

TELEVISION JOHN LEONARD

Under African Skies

The very game Henry Louis Gates Jr. explores the continent's history and its wonders for PBS; HBO's 'Butterfly Collectors' is British noir.



Wonderful world of color: "Skip" Gates (right) with Ivor Agyeman-Duah at an Asante Festival in Ghana.

IN THE FOURTH LIVELY HOUR OF *Wonders of the African World* (Monday through Wednesday, October 25-27; 9 to 11 p.m.; Channel 13), Henry Louis Gates Jr.—who introduces himself as "Skip" to everybody he meets from ancient Kush to modern Soweto—just happens in Addis Ababa to run into Louis Farrakhan. Farrakhan, on his own whirlwind tour of Africa, is not at all happy with an article about his calypso singing and his anti-Semitism that Gates wrote for *The New Yorker*. But Skip is as irresistible as he is irrepressible. After being frisked by burly bodyguards, he persuades Farrakhan to bite some sound for his BBC/PBS cameras. It turns out that the Black Muslim numerologist is delighted to be in Ethiopia, the only African country never to have been colonized by the West, because he digs "the idea of a black monarch."

You don't say no to Skip, this brother from a friendly planet. Skip, in fact, seems an odd nickname. While he's certainly nimble, leaps and bounds from point to point, has been known to ricochet, and often resembles a melodic interval, there's very little about our political, literary, or popular cultures that he merely skims and nothing he omits, and he never leaves town without paying up. When he isn't writing articles for *The New Yorker*, trolling for tenured professors to poach for Harvard's Department of Afro-American Studies, standing by in Stockholm for Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize, introducing the Nigerian exile Wole Soyinka at a Guggenheim forum on "The Identity of Africa," publishing a lovely memoir (*Colored Peo-*

ple), conspiring with Cornel West on a book-length chat about W. E. B. DuBois (*The Future of the Race*), and editing a 2,665-page compendium of dazzling artifacts (*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*), he is on a night train from Cairo to Abu-Simbel, or a ferry from Dar-es-Salaam to Zanzibar, or a dhow in the Limpopo, or on sneakered foot in a colonial-Portuguese slave port.

He journeys into a past it has been convenient for imperializing Europe to deny. On this trip he is not exactly Kenneth Clark, sermonizing on the monumental. Confiding quailms to the camera, he even occasionally giggles. But he's on a dream quest. At the barbershop in his West Virginia boyhood, Skip heard stories of black pharaohs, black saints, black Amazons, a Queen of Sheba, and the once-upon-a-time of Timbuktu. How come so few tourists know about the Nubian pyramids in the Sudanese Sahara? Or the sacred mountain of Jebel Barkal, who conquered all of Egypt in the eighth century B.C.? Or the megaliths of Kerma, which went up centuries before Stonehenge? Why, in the bare ruined choirs of Great Zimbabwe, did German and

British archaeologists mistakenly decide that Romans must have built it, or maybe Arabs, but certainly not Africans? Gede! Shanga! Gondar! Axum!

Not that *Wonders of the African World* is a six-hour exercise in Afrocentric propaganda. Gates knows perfectly well that the kings of Asante (now Ghana) and Dahomey (now Benin) were slaveholders (in their palaces) and slave traders (selling POWs and their own criminals to the Arabs and Europeans). He meets, in Kumasi, in Abomey, and in Ouidah, descendants of the royal families and merchant princelings who facilitated the transatlantic shipping of his own ancestors to the sugarcane fields and cotton plantations of the Americas. He is sarcastic about how many Bantu-speaking black people on the Swahili coast prefer to think of themselves as Arabs and how many Zanzibari would really rather be Persian. He is appalled by female circumcision. And he is far too enamored of the possibility that the Ark of the Covenant is hiding out in Ethiopia, as if this series should have been called *Indiana Skip and the Tablets of Mosaic Law*.

But see Skip sit in on a spirit-cult exorcism in Mombasa, or follow a trail of gold and salt to the Great Mosque of Djenne, or go up a rope to a crypt of mummies in the sixth-century Debra Damo monastery, or frighten Afrikaners in a karaoke bar by singing John Denver songs. Because he's been such an eager, energetic, and informative tour guide to lost kingdoms, vanished civilizations, amazing monuments and ruins, we rejoice with him when he discovers, in Timbuktu, a 500-year-old

university and a private library of 50,000 ^{lips} books previously unknown and untranslated, written by Africans in Arabic between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. He is beside himself with scholarly pleasure at having happened on "the mind of the black world." Of course, he brought this rich mind with him, all the way from West Virginia.

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