

George Melly

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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### What does the portrait signify?

Maggie's portrait is actually three portraits and I imagine she thinks they represent the three sides of my character, if characters have three sides. The one in the middle is the one most people recognise of me singing, stomping away, very awkward position to hold I may say, I was up on one leg, she's cruel like that, but that's me as the entertainer. Then to the right, sitting looking gloomily as if I was thinking of my end, I'm dressed in the robes of the John Moores University in Liverpool of which I am an Hon-fellow so there is my academic side, such as it is. On the other side I'm in travesty, 'un travesti', in drag as my great heroine Bessie Smith who... The Observer a long time ago asked people to say who were their great heroes they could be dressed as, you know Napoleon or whoever it might have been, I chose Bessie Smith. I'm not an inveterate drag artist, I've been in drag very few times in my life but on this occasion they took a lot of trouble to find the exact clothes and I was photographed thus, I can't find the original unfortunately and then that would be the three of them, entertainer, worshipper of a great blues singer and late academic, honorary academic.

### Why do you admire Bessie Smith so much?

She seemed to me the essence of what I was sort of escaping from, a liberal suburban Liverpool background and ever since then I've been in love with her. As a singer completely based on black singing and a lot of the white critics took me up on it and said, it was impertinent. In the portraits obviously, Bessie's the one in which I look blackest but I'm not, if you look closely it's not a black person's face, it's my face but it looks black and then one associates it with Bessie maybe after all she's black. The middle singer, no, I do have big lips as my grandmother used to say rather sarcastically 'you've got a very generous mouth' and quite a wide nose and so on, so it's not ridiculous. But I certainly don't look like a token black honorary, I'd never have been honoured at John Moores University, no. I don't think she has but I am soaked in Bessie and the other great early jazz people so when I tell stories about touring the south which I have, I naturally talk in the dialect of the people. The man who ran the hotel, which was a hospital, it was the hospital where Bessie Smith died, I mean when I'm telling people about that he would say 'Just call me Rat you know, everyone call me Rat, ma name's Ratcliff but they call me Rat, everybody, you ask anyone in this town, white black don't make no diff'rence, you say you know Rat? Well I know Rat!' You see that's an imitation of Rat, but I don't think it's an insulting one, it's not a sort of 'banjo-playing on the levee' type imitation. It's exactly, as far as I know, as he talked: 'Yeah, everyone know Rat'...

### How did the sittings proceed?

Well each sitting, I don't know how many there were, maybe eight, merged into the next because it was always exactly the same routine. I arrived at Maggie's, I rang, the dogs barked, we went upstairs, maybe we had a cup of coffee I can't remember, and then either I sat in a chair in my robes, I had to keep changing you see, and she liked to deal with each of them each day you know. Then I get into my band singing clothes and for that I had to stand up on a bench, a rather wobbly old table and then she wanted me to stand on one leg, well one leg on a wobbly table is quite difficult to hold, but I did, and finally as Bessie. I just struck a physical pose, she painted it from a photograph obviously, thus dressed. And she would sometimes wipe quite a large area out you know, she'd have the mouth wrong and wipe it out, leaving a horrible blur, a mess, but then she'd go back in again and it'd be right. She'd go on at it, one eye took her a long time to get right in the main portrait and then it approached the end and the paintwork became full of bravura

on the robes and so on, the clothes. They are very impressionistic if you look at them, they're not precise in detail but they're absolutely right and they're lively, they move.

**What do you think of the portrait?**

I watched it growing of course, because I knew a bit about the painting, she didn't stop me from seeing it at any stage. I thought it was so mentally exact, or spiritually if you want that word, exact, what I felt about the world, about my life, about what I did but caught in a non sort of realistic way, caught in a swirl of paint, in a framework of firm drawing with a slight element of caricature - all those things. And with very judicious colour, I love very much those colours swirling about.