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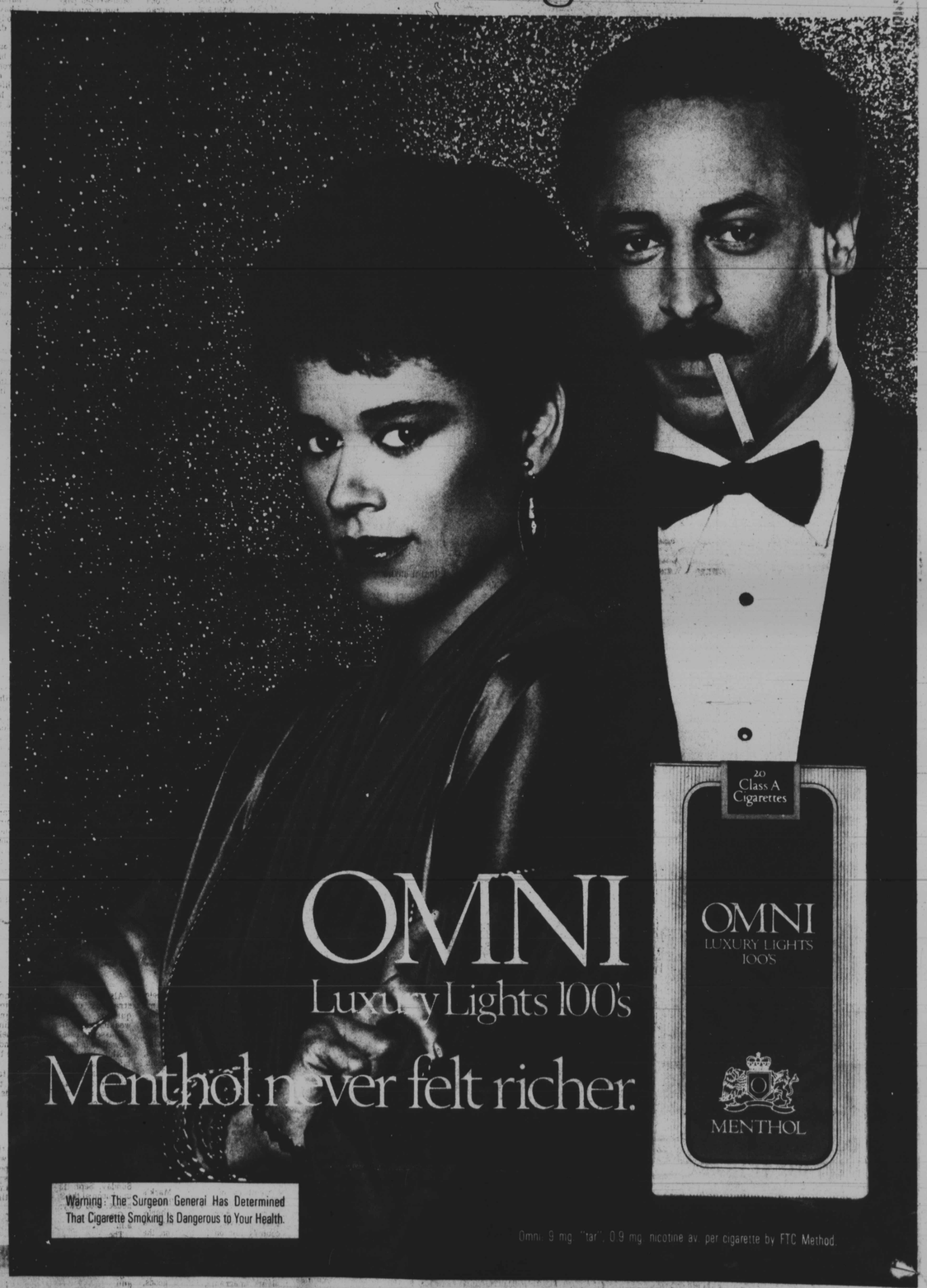

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THE LIVING CHURCH

'The Wizard of Bars': From whiskey to God

Soon-to-be released novel chronicles life of alcoholic

By Sue Williams
AFRO Staff Writer

Samuel Robinson will tell you, quite frankly, that he was "the lowest kind of alcoholic."

From 1955 until 1970, Robinson was little more than a street bum, wearing clothes for years at a time, rarely bathing, wandering in and out of bars and churches, seeking to find the one balm that would heal his soul.

Dubbed "the wizard of bars" by his friends on the streets, because, as he puts it, he was in and out of so many of them, Robinson skirted death and even welcomed the thought of it. He was sick, he knew, but he could not find the cure, as desperately as he wanted to.

He lived like little more than an animal until Christmas Day, 1970. On Christmas Eve of that year, he recalled, his children looked at him as if he were a stranger.

He left them at their mother's house and went home, determined to drink himself, one more time, into oblivion. But as he puts it, a miracle happened.

"The liquor...didn't do what it normally did," he recalled, his eyes clouding. "There was this feeling, just a feeling, I can't explain how it felt..."

At this point, Robinson's voice trailed off as he held his eyes trying to stop the tears.

"It was God," he said quietly "It was God...and I said to myself, 'I got it this time.'" The man who had made a name for himself among all the street folks of the city got up and threw away all his liquor, and hasn't taken a drink since.

He has put all of his experiences down in a book, "hopefully to help somebody," chronicling his life from 1955 to 1970.

The Wizard of Bars, published by Holloway House Publishing Co. and due for release next month, is his story. It was not something he wanted to do, he says. He was compelled to write it.

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Robinson says he came from a heavy drinking family from South Baltimore.

From as early as he could remember, his family, especially his mother, battled with the bottle, never winning.

By the time he was 15, young Robinson, once a straight A student at Mergenthaler High School, was on his way down the same road.

"Drinking was it," he said. "It was the way you showed your manhood." With the absence of parental guidance, and a need to feel included by his peers, Robinson slowly began to ease his way from one way of existence to another.

He dropped out of high school and began to concentrate more on his drinking habit, taking it with him into his marriage. It was when his marriage broke up in 1955, because of his drinking, that Robinson's journey into the deep really began.

Feeling alone, he roamed the streets, drinking all the while. He says he once wore two pairs of pants for more than a year. He seldom bathed. He would end up in mental institutions for rehabilitation, only to be released to the same routine.

> "When I got back from the farm, the manure was so thick I scraped it off with a razor..."

He says he was beaten, stabbed, thrown out of a window, hit by a bus, and shot. The more he slipped away from reality, the more he hated himself (I once grew a beard because I couldn't stand to look at myself," he says.).

His life was a series of images and impressions, a monotonous search for an answer to a problem of doing everything in excess to the destruction of himself. No answers, not even from the church, were there.

In February, 1970 he took a job at a mushroom farm in Cockeysville, Md., to make a little money to support his habit.

For 20 days, he stood in a damp, cold, unheated building turning mushrooms over in horse manure—for $1 a day. He and the other workers, all of them from the streets, had no bathrooms (we used buckets, he says) were not allowed to bathe, and ate very poorly.

When he returned to Baltimore. able to scrape the inch-thick manure off his body with a razor. he looked at himself in a downtown store window and grimaced. The image was so shocking he drank more than he had in a while.

But a change had begun to happen.

During his years as an alcoholic, Robinson recalled a strange closeness to God. He had questions he wanted answered, and only the church seemed to have the way.

To his painful discovery, the churches did not want him. He was groping for the only soul medicine he knew of, and the administers of the balm were too busy, or too afraid. Most times, he was ejected from the church premises. Only once, he remembered, did members of one of Father Divine's churches grab hold of him and made him sit and listen to what was going on.

"They told me I was going to stay and learn something," he said.

But it was God, he insists, that saved him.

"That's (religion) the way out," he said flatly. "There's a page in my book where I cursed God out . . . but I'm convinced that's what He wanted me to do."

"God wants us to use Him the way we can . . . at our own levels. I knew He was there, but He wasn't coming fast enough for me. So I hit him with the big request."

Sounding like a learned theologian, Robinson explained how he came to realize that "God wants us to ask for the big things."

"He gave us enough equipment to handle the little things. You have to believe in God for what He is. If you don't have that spiritual thing in you . . . you won't make it."

God, over Alcoholics Anonymous and so-called conventional treatments, pulled Samuel Robinson from the bars and the gutters into this world again. And he is not ashamed to tell it.

There are times, Robinson says, that he cannot read the manuscript of **The Wizard of Bars**. It hurts too much.

"I can't believe . . . I did some of those things," he says slowly, bowing his head, holding the hand-written pages in his hands.

"But as much as it hurts, I have to tell it. It might help somebody, and that's what I want to do. That's what I have to do."

The 41-year-old father of four says he is grateful now for his experiences. He shys away from blaming any person or set of circumstances for his past life. What is important is that he survived, and he wants others to be as lucky.

He concentrates now on writing and his art work, professing a deep resentment to the depiction of Jesus as a straight-haired, pointed nose white man, "especially when He came out of Africa."

He is also working on two more books the thoughts keep coming...they have to come.

But in the midst of the thoughts is a new Samuel Robinson, a man who now says he can look in the mirror and like what he sees. ("I can kiss myself now," he says.) When his book, **The Wizard of Bars** comes out in October, he will be watching, not for big sales, but for changed lives.

"It's the only way...the whole thing makes any sense." he says.

Editor's note:

Readers interested in obtaining copies of **The Wizard of Bars** are urged to watch their bookstores in mid-October, or check with the **AFRO** for purchasing information.

Revivals herald hope for better times

Trinity Baptist members canvass neighborhoods

The Rev. Isaiah Paul, pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Akron, Ohio, will be guest preacher for the annual fall revival of Trinity Baptist Church, Sept. 21-25.

The revival, under the theme, "In one Accord with Chrust and the Church", will be held nightly at Trinity, Druid Hill Avenue and McMechen Street, at 7:30 p.m.

Rev. Paul is a current member of the Board of Education and Publication of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and was formerly the assistant pastor of Trinity Baptist here in Baltimore before accepting the pastorate of the Akron church.

According to the pastor of Trinity, the Rev. William Calhoun, special efforts are being made to bring more people to the revival this year.

Rev. Calhoun said the Telephone and Transportation Committees of the church have gathered to contact and bring members to the services who otherwise would not be able to attend.

The Rev. Isaiah Paul

Letters, he said, have been sent to the total membership, and the "immediate Upton community will be canvassed within a three-block radius, inviting the neighbors."

Rev. Calhoun also said prayer groups have been established throughout the city, following the "Cottage Prayer Meetings" tradition of the old south.

"It (the prayer groups) has already created a new spirit within the church," said Rev. Calhoun.

Music for the revival will be provided by the Trinity Baptist Combined Choir, under the direction of William Syndor, the church's minister of music.

"This revival," said Rev. Calhoun, "promises to be one of the more successful at Trinity."

A service of baptism will be held the final evening of the week-long services, Sept. 25.

For more information, call 728-9380.

Allen AME youth plan city-wide services

There is a pervading feeling at the Allen AME church right now that if anybody can reach today's troubled youth—it is other youth.

Rallying behind the belief the youth of Allen are planning a city-wide youth revival next week, Sept. 16 through the 18 under the theme, "Youth Together Praising His Name."

A young revivalist preacher, the Rev. Louis Washington of Elkton, Maryland on the Eastern Shore, will be guest preacher, and will bring the Word of God to combat the problems facing youth today.

The Rev. Marie Braxton, wife of the Rev. Ronald Braxton, pastor of Allen, explained that the youth decided themselves to undertake the work involved for pulling youth from all churches together to try to bring souls to Christ because they sensed a need.

Rev. Braxton said that 15 choirs from various churches have committed their messages of salvation through song, and youth groups from other churches will participate and conduct different parts of the services as well.

But even now, with the revival looming one week into the future, more youth are being sought to participate.

There is a saying out today, said Rev. Braxton, that our youth are the leaders of tomorrow.

"I don't think that way. I think our youth are the leaders of today. They're role models, and they, being in the Lord, have a big responsibility to show that leadership wherever they are."

Rev. Braxton and her husband say the revival is a back to school revival, something, perhaps the only thing, that will pull teachers, parents, but most of all students through the coming school year.

My husband saw a billboard not long ago that advertised a back to school disco. The event was supposed to be celebrating going back to school with disco dancing.

But the Braxtons said that celebration should and must come from a different source.

These kids have to know," she said, that only the goodness of the Lord will get them through this year, help them get those grades and solve the situations they'll encounter.

Rev. Braxton maintains that it is very hard for a young person to be a practicing Christian while in school. Peer pressure presents the dilemma of what to say, how to proclaim Jesus when it seems that doing so will mean certain ostracism.

The problem of feeling like an outcast is real. It is very hard for them (the youth) to be what they consider too religious.

But, she said, there is a feeling coming from the youth themselves that the Word of God must somehow come through, despite the consequences, real or imagined.

The conflict at once deepens and becomes less severe as the youth struggle to decide how to handle what they know they have to do.

Rev. Braxton believes that this youth revival is an outpouring of that basic conflict, and believes that through deeper study of the Word and deep worship experiences, such as will be felt at the revival, will bring the problem to the surface and give the courage for them to practice the obvious solution.

"The more they study the Word the more they'll live the Word, she said, and when that happens, things will begin to change."

The youth still want more churches to respond. They want response in the form of choirs, worship leaders, or old-fashioned evangelists who won't be shy about approaching schoolmates and inviting them to come.

What they want, in a word, is a victory for the Lord.

For information on how to participate, call the church office at 728-9263.

Bethel AME Church plans city-wide conference

A four-day teaching conference on how to love as Christians will be held at the Bethel AME Church Dec. 17-20.

"Unshackled! My Spirit Set Free, Part II: Tell Them I Love Them" is an extension of a similar conference held last year at the church, which concentrated on application of the Scriptures to show people in the Christian church the basic love that is available to them through Christ.

According to a key organizer of the city-wide conference, people in general have the feeling that they are not loved, and that, she says, leads to big problems.

"So many of us don't feel loved," explained Juretha Maiden, president of the Evangelism Commission at Bethel, "but we don't realize we have the most powerful lover of all—Jesus Christ."

Maiden said the conference, which will include preaching as well as workshops, will help those "who thought they understood what love is all about" really to understand.

"Part of being able to love is being able to forgive," said Maiden. "Before the conference in December comes, we'll have a workshop on forgiveness."

The "Unshackled" seminar is a seed of what Bethel is trying to do in increasing its education curriculum.

Leaders of the church, under the direction of the Rev. Dr. John R. Bryant as well as the president of the Christian Education Committee, are trying to develop an organized intensive Christian education program that will teach Christians how to be Christians.

"It is not enough," offered one member of the Christian Education Committee, "to come to church. You have to first be taught how to do the things Jesus taught, and then you have to develop the discipline to practice them."

Underlying all Christian themes is the necessity of love, says Maiden, but inless people are coached on how to love, they will have problems.

The Rev. Joseph Clemmons, pastor of the Miracle Temple Church of God in Christ will be a workshop teacher at the "Unshackled" seminar, as well as guest preacher.

The seminar, sponsored by the Stewards of Bethel and co-sponsored by the Christian Education Committee, the Committee on Evangelism, class leaders and new members, will require a $5 registration fee.

More information may be had by calling 523-4273, Mondays through Fridays.

Metro Church Briefs

St. Mary's Seminary and University will sponsor the President's Annual Convocation at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 15, at St. Mary's, 5400 Roland Ave.

The Rev. Robert Leavitt, S.S., president rector of St. Mary's, will give the convocation address, entitle, "Reflections on Theology and Society."

The President's Convocation is held at the beginning of each academic year to celebrate the religious and educational mission of St. Mary's.

The seminary, the first one established in this country, was founded in 1791.

The convocation expresses St. Mary's belief that the study of theology is a humane discipline and makes its own contributions to the personal and cultural enrichment of the community.

Archbishop William D. Borders, chancellor of the university, will preside at the convocation.

The public is invited to attend.

The annual fall fair and flea market of the Episcopal Church of Christ the King will be held Saturday, Sept. 26, from 10 a.m. unti. 4 p.m. on the church grounds at Security Blvd. near Rolling Road.

Featured this year will be home grown produce, games, food, clothing, books and other items.

Rain date is October 3.

The Chancel Choir of Waters AME Church, 417 N. Aisquith St., will present the Sanctuary Choir of Harlem Park Community Baptist Church in recital on Sunday, Sept. 13, at 4 p.m.

Donations to the concert are $1.

Members of the St. Mark's United Methodist Church, Garrison Ave. and Liberty Heights Ave., will sponsor a country fair on Sept. 12 on the church grounds from 12 noon until 7 p.m.

Included will be exhibits featuring household appliances, plants, macrame, baked goods, and tupperware.

Also included will be demonstrations covering nutrition, quilting, cake decorating, weaving, and flower arranging.

Classes in exercise will be held, as well as in candy-making, and a clothing boutique, will feature the latest fashions and jewelry.

Admission to the country fair will be $1. Participants in the exercise class will be requireds to pay 50 cents, and $1.50 will be charged for those taking the candy class.

The Sunday School of the Baltimore Ethical Society will hold an open house for prospective students and their parents on Sunday, Sept. 13, from 11 a.m. until noon at the Society's meeting house, 3800 Gwynn Oak Ave.

Classes begin Sept. 20 at 10:30 a.m.

The Ethical Society Sunday School stresses moral development and respect for differences. Children from pre-school through high school of all racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds are welcome.

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