Entertainers Once Boasted Of 'Big B'

CAB CALLOWAY

By RALPH MATTHEWS Sr

Two things help to earn a city the title of a good theatre town and Baltimore long has had both of them.

One is the city's receptivity to the creative arts plus the facilities to display them and the other is the number of performing artists that it contributes to the theatrical profession.

Without the one it is difficult for a community to produce the other. It was no accident therefore that many of the personalities whose names loomed large during the formative years when the race was carving a place for itself on Broadway, in Hollywood and Europe, called Baltimore home.

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MANY FORTUITOUS circumstances contributed to this development.

Many Baltimoreans became great entertainers because they were reared on great entertainment. Baltimore once had one of the greatest areas of entertainment outlets along the Eastern seaboard outside of Manhattan.

Oldtimers will recall when Pennsylvania Avenue was a rialto with theatres forming a ring from North Avenue, starting with the Rainbow Theatre, down past the Regent, the Royal, the Douglass, the Lincoln across Franklin to the Maryland Theatre, the Academy of Music, Ford's, the Gaiety on Baltimore Street; over to the Lyceum into East Baltimore with the Star, all of which were featuring colored entertainers in varying degrees of excellence and interspersed with night clubs and dance halls and other entertainment emporiums.

What did this mean to those who earned their living in the profession? Most of all it meant troupes and acts whipped into shape in New York, Chicago and elsewhere could come into Baltimore and be sure of employment for several weeks without having to invest their earnings in a long train ticket heading elsewhere.

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TO SUPPORT this network of entertainment personalities there was a groundcrew of rooming houses, boarding establishments and general flunkies who actually made their living off the theatre though not in it.

Then of course there was another advantage that Baltimore gave to the theatrical world.

There were the rehearsal halls where actors could exchange scuttlebutt, polish their acts under the helpful eyes of real pros and oldtimers, get the dope on what to put in and take out when moving to various houses to please the idiosyncrasies of various theatre managers from Boston to Florida.

It was worth money to know that certain managers in certain houses made a habit of watching a chorus live during every performance who would line the troupe if one chorus girl missed a cue.

It was good to know that certain Dixie theatres would encourage a little blackjack game or poker back stage just to while away the time and suddenly have a deputy sheriff appear and threaten to lock up the whole cast just before they are ready to leave town.

A stiff penalty exacted by everybody chipping in from their salary would not only permit the troupe to leave, but would give the management back most of the money it had paid out.

All this information was exchanged along with other vital information.

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THERE WAS a class distinction about Baltimore theatres in the old days, as well as a racial distinction, that was rigidly adherred to.

The Rainbow Theatre featured single and double acts as did the Star. The Regent and the Douglass (later the Royal) took these plus the tab shows ranging 50 often splitting the shows from 45 or 20 up to 40 and in two parts playing one act one week and the second half the following week.

CHICK WEBB

EUBIE BLAKE

The Lincoln Theatre down near Biddle Street specialized in broad risque humor and double intendre comedy which was frowned on in the Regent and Douglass which catered to family type audiences.

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MOST OF the shows were booked through the TOBA (Theatrical Owners Booking Association) and it was easy to determine how a troupe or act was improving when they were graduated from one theatre to another.

Some of the top units were institutions and household words at the Regent and Douglass whose annual coming was looked forward to by Baltimoreans from all walks of life.

These included The Whitman Sisters, always classy and elaborately costumed; Irvin C. Miller's Brown Skin Models (the colored version of Ziegfeld Follies), Drake and Walker; Whitney and Tutt's Smarter Set; Tim Moore (who later became famous as TV Andy in Amos and Andy), Chapelle and Stipette, one of the greatest singing combos of all time.

Also, Clarence Muse's Revue (he was the first race star of a full length Hollywood film, "Heart in Dixie"), and a native Baltimorean; Ethel Waters and her Plantation Revue direct from Broadway, and many others like Johnnie Hudgins, the Wah Wha Man, another Baltimorean who became a toast of Paris and London Music Halls with an act he developed in the Regent Theatre.

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THIS WAS all before the era of the Big Band which brought into being Duke Ellington, Don Redmond, Andy Kirk, Jimmie Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Chic Webb both natives of Baltimore, and others.

While all this was going on something was taking place in the colored theatre and lot of it was happening in Baltimore.

Although this was tenatively a jim crow city (unlike Washington where Broadway shows refused to play because colored patrons were not permitted) the lodges and balconies were open to colored.

This seems preposterous in face of the Civil Rights revolution but it was here that Baltimore youngsters got their exposure to top flight Broadway entertainers at the Maryland, Ford's and the Academy of Music which in addition to the great acts of the Kieth - Albee Circuit who are the stars of radio and television today — they also saw all of the great colored Broadway Musicals like "Shuffle Along" with Miller and Lyles; "Blackbirds, with the great Florence Mills; "Chocolate Dandies," with Sissle and Blake; "Brown Buddies," with Bill Robinson and Adelaide Hall; "Rhapsody in Black," with Ethel Waters and Valadia Snow; "Liza," with Gertrude Saunders and Josephine Baker who appeared in a number of shows in Baltimore before she became world famous in Paris, including Irvin C. Miller's "Liza."

Starting as a dancer entertaining between the doubleheaders in Black Sox baseball park where people tossed him money from the stands Earl (Snakehips) Tucker went to New York to become a star in Lew Leslie's Blackbirds.

BILLIE HOLLIDAY

From an editorial desk in the AFRO - AMERICAN, Eva Jessye became the choir director of "Porgy and Bess." After producing a show, "Adam and Eva," written by the writer and Rivers Chambers at the Regent Sheldon B. Hoskins, a dancing teacher of Lafayette Avenue, later became the dance director of Billy Rose's "Carmen Jones."

Also from this show, William Kenney went on to become the lead of the Million Dollar act, the Ink Spots and Chuck Richards, another singer, became the soloist of the famous Mills "Blue Rhythm Band."

* * *

ANOTHER star was Patsy Davis who later became the featured dancer at the Sunset Cafe in Chicago as a partner of Billy Eckstine, featured with Earl Hines and his famous orchestra.

From his post as a supervisor in the public schools, Ulysses Chambers became the music director of "The Green Pastures," which ran for three years on Broadway.

After getting her training as a chorus girl at the Regent and Royal, Selma Sampson went to Broadway to become the first colored lass that Flo Ziegfeld featured in his great musical, "Show Boat."

Already Baltimore had played a role in bringing about the "Negro Renaissance when Eubie Blake left East Baltimore to team up with Noble Sissle and produce, "Shuffle Along," which opened the flood gates for all that followed between World War I and World War II.

I insist that the very atmosphere of Baltimore was a contributing factor and we should not overlook the encouragement given to young performers by men like Llewelyn Wilson, Gough McDaniels, Professor Toomey and Louis Murray, all teachers who made many stars by recognizing talent in the making.

IN RETROSPECT my failure to condemn our jim crowism looks like a terrible price to pay, but I wonder if there had not been the exposure even from what we laughingly called "the crow's nest" if we would have had the inspiration to develop such stars as Cab Calloway, Anne Wiggins Brown, the star of Porgy and Bess, Avon Long, a Sport-Life, a Snakehips Tucker, a Chick Webb whose great band brought Ella Fitzgerald into orbit, or a Billie Holiday and a Bill Kenny who led the Ink Spots to a million dollar act.

Where would they have envisioned the opportunities that were open to them and guessed the heights to which they could climb had they not all grown up in this great reservoir of talent and accomplishment?

JOHNNY HUDGINS

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Left Bank Jazz Society buffs giving city 'cool' image

By FRANK HUNT

Blind jazz virtuoso Roland Kirk flung wide his arms as if to embrace the entire city and told a foot-stomping, whistling audience of over 500 persons:

"I'm going back to New York and tell them Baltimore is cool!"

This is perhaps the highest tribute a jazz artist can pay to a responsive city. Certainly it was the goal toward which the sponsors of the Sunday afternoon concerts had labored.

Kirk's reaction highlighted a growing recognition that jazz is — finally — being reclaimed by the city which weaned such jazz greats as Billie Holliday, Chick Webb, Art Blakely, and more recently, John Kirby and Ethel Ennis.

While the jazz revival is less dramatic than the city's downtown redevelopment, it is every bit as important to the music world, and is costing a great deal less.

Perpetrators of the jazz renaissance is the Left Bank Jazz Society (LBJS), a non-profit organization of some 60 jazz buffs whose sole aim is keeping this uniquely American musical phenomenon on the Baltimore scene.

* * *

THE GROUP has been acclaimed by national jazz magazines as a maker of music history, and the bulwark of jazz on the East Coast.

Its efforts have been mentioned on jazz broadcasts across the nation, and its phone number is in the private notebooks of the country's top jazz artists.

Art Farmer, famed trumpeter, in a recent interview in Downbeat Magazine, praised LBJS, and suggested that other cities encourage similar groups to promote its cultural image.

* * *

THE CLUB was organized in early 1964 by a group of 12 jazz bugs who were concerned by the lack of live jazz in the city.

They took their name from the South Baltimore nightclub where they held their first meeting.

LBJS is best known for its Sunday afternoon concerts, between 4 and 8 p.m. in the upper room of the Madison Club at Madison and Chester Sts. in East Baltimore.

The list of artists whose horns and strings have drawn crowds at the Madison room included the Jazz Crusaders, the Blue Mitchell - Junior Cook Quintet, the Charles Lloyd Quartet, Dizzy Gillespie, the Shirley Horen Trio, the Tony Scott Quintet, and others.

* * *

MOST OF THE musicians, contacted by the in-group engagements, play for little more than travel expenses, and this is reflected in the cut-rate admission fee.

The artists share and appreciate the organization's concern for the future of jazz in Baltimore.

Most will admit that the plight of jazz is dim all over, and are willing to encourage anybody who wants to do a little missionary work in this area.

The Sunday afternoon concerts also serve as a forum for local jazz talent.

Pianist Yusef Salim, tenorman Dave Hubbard, altoist Jackie Blake, pianist Donald Criss, and reedman Ricky Bauer have all played to encouraging audiences in the Madison Room.

The success of the group, whose members range from blue collar workers and union officials, to teachers, social workers, and college students, can be measured by growth of clubs which now offer jazz on a regular basis.

LBJS has also encouraged the development of another jazz society, the Jazz Society of Performing Artists, which, unlike the former group, is composed of mostly local artists.

The new group, organized in March, schedules its offerings every Monday night at Forest Manor, 3800 block Forest Ave.

* * *

BENNY KEARSE, president and a co-founder of the group, believes that it is succeeding because it fills a definite need.

When LBJS first began there were no high clubs which offered jazz regularly, he pointed out.

"For a city of this size it was unflattering," he added.

For the Arena Players it has been 'a long, hard, rewarding, journey'

Thirteen years ago the line which divides the city into two color-tinted worlds, amateur theatre-in-the flesh was but a dream in the fertile brain of a public school teacher.

In the intervening decade plus three, the rigidity of the demarcation line — to the welcome relief of most Baltimoreans — has relaxed.

In that span of time, too, the dream wich dominated the being of Samuel Wilson has become a reality in the person of the Arena Players.

Despite apparent unsurmountable handicaps, the Arena Players — displaying the epitome of the "never say die" spirit — have won warm acceptance from patrons of the arts particularly and the community in general.

Five times each season a cross section of Baltimore troops to 406 Orchard St. — Arena Playhouse — to witness and enjoy professionally-staged plays authored by some of the nation's most prolific playwrights.

* * *

CURRENTLY, Mr. Wilson and company are contemplating—or actually planning — a drive to locate in a new home.

The where and when are not so definite, but they are still planning.

This touch of uncertainty, however, should not be misinterpreted. In their 13-year operation, certainty has not been among Arena Players chief forte.

By the same token the absence of some has not been a crutch to carry postponement and delay.

One of the strongest virtues of the actresses and actors by night and hard working job holders by day is raw determination.

In their 'lean years' — not in the sense the term is commonly used — Arena Players, dedicated to the proposition that the show must go on, have lugged scenery, props, and technical equipment from one house to another for storage in the absence of a permanent home.

During an AFRO interview four years ago, Mr. Wilson said the diversified ban of lovers of the exciting art form took on the appearance of a Gypsy caravan as they bounced from place to place in search of appropriate facilities to stage plays for "free."

* * *

ONE OF the oddities of this group is the fact that it has given purpose to an otherwise light-hearted cliche.

"This is a hone-profit business," the wisecrack goes, adding flippantly, "it wasn't meant to be but that's the way it turned out."

Arena Players never intended to make money, declares Mr. Wilson.

It's no secret that no other group in the history of theatre has been more faithful to a pledge.

Their sole and satisfactory reward,' experiences have taught us, is to 'shine' in the floodlights while emoting, radiating, and projecting in the finest tradition of the legitimate theatre.

Testimony to support the belief that the theatre generally — which has been a pioneer in basing acceptance on ability alone — is color-blind is found in the fact that many past and current members of the Arena Players are frequently called upon to perform in other amteur, collegiate, and even professional drama productions.

* * *

Looking back recently to their Gypsy-like roaming which saw them using the Coppin State College gym, YMCA, and St. Mary's Hall as staging areas, Mr. Wilson reminisced:

"It's been a long, hard, but rewarding journey."

There is no area for disagreement and Arena Players' partisans are glad there isn't because they have become as much a part of Baltimore as crab cakes and white steps.

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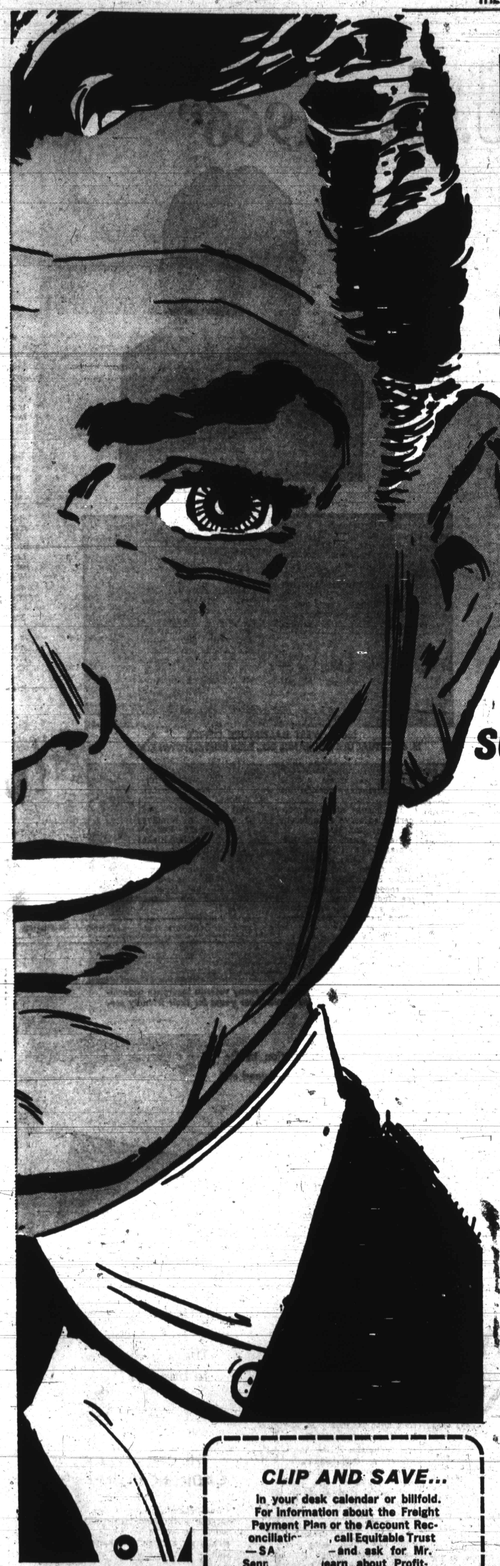

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