

Pauline Black, OBE

21 July 2022 awarded Honorary Doctor of Letters, (Hon DLitt) with oration given by Professor Helen Wheatley

Vice-Chancellor

This morning, we are awarding an honorary degree to a singer, actress and author who epitomises the talent, creativity and diversity nurtured in Coventry, and deployed so brilliantly during its time as City of Culture. I am delighted to introduce our honorary graduand: **PAULINE BLACK.**

Pauline came to Coventry in 1971, to study science at Lanchester Polytechnic before training as a radiographer at Walsgrave Hospital. An adopted child, brought up in Essex by white parents, she felt empowered by the Black Power movement in America, with a new pride in her identity. It was in Coventry that she met a politics student from the new Warwick University who suggested she needed ‘an immediate black musical education’. He became her

conduit into Coventry's black community. After singing in the city's folk clubs, she became – almost by accident – the lead singer of the 2-Tone Ska revival band, The Selecter, one of the bands credited with starting the Ska revival movement. The band released four singles that entered the Top 40 UK charts in the 1970s and 80s, including 'On My Radio': *Rolling Stone* described Pauline as 'the best voice that ever graced a 2-tone release', with her 'bewitching soprano and dramatic panache'. After The Selecter split up in the early 1980s, Pauline went on to develop a career in broadcasting and acting. She presented one of the first black tv programme for Channel 4, *Black on Black*, in the mid 1980s and in 2007 narrated the BBC Four documentary, *Soul Britannia*. More recently, we were delighted that Pauline agreed to narrate the documentary *Coventry Cathedral: Building for a New Britain*, made for BBC Four in the City of Culture year in collaboration with colleagues from the Centre for Television Histories here at Warwick. Also a champion of black theatre, her roles have included her portrayal of jazz singer, Billie Holiday, in the play *All or Nothing at All*, for

which she won a Time Out award in 1991. And in 2011, she released her acclaimed autobiography, *Black by Design*.

Throughout her career, Pauline has used her own experiences and her music in the battle against racism and sexism. Back in the 1970s, against a background of racial tension in Britain, The Selecter took a specifically anti-racist and anti-sexist stance, this latter agenda particularly championed by Pauline. Like other 2-Tone bands, *The Selecter* produced what Pauline describes as ‘music to tickle the brain cells and the soles of the feet’ – inherently, music of protest - ‘a product of blue-collar Britons and West Indian immigrants uniting against common ills’. Its messages were made more powerful by The Selecter’s composition – the only band with a black female singer and only one white member – and undoubtedly by Pauline’s dramatic presence – the original Rude Girl in her legendary androgynous outfit complete with its grey trilby. ‘An awful lot of people had their opinions changed or challenged [by us],’ says Pauline. Pauline, and, indeed, The Selecter in subsequent incarnations, has continued to tackle these issues. In

a recent interview, she said sadly, ‘I marvel...that I’m still talking about racism... But I really do feel that ... in 1979, we started the conversation ... in Coventry.’

Dr Pete Chambers, director of Coventry’s Music Museum, said of Pauline Black: *Pauline has many hats, and I don’t just mean the ones she wears on stage - singer, songwriter, actor, author, and broadcaster and above all icon. She has that rare ability to be good at all she does. Back in the day as the Selecter began their exciting musical journey, she commanded every stage like it was hers, giving short shrift to hecklers and talking eloquently about what the song lyrics actually meant and why you needed to understand them. As a front-person she shone, a role model to every rude girl desperate for the day their makeshift hairbrushes would become a real microphone and they could be like Pauline Black. Her own unique styling launched a thousand other rude girls as she feminised the male dominated fashion of tonic suits, Ben Sherman shirts and trilby hats. Over forty years on, she is still a rude girl fashionista,*

eloquent as ever, still telling it how it is, and still wearing as many hats.

The backdrop to Pauline's work and career has been Coventry, her adopted city. She has lived in this multicultural, creative city for 50 years and has contributed enormously to its vibrant artistic scene: The Selecter cemented Coventry as a city filled with musical talent and individuals not afraid to tackle social issues and to stand up for what they believed in. Pauline was a key figure in encouraging Coventry to bid to become City of Culture in 2021. In June, she launched the year's signature event, 'Coventry Moves', by performing 'River Rushing Flow', and in December presented the 2021 Turner Prize at a ceremony in Coventry Cathedral. Coventry has honoured Pauline: she has been inducted into its Hall of Fame and holds an honorary degree from Coventry University. In this year's New Year's Honours, she was awarded an OBE for services to entertainment. Tonight, we are delighted to add our own accolade and to welcome the Queen of 2-Tone to Warwick.

Vice-Chancellor: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for
admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*,

PAULINE BLACK.

897 words