



Bach & Mozart on Six Strings:
John Williams, the world's greatest living classical guitarist, comes to McCarter on March 23. Events, page 12.

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Karma & Capitalism

Marty Tuchman turned Interpool into one of the biggest names in the transportation industry

Now he is using his wealth and ingenuity to bring down Parkinson's disease



Tuchman helped set the standard for multi-modal shipping containers.

Scott Morgan reports – 36

Photo by Frank Wojciechowski

PREVIEW

Have We Become a Post-Racial Society Yet?

by Michele Alperin

History is often a matter of perspective, but point of view is largely in the control of the politically and socially powerful. Reading “Still I Rise,” a graphic history of African Americans by Trentonians Roland Laird with his wife, Taneshia Nash Laird, the experience for at least this white reader was like a step into a different skin. The “facts,” if such things exist, were familiar, but their nuances were eye opening.

A man and a woman who stand outside the narrative tell the story, often with a sense of strong pride. When African Americans first came to the United States as indentured servants, they often came from a higher social standing than the white Europeans. As the female narrator observes, “Not only did we adapt, but we were more creative, innovative, and productive than our European counterparts. They had been poor, disenfranchised, and on the margins of society in their own land, while the Africans had been skilled craftspeople and successful farmers.”

As a result, the Africans were often able to buy themselves out of their indentured servitude early, leaving the colonists who had brought them over with slimmer profits than expected. The logical economic response, justified as it has been throughout America’s sordid racial history, was to enslave blacks. As a man from Virginia in 1645 observes, “We are white men born to rule our inferiors. Indentured servitude is ungodly; it puts him on the level of the lowest of white men. He is meant to serve our needs.”

Laird will speak on “Alternative Views on a Post-Racial Society” and about the book “Still I Rise,” on Monday, March 23, at the Princeton Public Library, 65 Witherspoon Street.

Laird himself has always lived in both worlds. From a middle-class family — his mother a high school math teacher and his father a branch librarian for the Brooklyn Public Library — he was born in Brooklyn but grew up in the 1970s and ’80s in an all-black neighborhood in Hollis, Queens. From his childhood haunts he knew hip hop musicians Joseph “Run” Simmons, Darryl “D.M.C.” McDaniels, and Jason “Jam-Master Jay,” and he played pick-up basketball with rap impresario Russell Simmons.

At the same time, he always went to integrated schools, including Stuyvesant High School, a public magnet school in Manhattan. “I’d go from a place that was a majority white to an environment that is all black,” he says. “Obviously that played a role in my interest in our history, taking me into the historical significance of black people.”

Despite the insistence of his English teacher, Pulitzer Prize-winner Frank McCourt, that Laird should use his writing talent to study English at Vanderbilt, he chose instead to go with his math-science side; he earned a bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Brown University in 1982 and a master’s degree in computer science from the New York Institute of Technology in 1986. Yet he was always interested in literature and media and took a number of English courses at Brown. “I knew at some point I would try to write a book, and, at a maximum, I wanted to have a company that revolved around different types of media,” he says.

Laird started working in the computer field as a programmer for AT&T, then moved to Dow Jones. While at Dow Jones, he added on his second, sideline career, by founding Posro Media. It grew in part out of conversations with friends at Dow Jones and AT&T about starting their own businesses. But when African Americans talk about opening a business, the perspective is different, says

Laird, Posro’s CEO. “You know as a black person that there is a scarcity of black-owned businesses in our community, and if you have a college degree you should give it a shot in some way, shape, or form,” he says. After nixing the idea of becoming a computer consultant, he decided to focus his new career on his lifelong concern with getting out the stories of African Americans through Posro.

Meanwhile his “first” career remained on track. After stints at Comverse Technology, StreetLine, and Swiss American Securities, leaving in October 2008 to devote himself entirely to Posro.

Posro had moved ahead with its mission, to create media projecting positive imagery that stands in sharp counterpoint to the mass media’s often unrealistic and misleading portraits of the African American community. From 1989 to 1991, Posro produced t-shirts to raise money and then in 1991 produced its first media product, the MC Squared hip hop-infused comic book. Its focus was Earl Terrel, a young Harlem barber who designs computer games on the side, and it became the first contemporary comic book to be archived in the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum for its literary focus on the Negro Leagues.

MC Squared sold 15,000 copies of each of its first two issues, but its third issue was destroyed in a 1994 gas pipeline explosion, just about the time that he and Taneshia had gotten married. “That’s when I really started to focus more on my computer career,” says Laird. Laird’s wife is executive director of the Trenton Downtown Association, and before that she had her own marketing company. The two met when she was working for Posro while she was in college. Their daughter, Imani Fasarrah Laird, is two and a half.

Posro’s next product, Griots, was a comic strip about a black family who owns a newspaper, and it was syndicated to black weeklies around the country.

After MC Squared and Griots were featured in a New York Times article in 1993, the Lairds started hearing from people interested in their products. One was Heidi von Schreiner, an editor who was branching out as an agent. They were not ready then, but she called again in early 1995. She was working for the book packager, the Philip Lief Group, and approached the Lairds with the idea of doing an African-American history comic book. With their input, von Schreiner wrote a proposal, set up a seven-publisher book auction in October, 1995, and set up the initial deal with W.W. Norton. The first edition of “Still I Rise,” published in November, 1997, covered African-American history from 1619 to the Million Man March in Washington, D.C.

In writing the book, Laird synthesized material from secondary sources, in particular, “From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans,” by John Hope Franklin. When he found gaps in information or perspective, he sought other books.

An expanded edition of “Still I Rise,” published recently by Sterling, has 13 additional pages, stretching through Barack Obama’s election as president of the United States.



In Black and White: Roland Laird, above, and an updated page from his 1997 book ‘Still I Rise.’



The favorable press for “Still I Rise,” accompanied by reasonable sales, has given the Lairds a boost in soliciting interest in other Posro projects. They are currently at work on an anthology centering around the TV Show “The Wire” with Deesha Philyaw, as well as fleshing out another comic book project and producing a couple of short documentaries about Trenton past and present.

One theme that threads through “Still I Rise” are the disagreements within the black community about how much to trust and work together with white people. “In slavery times it was a very segregated environment, and the goals and aims of blacks and whites were different. On the white side it was maintaining the status quo, and on the black side it was getting freedom,” says Laird. “But you had pockets of collaboration even in the 1600s before slavery really took firm hold.”

Posro Media is also partnering with one of the top black developers in the country, Full Spectrum, on a new project, called My Image Studios, or MIST. Full Spectrum built Harlem’s Kalahari Condominiums, the largest green, mixed-income condominium development in New York City. My Image Studios, of which Laird is managing director, will be a “convergent entertainment center” focusing on the African and Latino diaspora in the retail space of Kalahari — offering food and drinks, three screening rooms, a performance stage, and a post-production facility.

Laird is actively talking to banks and investors, trying to raise \$10 million to build the facility; his argument is that Harlem is underserved in both restauranting and live performance venues. If the idea works in Harlem, the partnership is ready to roll it out in different cities, with entertainment mixes that reflect the surrounding communities.

Despite Laird’s comfort with the white world, it is his empathy with African Americans and his respect for his own history that comes through in “Still I Rise.” Even his middle-class background did not, in the end, save him from experiences of racism along the way, but his life experiences have left him with a broader view of race relations.

As a young child, he played Pop Warner

football, first on an integrated, then on an all-black team. He describes an incident at a championship game he played with the all-black team. “When we traveled to some neighborhood in the Brooklyn-Queens area, we were in a mini-race riot,” he says, recalling bottles thrown at them, “just because the black team was playing a white team, and we were the two best teams in the league.”

In the 1990s, Laird was on an important project in Colorado, Laird was a little surprised at how the prejudices of his fellow workers came down: “The native Coloradans who worked at the company were borderline hostile, whereas the folks who were my allies and had my back on the project were folks from deep Texas,” he says. Thus even the times he encountered racism in a corporation, “I always had a white person who acknowledged that that was going on,” says Laird.

As a result, Laird makes it a practice never to make a sweeping indictment of individuals. “I’ve never been one to think everything is one particular way,” he says. “I don’t speak to generalities — all black people need to do this, all white people need to do this.”

In a way, Laird pulls back the veil of race, and although he acknowledges cultural differences, he likes to see how relations play out between individuals. Seeing African-American history play out over close to 400 years in his book, he says, “I see that there are so many different types of folks within the races.”

Working on the book did reinforce his sense that some whites, for example, Thaddeus Stevens — a 19th century Republican Congressman and chair of the House Ways and Means Committee who wrote much of the financial legislation that paid for the Civil War and who fought to maintain justice for freed men during Reconstruction — were real advocates for black people, but he also left with a bit of more personal wisdom. He says, “It allowed me to see how resilient my people have been — resilient in the face of oppression in America and overcoming that and seeing some of the things that we’re capable of doing of now.”

“Alternative Views on a Post-Racial Society,” Princeton Public Library, 65 Witherspoon Street. Monday, March 23, 7:30 p.m. Lecture presented by author and media executive Roland Laird. He will also talk on his graphic novel, “Still I Rise,” based on African-American history. A graduate of Brown University, he is the founder and CEO of Posro Media. 609-924-9529 or www.princetonlibrary.org.

‘You know as a black person that there is a scarcity of black-owned businesses in our community, and if you have a college degree you should give it a shot in some way, shape, or form,’ says Roland Laird.