ensuring the blackout was maintained. Yet during the ‘Phony War’ that lasted until the summer of 1940, life would have continued comparatively normally, save for the privations of rationing. The handful of children in the flats were mostly infants, meaning evacuation also made little impact on residents.

Things soon changed. As the Blitz began, central Holloway was bombed several times. North London was not hit as hard as the East End docks, but its proximity to central London and the fact many munitions factories were dotted around the nearby North Circular road made it a target. The closest Northview came to destruction was when a bomb hit the Gaumont Theatre on the opposite corner of the junction. The auditorium was badly damaged, though most of the architecturally imposing 1930s façade survived.[[16]](#footnote-16) The raid would have been a common talking point for local residents: it certainly would have disrupted the lives of Marian Christie who lived at number 6 and Marie Stevens at number 16, both in their early twenties and who worked as a cinema attendant and usherette.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Life on the wartime London stage also found a way to continue despite the blackout, rationing, and occasional bombardment. The 1940 Pathetone film *Behind the Blackout* captured this ‘carry on’ spirit, including a selection of musical hall and variety acts to show how life was continuing. In an upbeat scene from the Florida, Sowande accompanied Adelaide Hall in a lively rendition of ‘Tain’t what you do it’s the way that you do it’, providing a rare but revealing public glimpse into the burgeoning black presence in London’s theatres and clubs.[[18]](#footnote-18) Yet the reality of war was close by. That same club was destroyed by a bomb just a few months later, though a new Florida Club was established nearby that became popular with American service personnel and was subsequently visited by Bob Hope and Fred Astaire. For some performers, however, the war brought a cruel end. Ken ‘Snakehips’ Johnson, well-known to both Sowande and the Denizes and famous on the London scene, was one of several killed when a bomb hit the Cafe de Paris on Piccadilly Circus in March 1941. The venue had previously been advertised as ‘London's safest restaurant'.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Fela Sowande escaped this brutal fate, but experienced personal problems of his own. A month after war broke out, his [African?] American wife, Mildred, left for New York City and took their two young daughters with her.[[20]](#footnote-20) [book by daughter?] Yet the war offered opportunities for Sowande. He was awarded his degree by the University of London and was elected a fellow of the Royal College of Organists.[[21]](#footnote-21) As his reputation grew, Sowande began working for the government as a composer for the Colonial Film Unit (CFU), a group set up in 1939 under the control of the Ministry of Information based at Senate House in Russell Square. The CFU’s wartime remit was to produce films to promote loyalty among African people during the war – a patronizing enterprise that also offered a back-handed compliment that the African continent was an important theatre of battle and, with Indian independence becoming more likely, central to Britain’s post-war imperial vision. Sowande’s job was to compose background music; his hybrid compositional styles, which were also used by the BBC’s Africa Service, made his work a perfect fit for propaganda that aimed to appeal to African sensibilities while retaining notions of British superiority.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The irony was, of course, that Sowande was involved with groups like WASU that were fiercely critical of British imperial policies before, during and after the war. In this sense, Sowande experienced his own version of an insider-outsider ‘double life’ experienced by other black Londoners during wartime. Jamaican poet, playwright and journalist Una Marson was another example, whose creative work addressed the problems of racism and empire but who also spent the war working for the BBC presenting the programme *Calling the West Indies*. Moreover, creative black Londoners like Sowande and Marson found the war offered new opportunities and a greater degree of acceptance into ‘mainstream’ British culture, at the very same time as the arrival of a segregated US Army meant racial discrimination became a newly visible problem on London’s streets.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The turbulence of war, meanwhile, was shaking the British imperial edifice in ways that officials in London could scarcely comprehend. Frank Deniz saw this reality first-hand, as he was recalled into the merchant navy and worked in the engine rooms of ships alongside his brother Joe. Visiting the Americas offered him a global perspective on the war, as well as opportunities to reacquaint himself with the Latin American music that had been part of his life since childhood. In North America, meanwhile, he met Louis Armstrong while his ship was docked in San Francisco. Closer to home, he played for wounded troops in France as part of a service jazz quartet and survived a bombing attack while onboard his ship. [[24]](#footnote-24)

When he returned, with the musical ability and worldwide experience to traverse multiple cultural worlds, Deniz’s music took a Latin turn. Three Denizes – Clara, Frank and Joe – formed the Hermanos Deniz Cuban Rhythm Orchestra and were featured by the BBC in a radio broadcast that reached an audience of five million. The Denizes’ musical abilities and possession of a racial ‘exoticism’ meant they easily appeared an authentic Latin act to white audiences.[[25]](#footnote-25) This shift toward South American music, meanwhile, can be read as an attempt to move beyond the more limited roles and negative connotations associated with American-style jazz.[[26]](#footnote-26) Not only was there a multiracial black presence in the heart of the wartime city, therefore, but it was a presence within which racial identities were complex, overlapping and ever-evolving.

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The racial remapping of London, and of notions of the Londoner, became an ever-more important feature of life in the post-war city. But the Sowandes and Denizes wartime experiences provide an important reminder that the arrival of the SS Windrush in 1948 was far from ‘year zero’ in this history. In the period that followed, they remained part of a growing number of black musicians and performers who began to carve out a more regular space in British public life. In 1953, set against a backdrop of the upcoming coronation and amidst large-scale immigration from the Caribbean, these musical neighbours were reunited on the BBC radio programme *Club Ebony.* Listeners were invited to join the ‘coloured guests in their club of the air’, as Clara sang, Frank played guitar and Fela Sowande led the musical direction.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The programme exemplified the slow, often grudging, progress black people made towards acceptance in ‘mainstream’ culture in post-war Britain. It was no coincidence that some of those who made even greater headway subsequently like Shirley Bassey had similar backstories to earlier pioneers like Clara Deniz. Yet the Second World War’s legacies went far beyond London, or even Britain. The conflict helped foment the end of empire in sub-Saharan Africa, an event Sowande witnessed first-hand. After leaving London in the mid-1950s, he was appointed head of music at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation before moving into academia at the University of Ibadan.[[28]](#footnote-28) Reflecting some enduring connections to Britain, Sowande was commissioned by the BBC to compose a *Folk Symphony* to mark independence in 1960. Sowande’s academic career soon took him to the USA, where he arrived during the heyday of the civil rights and Black Power movements and was uniquely well-positioned to address an upsurge in interest in black culture in all its international guises.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Northview’s wartime story may have offered just a small snapshot of these bigger historical forces, but it is worth dwelling on the fact these were the most critical to the conflict and its aftermath: the fact the war’s front-line was on Britain’s bomb-damaged and ration-hit streets as well as the battle fields of Europe and the Pacific; that Britain’s empire was a source of vital support but whose subjects would not accept a return to the pre-war status quo; and that race was becoming a category alongside class that shaped both the social reality and cultural perception of life on London’s streets. Like these long-range trends, Northview itself endures into the twenty-first century as a rare but important example of a pre-war multi-story residential building.[[30]](#footnote-30) Its residents’ stories remind us that London’s multiracial experience was not the sole preserve of the post-war period but, instead, was part of a longer history. The bigger history revealed by this snapshot, moreover, was decided by an interplay of the profoundly local – including the bricks and mortar of art deco buildings and the intersections of road and rail routes – and the truly global forces of empire, immigration and war.

1. 1939 National Register, RG101/0260D/006/31; Among the more colourful residents was Sidney Solomon Daniels, a Jewish east ender who achieved a degree of fame as a ‘radio magician’ and adopted a comedic act in which he wore a fez – anticipating a device deployed successfully years later by Tommy Cooper. ‘Says Sirdani’, (1945), available at <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-says-sirdani-1945-online> accessed 11 June 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 'Bode Omojola, ‘Style in Modern Nigerian Art Music: The Pioneering Works of Fela Sowande’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 68, no. 4 (1998): 455-56.  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Val Wilmer, ‘Sowande, Charles Emanuel Olufela Obafunmilayo (Fela) (1905–1987)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020 [Online Edition]). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid; [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eileen Southern and Fela Sowande, ‘Conversation with Fela Sowande, High Priest of Music’, *The Black Perspective in Music* 4, no. 1 (1976): 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wilmer, ‘Sowande’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Southern and Sowande, ‘Conversation with Fela Sowande’, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bode Omojola, ‘Black Diasporic Encounters: A Study of the Music of Fela Sowande’, *Black Music Research Journal* 27, no. 2 (2007): 148.  [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wilmer, ‘Sowande’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Val Wilmer, ‘Frank Deniz‘, *The Guardian,* 30 July 2005, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/jul/30/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries>, accessed 11 June 2021; ‘The Deniz Dynasty’, available at: <https://gypsyjazzuk.wordpress.com/36-2/the-deniz-dynasty/>, accessed 11 June 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ‘Trailblazer for Bassey Dies Aged 91’, *Wales on Sunday,*5 January 2003, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Stephen Bourne, *Mother Country: Britain’s Black Community on the Home Front, 1939-45* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2010), 89; David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones, *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 522. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wilmer, ‘Frank Deniz’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A. Simons, ‘Black British Swing’, *IAJRC Journal* 41, no. 4 (2008): 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘Odeon Cinema‘, available at: <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101384986-odeon-cinema-st-georges-ward#.YJwlr7VKhPY> accessed 11 June 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 1939 Register. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. British Pathe, ‘Behind the Blackout’, (1940), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxEruseWsMU> accessed 11 June 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bourne, *Mother Country,* 76, 89; Dabydeen et al., *Oxford Companion*, 522; Constantine FitzGibbon, *The Blitz* (London: Wingate, 1957), 245-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. ‘Passage of St John from Southampton to New York City, 16 October 1939’, Passenger Lists Leaving UK 1890-1960, available at https://[www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) accessed 11 June 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Omojola, ‘Style in Modern Nigerian Art Music’’, 456). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. 457; ‘Colonial Film Unit’, available at: <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/production-company/colonial-film-unit> accessed 11 June 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Oliver Ayers, ‘Jim Crow and John Bull in London: Transatlantic Encounters with Race and Nation in the Second World War’, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20, no. 3 (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wilmer, ‘Frank Deniz’. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Simons, ‘Black British Swing’, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Val Wilmer, ‘Frank Deniz’ chapter in Laurence Goldman ed., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* 2005-2008, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ‘Club Ebony’, *Radio Times,* 1534, 3 April 1953, 24; Cy Grant, who was also part of the show, was another good example of a black Briton who both served in the war and later became a recognizable figure on post-war radio and television. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Omojola, ‘Style in Modern Nigerian Art Music’, 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Omojola, ‘Black Diasporic Encounters’, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. ‘Northview – A Rare Survivor of its Time’, available at <http://northview.org.uk/> accessed 11 June 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)