

C O M M E N T A R Y

Ossie Davis seamlessly mixed art, politics

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When I first learned that Ossie Davis had died, I thought first of Ruby Dee, his wife. And I also thought about Dick Gregory, Harry Belafonte, Curtis Mayfield, James Baldwin and Paul Robeson. They are all special people. They're special, not because of their professions, but because they were willing to risk their professional success to help people who needed them the most.

Paul Robeson was a quintessential Renaissance man. At Rutgers University, he was twice named to the All-America football team, received the Phi Beta Kappa key and graduated Valedictorian of his class. He was internationally known for his singing and acting. He was a freedom fighter, declaring: "The artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."

Long before there was a Def Comedy Jam, Cedric the Entertainer, Chris Rock, Eddie Murphy or J. Anthony Brown, there was Dick Gregory. He was at the zenith of his career, making \$1 million a year, when he left the stage and headed south to help Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I was a teenager when he came to my hometown, Tuscaloosa, Ala., to help us desegregate the city bus line.

Harry Belafonte was another entertainer

who marched with Dr. King and helped raise millions for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Curtis Mayfield's songs were so pro-Black that many radio stations in the South wouldn't play his music. Still, he urged "we people, who are darker than blue" to "Keep on Pushing."

James Baldwin was always pointing out America's shortcomings in his writings. Like Belafonte and others, he was part of the Selma to Montgomery, Ala., march that led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

But it was Ossie Davis who best merged art with politics. He and Ruby Dee were among the first to defend Robeson when he was falsely accused by Sen. Joe McCarthy of being a communist.

Writing in "With Ossie and Ruby," the couple's autobiography, Davis said: "When Jackie Robinson had gone down to Washington to testify against Paul Robeson, it hurt us deeply. We understood that he did what he thought he had to do. How could he turn against Paul, who had been so instrumental in getting Jackie admitted into the game?"

"And Jackie wasn't the only one. There



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was Langston Hughes, who had to publicly eat his words to square himself with the [McCarthy] House Committee; there was Josh White; and there was Canada Lee, who couldn't find a job anywhere and died of a broken heart. Some of these Black heroes had to publicly attack Paul Robson, or at least swear that Paul had duped them. We

thought about it, the agony and shame of it all..."

Davis would never stoop to such activities. He eulogized Malcolm X when it was unpopular to do so. He also spoke at the 1963 March on Washington and five years later at Dr. King's funeral. The fact that he asked to speak at the funerals of an integrationist and that of a one-time separatist attests to his ability to move easily between both worlds.

With the exceptions of a few artists, such as Belafonte, Dick Gregory and Danny Glover, most of today's athletes and entertainers don't demonstrate the courage and principles that became the hallmark of Ossie Davis.

Today's stars tend to be more interested in landing a contract to promote gym shoes, sodas or burgers than helping their people. In

fact, Michael Jordan was asked why he wasn't more political and he replied, "Republicans buy sneakers, too."

Some are so disconnected from reality that they think they can get elected to public office as Republicans. Basketball great Charles Barkley flirted with the idea of running for governor on the GOP ticket in Alabama before being talked out of it; Lynn Swann, the former Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver, is looking into the possibility of running for governor of Pennsylvania as a Republican. Singer Brian McKnight made a fool of himself when he told Tom Joyner two years ago that he does not vote. Strangely, McKnight cared enough about politics to perform at the Republican National Convention. James Brown admits in his autobiography he campaigned for Richard Nixon at a time that he was unregistered to vote.

Ossie Davis would be a giant under any circumstances. He is an even taller one when compared to the celebrity lightweights who shun civil rights. Like Dallas Cowboys linebacker Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson said about Terry Bradshaw, those airheads couldn't spell cat if you spotted them the "c" and the "a."

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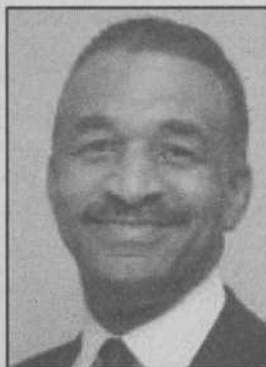
Hey, Black brothers and sisters, can you spare \$5?

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In case you have not heard about the Blackonomics Million Dollar Club (BMDC), let me give you the 411 on this progressive, innovative and committed group of brothers and sisters. From across this country, and even from several other countries, BMDC members have signed up to give a minimum of \$5 each to a cause, institution or organization, just five times per year. This group of individuals has already demonstrated what can be done if more of us work together, thereby minimizing responsibility by spreading it across a broader base of participants. Sounds like collective work and responsibility to me.

ity to me.

The BMDC was established in 2004 with the goal of getting 200,000 persons, via the Internet, to commit to giving \$5 to a selected recipient. Although even at this point in our existence we have not reached our membership goal, those who had signed on insisted we get started making our donations. Thus, we have sent our funds to seven different Black organizations, schools, and/or causes, the latest of which are the A. Phillip Randolph Museum (www.aphiliprandolphmuseum.org) and the



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William Mayo Defense Fund (www.freemayo.com).

New members sign on everyday, and we are grateful for those who love, trust and respect one another enough to participate in such a worthy cause. The BMDC was featured on Black America Web (BAW) in January 2005, which brought in more than 100 new members. That's just a fraction of the millions who read BAW, but a few hundred additional commitments are better than none at all. Our thanks to Walter Higgins of BAW, and a BMDC member, for helping

us spread the word.

One satisfying aspect of working with the BMDC is the vast network of resources within the group. Many of the members offer their expertise to assist with publicity and come up with creative ways of getting the word out and with getting others to join the BMDC.

For example, one of our members told his cousin about our effort. She said, "Wow! This sounds really [great]. It is definitely something I want to be a part of. And I will spread the word. It's too inexpensive not to try and help. This is what Ujamaa, cooperative economics, is all about." By the way, the cousin's name is Regina King, the actress in "Ray," "Enemy of the State," and "Daddy Day Care," to name a few.

Another sister set up her own website for the sole purpose of spreading the word about the BMDC; another member created a flyer that we use to get information out to those who inquire about the BMDC; the Black Data Processors of America wrote an article about the BMDC in their newsletter; a brother in West Palm Beach, Fla., continuously sends out e-mails enlisting new members; a sister, one of this nation's best attorneys and director of an entrepreneurial organization, offers advice and direction on a continuous basis; one brother is soliciting members who do not have access to a computer, personally collecting their donations and sending them in with his; and several Black radio hosts have done shows on the BMDC.

There are many who have stepped up to do a little more to promote the BMDC, and I could not cite every instance, but they already know how much we appreciate them and their willingness to make a small sacrifice for others.

One of our newest members, someone whose books many of you have read, T.J. (See Clingman, Page 14)

La Grande

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however, is not due to the Social Security payroll tax but stems, in great part, from the fact that many current African-American retirees are only the second or third generation away from their enslaved ancestors (who were forbidden to own property or obtain an education that could have improved their economic circumstances)

Furthermore, most African-Americans are only zero to one generation away from de jure segregation that also systematically limited Black's economic and educational opportunities.

The income and wealth gap is complicated by historic marginalization of African-Americans in labor markets where they have been disproportionately unemployed, underemployed and/or segmented into those jobs that do not offer pension benefits.

This results in an overrepresentation of low to moderate income workers and a diminished capacity to accumulate or pass on assets such as equity-rich homes, stocks, land and businesses.

These are the main reasons that African-Americans have yet to accumulate substantial personal wealth that is inheritable across generations.

Because individual (privatized) accounts, unlike Social Security, do nothing to offset periods when individuals make very small or zero contributions to their accounts due to lower earnings or unemployment, the income and unemployment gap would remain and even grow wider if Blacks and Whites were earning the same rate of return.

The inheritance argument is also misleading. Social Security provides benefits for the surviving dependents if a worker passes away in the prime of his or her working years. Because Blacks have lower life expectancies, African-American widowers and young surviving children have a higher reliance on these benefits when compared to Whites. Statistics show that 48 percent of African-American survivors receiving survivor benefits are children.

So, if one doesn't have enough money accrued in his/her individual account how

can they leave an inheritance?

Furthermore, those who would like to leave an inheritance but are reaching the age of retirement would likely be required to use their individual account funds to purchase an annuity with a life insurance feature that upon death could be paid out to survivors. This policy is very expensive and exposes the retiree to having very little money at retirement and his heirs receiving little or next to nothing.

Individual accounts don't address the problem of shorter life expectancy for African-Americans because they include no structural features that make it easier for African-Americans to access retirement benefits.

Finally, don't be bamboozled. The dismantling of Social Security will severely harm the Black community.

Take action, call your U.S. Senators and Congresspersons and tell them to vote against the President's Social Security privatization plan.

Next week: Community Development Block Grant cuts and their impact.