

"...a Very Funny Man"

(Negro comedian GODFREY CAMBRIDGE is scoring a big hit at the "hungry 1" in San Francisco according to all reports from the Bay Area. Typical of the glowing reviews in the local press was the following by RALPH J. GLEASON in the San Francisco Chronicle.)

WELL, it's good news for New Year's. The hungry 1 has the best show it's had in months and the whole thing is a ball from beginning to end.

Godfrey Cambridge, the comic, headlines the show and singer Carol Sloane and The Driftwood Singers are the supporting acts and it isn't often that such top rank calibre of entertainment goes all the way like that.

Cambridge is a very funny man, a sensitive, sharp

and versatile artist who brings great acting talent to his work, plus a sharp mind for social satire. His stance, basically, is to spotlight the follies and the inconsistencies of all of us with particular attention to the "new image" of the Negro, which he himself represents.

"We're changin' the image," he says. "No more fried chicken in the paper sack. We got the attache case now . . . with the chicken in it!" Then he pauses and adds. "I ain't gonna give up EVERYTHING just to live with you-all!"

"Let's face it," he says, "we've got to live together. You ain't goin' back to Europe and I ain't goin' back to Africa. We got too much invested here!"

HE THROWS AWAY great lines, like his side comment on meeting the huge black man late at night "we're just as afraid of us as anybody!" Or his comment on his recent European trip, "It's nice to go

overseas and be hated solely because you're an American."

But I think that the most effective and deepest bit that he does, something that may very well live with you long after you laugh uneasily at the funnies in it, is the "Arthur Uncle" piece. Cambridge plays a Negro show business star from Before the New Revolution who is allying to his "soul brothers" for his own attitudes.

It is a savage piece on one level and a terribly and deeply understanding insight into the human condition on another level. And as Cambridge delineates how Arthur Uncle rationalizes his own acceptance of a demeaning role, for the money and for the prestige and for the sheer necessity of working, you laugh at first but then you think and the thinking is what is the most valuable.

(BOOK, from page 7) have made the writing of *Invisible Man* (and, I would surmise from the few published excerpts, the novel on which he is currently working as well) quite impossible. It is hard, for example, to see how the beautiful poise of *Invisible Man* could have been achieved by a writer given to the kind of touchiness—no other word will do—Ellison allows himself in his 37-page reply to Irving Howe's essay, "Black Boys and Native Sons."

"Must I be condemned because my sense of Negro life was quite different [from Richard Wright's]?" he wails in response to a critical analysis in which he is generously, though not unreservedly, praised. Howe, while acknowledging the freedom *Invisible Man* "displays from the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country," asserts that there is a special and inescapable pain in the life of a Negro in America. For thus taking seriously what so many Negroes have been telling the world, he is accused by Ellison, and in harsh and insulting terms, of refusing to recognize how rich and varied Negro life in America actually is, because (as Irving Howe evidently needs to be instructed) "it is human life."

To my mind, then, Ellison chose the wrong occasion for delivering himself of an apology and the wrong target for an outburst of temper. Nevertheless, he is certainly right to insist, as he does not only in his reply to Howe but throughout the whole book, on the degree of freedom from the "sociology" of his existence that is possible to the individual Negro—even in Mississippi. "No matter how strictly Negroes are segregated socially and politically, on the level of the imagination their ability to achieve freedom is limited only by their individual aspiration, insight, energy and will." The pride that glows in statements like these gives us a glimpse into the source of Ellison's occasional touchiness: he simply will not permit special allowances to be made for him, no more than he will permit special demands to be made upon him or "sociological" assumptions to be made about him. Nor does it matter in the slightest if the demands, or assumptions are made by Negroes.

Thus, speaking from within an American Negro tradition "which abhors as obscene any trading on one's own anguish for gain or sympathy," he denounces the "easy con-game" that the "stance of 'militancy' has become" for "ambitious, publicity-hungry Negroes," and he contends (as against a

famous early essay by James Baldwin) "that protest is not the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing."

What, then, is his own position? He believes that Negro life offers "as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere," that "American Negro life . . . is, for the Negro who must live it, not only a burden (and not always that) but also a discipline," and that his social responsibility as a novelist is to affirm and commemorate "those human qualities which the American Negro has developed despite and in rejection of the obstacles and meannesses imposed upon us." Repudiating the idea (espoused most prominently by the Negro psychologist Kenneth Clark) that "all Negroes suffer from self-hatred and defensiveness, Ellison writes lovingly of the Negro style, especially in his essays on musicians like Mahalia Jackson, Jimmy Rushing and Charlie Parker. And as a great believer in diversity ("I think that the real death of the United States will come when everyone is just alike"), he wishes to see this style preserved. He knows, of course, that an enormous price has been paid for "the faith, the patience, the humor, the sense of timing, rugged sense of life and the manner of expressing it which all go to define the American Negro." But he is "unwilling to see those values which I would celebrate as existing sheerly through terror," and he thinks that "the sociological conditions which have made for so much misery in Negro life are not necessarily the only factors which make for the values which I feel should endure and shall endure."

Just as there is nothing defensive in Ellison's assertion of the richness and complexity of Negro life (he really does consider it a world like any other), so there is nothing aggressive in his celebration of the special values which that life has bred. He is not saying, as Baldwin and many lesser Negro intellectuals have lately taken to saying, that Negro life is superior to the life of "white America"—that Negroes are, precisely, *alive* at a time when everyone else (poor thin-blooded middle-class creatures) is "dead." Baldwin and the others are, of course, capable of combining such Black Nationalist sentiments with equally passionate declarations to the effect that Negro life is wholly intolerable. But of that kind of thing, too, Ellison will have no part. He takes his pluralism seriously.

And it is pluralism which is finally the issue in any discus-

sion involving the future of Negro culture in America—and, indeed, of American culture as a whole. The vision of a world in which many different groups live together on a footing of legal and social equality, each partaking of a broad general culture and yet maintaining its own distinctive identity: this is one of the noble dreams of the liberal tradition. Yet the hard truth is that very little evidence exists to suggest that such a pluralistic order is possible. Most societies throughout history have simply been unable to suffer the presence of distinctive minority groups among them; and the fate of minorities has generally been to disappear, either through being assimilated into the majority, or through being expelled, or through being murdered. (The ten lost tribes of Israel, for example, were probably subjected to all three techniques.)

This does not, of course, prove that the American experiment in pluralism is necessarily doomed to failure, though I for one remain unconvinced by the case that various sociologists have made to show that it is already succeeding. It may be true that the forces of homogenization at work in America have not yet managed to erase all our differences; the melting pot seems not to have done its job. But it is only 40 years since mass immigration to this country ended and from certain points of view the successes of the melting pot look at least as impressive as its failures appear to be.

Ellison is "unwilling to believe"—he is a stubborn man—that the things he values in the Negro subculture will disappear as Negroes win a greater and greater share of participation in the general society. But as his own essays on jazz and the blues make perfectly clear, the marvelous qualities expressed in this music were developed in direct response to oppression; in some awful sense, we can even say that they were *produced* by oppression, just as was the case with much that is best in Jewish life. The price Jews have paid for acceptance in America—which means, to put no pretty face on it, physical safety first of all—is the surrender of more than many Jews are by now even capable of realizing. I suspect that the Negroes will follow roughly the same pattern and be charged (without anyone being allowed to call attention to the unpleasant fact) roughly the same price. It is a high price: Ellison is undoubtedly right about that. But who is to say that it is higher than the price in suffering and blood that had to be paid for a Levi Yitzchak of Berditshev or a Bessie Smith?

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