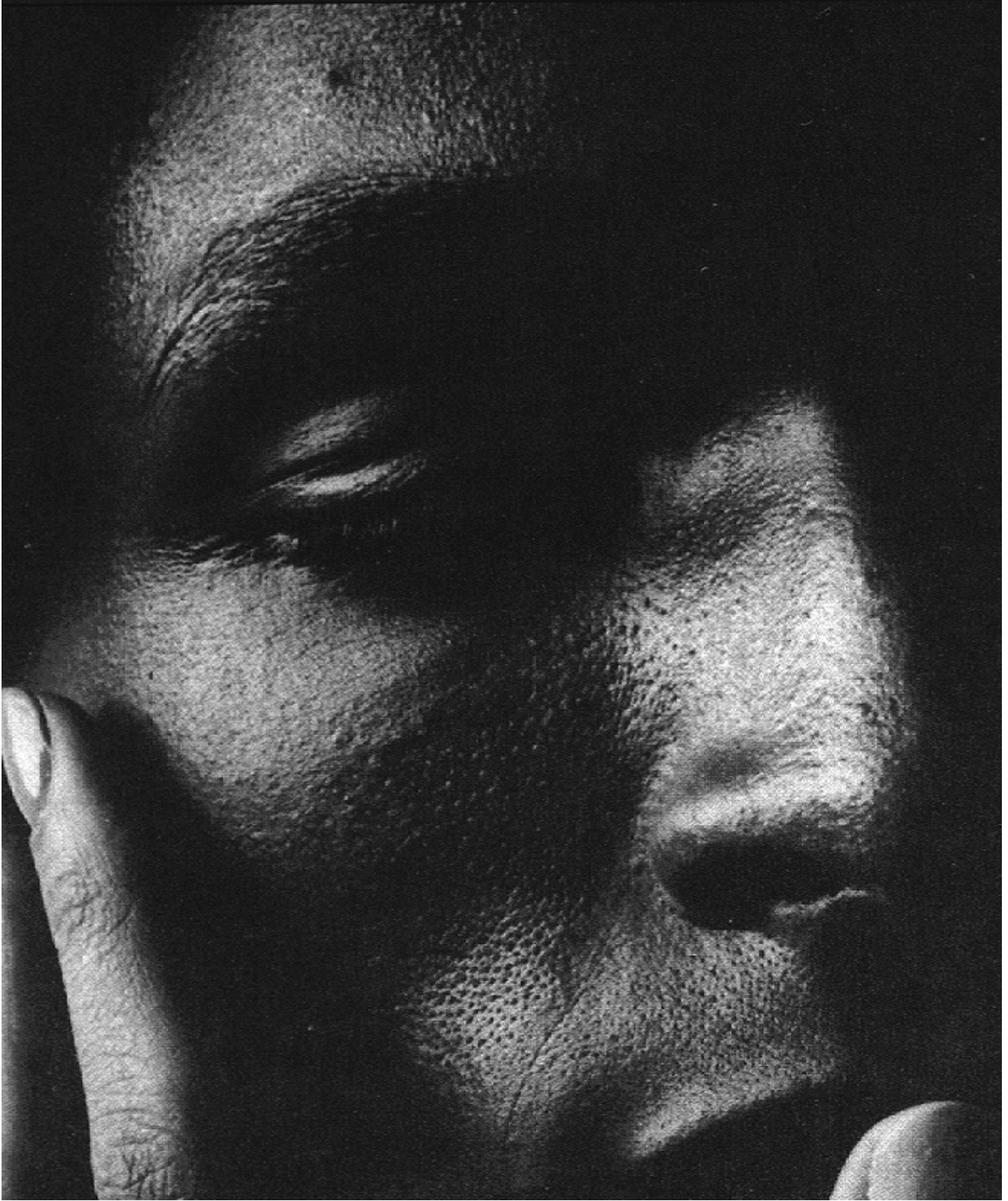


mosaic



eric jerome dickey / preview issue! / david haynes

Hi

If you are reading this then you are one of the lucky few to receive the first issue (collectors copy) of Mosaic Magazine. Mosaic Magazine is a new literary quarterly magazine. Those of you familiar with my website, Mosaicbooks.com, already know that I am dedicated to Black literature. With Mosaic Magazine I plan to take it one step further.

We plan to offer the same previews as we do on the website but in addition we'll have reviews, interviews, advice to writers, original short stories, poetry, and a best-sellers lists supplied by four different booksellers every quarter so you can get the true essence of what people of color are reading.

There's just two of us running the magazine at present so please be patient. If Mosaic isn't in your favorite bookstore then request it!

Look for the next issue in May. Hopefully by then we will have a little color. :)

Ron Kavanaugh Jackie Jacob
Publisher Publisher
www.mosaicbooks.com

Introducing two exciting new novelists

Teresa McClain-Watson

Plenty Good Room

When 13-year-old Bay Dawson's best friend and older brother are both shot to death in Harlem, his mother decides to send him away from the dangers of the big city. She packs him off to Jacksonville, Florida to live with the father he has never known—a well-to-do black slumlord with a penchant for easy women, expensive

cars, and Frank Sinatra tunes. *Plenty Good Room* is the gripping story of Bay's attempts to fit into his new life.

"Told in Bay's shaky, adolescent voice, McClain-Watson's narrative gets into the heart of a teenager desperate to know his father and win his affection—a desire doomed, in this case, from the start.... McClain-Watson believably, touchingly captures Bay's wide-eyed transition from poverty to 'living large,' and his final decision to give up a losing battle for love and leave his father's ostensibly good life behind." — *Publishers Weekly*

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Nancy Rawles

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"Set in South Central Los Angeles in 1978, Rawles's bittersweet debut poignantly details a young woman's coming of age in a lovable but overbearing family... With straightforward yet lyrical prose, Rawles meanders deftly through the swampy Broussard past, where dead relatives and Creole folklore mix equally with racial prejudice and family pride... Through Grace's struggle to understand herself and her family, Rawles tells a solid, candidly funny and touching story that marks the emergence of a talented new novelist." — *Publishers Weekly*

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PREVIEW ISSUE

4. Excerpts from the book Men We Cherish - Kiini Salaam and Brooke Stephens **8.** Eric Jerome Dickey interviewed by Pat Houser **10.** Bestsellers list / Preview list **12.** Louisiana's Black Writers by Rosa Lili **13.** Excerpt from the book All American Dream Dolls by David Haynes **14.** The Literary Life by Mo Fleming

Sneak Peaks: Caribe by Evangeline Blanco, A Stranger In My Bed by Kevin Luttery, Blue by Eric Nisenson,

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Preview Issue

Volumn 1 No.1 / Feb 1998

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The Truth Speaks Volumns

Men We Cherish:

African American Women Praise te Men In Their Lives

Edited by Brooke Stephens

If you believe what you see on the news everyday, a book like this should not exist. The figures we are oft quoted are staggering but what we aren't told is even more wonderful.

There should be no black men worth writing about. Regardless of all the black men you might know who are in the penal system, millions are not. This book speaks to them. Each story represents the thousands of black men who don't have the slightest idea what the penal system is all about on an intimate level.

Brooke Stephens has compiled a book a 34 stories, written by 34 women from diverse backgrounds. Bessie and Sadie Delany, Bebe Moore Campbell, Charlene Huner-Gault, Doris Jean Austin are just a few of the women who contribute their talents.

They write stories not of the men who are paraded over and over on the evening news but stories of men who shape lives. Fathers, sons, uncles... Some short some long all powerful an emotionally heartfelt. Brooke Stephens has done a great justice to the human race. The following stories are just a sample of what awaits in this very necessary literary work.

Brothers Are...

By Kiini Ibura Ya Salaam

Growing up in an Africa-centered, revolution-based, ancestor-focused household can do a number on you. Being the child of two community leaders can make you a little strange. It can make you think crazy, convince you the world is yours. It can make you think you can fly. For years I thought my brothers feared the wings our parents nurtured in us. Hadn't they stayed home while my sisters and I flew around the globe? Hadn't they shunned college for the work world and everyday survival? Hadn't they abandoned any interest in the arts or any personal pursuit of a passion in life? Hadn't they chosen partners and confined themselves to family at ridiculously young ages? Ain't they still in New Orleans?

My siblings and I always joke that we were the ultimate experiment in parenting. No TV, no sugar, no perms, no candy, no pop music, no meat, no white people, no processed food, down with America, up with Afrika, the revolution is here and we are living it. Our parents and their peers achieved total isolation from the larger society by establishing an organization called Ahidiana. Ahidiana created a private school, which taught awareness, history, and self-sufficiency to Black children in the community. The land on which the school stood was six blocks from our house. During our formative years, my brothers, sisters,

cousins, and friends socialized at school, at Kwanzaa events, at political and social events, and at each other's homes, which were all in the same impoverished New Orleans ghetto. A network of like-minded adults sheltered us and closely monitored our isolation.

If my younger brother Tuta was passionate about anything, it was about being average. He didn't want to stand out among the other young men in the ninth ward. He let his pants sag and dreamed of one day driving a huge, gas-guzzling player's hooptie. When he was old enough to make his own choices, he left juice behind in favor of all drinks carbonated, left vegetables behind in favor of all foods packaged. In terms of musical taste, Tuta defiantly refused to follow in our father's footsteps. Instead of collecting a wide range of music, Tuta committed himself to gangsta posturing early on. If it wasn't bass, he wasn't having it. If there were no curse words embedded in the lyrics, the music was too soft. In his refusal to assert his uniqueness, he regularly allowed mouthful for anyone to pronounce, but "Tuta," the shortened version of his names, was by no means difficult.

My older brother Mtume seemed to be chasing the Black Republican image. He had a dizzying array of thoughts and ideas that supported his objections to our Black-only lifestyle. Mtume's strong work ethic allowed him to

[The seriousness of our upbringing influenced them to echew dating and womanizing and to make important love selections, marrying and settling down at early ages.]

surround himself with the material objects that made his life comfortable. During childhood, his room was a maze of comic books and records. A constant philosopher, Mtume always had the blueprint for everything. Well-groomed, intelligent, self-sufficient, and conservative, his solution to life seemed to be to discreetly and quietly collect the kudos he needed to get where he wanted to go. His wrestling with normality seemed to happen within, whereas Tuta's seemed to happen in his outside world.

However they chose to integrate their renegade upbringing into the mainstream world, both my brothers

followed eerily similar paths to similar ends. Because of Ahidiana's powerful educational success, Tuta was three years ahead of his classmates, and Mtume was two years ahead of his. We were all painfully conscious of their relentless intelligence, yet they refused to display it in school. Bored beyond belief both preferred to belittle the school system rather than participate in it. It seemed the punishments my parents devised for bad grades were made for my brothers. Every time report cards arrived, my brothers received some new punishment for the oft-recurring Cs, Ds, and Fs.

Summer punishments eventually earned laughter from my brothers as they expressed nothing but disdain for their education. Tuta and Mtume's classroom mischief exasperated their teachers, who always described them as intelligent, charming students who were not working up to their full potential. Despite dismal grades, Tuta and Mtume constantly scored remarkably high on standardized exams. A testament to the control my brothers exerted on their lives was the sudden turnaround in their grades as soon as they perceived high marks to be pertinent to their lives. This sudden improvement in grades occurred during their last two years of high school, allowing both to gain entrance into good colleges, from which both dropped out.

Mtume left Loyola University in New Orleans after his first semester. Tuta returned home from Georgia Institute of Technology after his fifth trimester. Characteristically, Mtume's flight from college was relatively quiet. He had a good job at Tower Records, where he was pursuing a career in the music industry. To outward appearances at least, Mtume was leaving school to pursue other interests. Before attending Georgia Tech, Tuta had proudly proclaimed he was pursuing a career in engineering for the paycheck that would undoubtedly be attached. It was my uncle's contention that Tuta wouldn't be able to build his life on the pursuit of money because he wasn't raised to be a slave to money. Tuta, in his obstinacy and self-assurance, insisted he could.

After enduring semesters of homesickness and frustration at his \$10-per-hour engineering internship, Tuta decided it just wasn't worth it. Never one to mince words, Tuta simply stated that he was "tired of working with white people" and that he was coming home. Tuta communicated his decision at the Kwanzaa celebrations.

All five of us Salaam siblings showed constant reluctance and embarrassment in the face of our annual Kwanzaa gatherings. When we were younger, our discomfort was expressed with giggles and mutual jokes. As he got older, Mtume began to make himself unavailable on those mornings during which we had to light the Kwanzaa candles. Eventually he moved out, assuring his freedom from such rituals. Tuta, on the other hand, was too young to leave, and so came slouching. He sat when everyone else was standing and mumbled when he was supposed to read.

[...so tickled were we at the prospect of a white person coming to our poverty-ridden neighborhood.]

On the morning of Tuta's announcement, just he, my mother, and I were in the house. He showed uncharacteristic participation in the entire ritual, even volunteering to light the candles. When we were discussing what self-determination meant to us, for it was Kujichagulia, the second day of Kwanzaa, Tuta explained the importance of determining his own life and ended his discussion with "and so I've decided not to go back to school next semester.

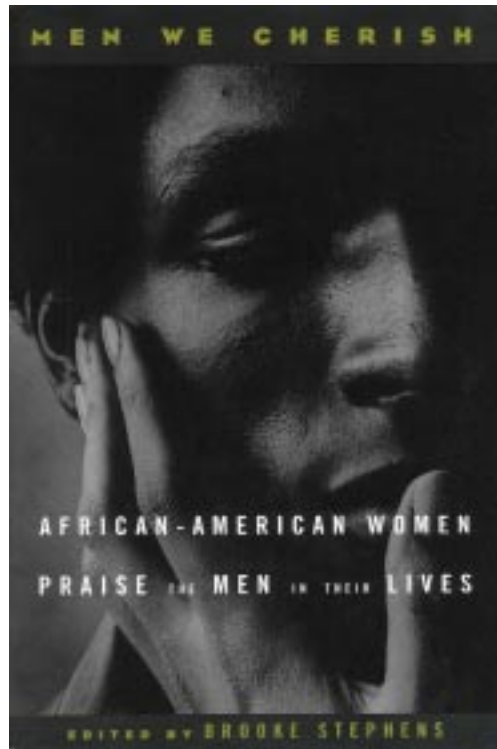
My jaw dropped open.

His respect for my mother was clear. He wished not to hurt her but to make her understand his motives in her own terms. He used the self-governing principles we had been taught to explain his dissent from the preconceived track. His loyalty to his upbringing was not immediately clear to us.

There were many bitter comments and much confusion. Many family members

clearly felt he was ruining his life. What kind of job could he get without a college degree? Eventually, though, his decision became a source of comfort for me. It proved his mind had been open during his formative years. It was evidence that he had soaked up the same fierce, uncompromising training my sisters and I were so proud of. His decision showed strength of character, as he threw off the role everyone had placed on his shoulders and followed his own plans.

Kwanzaa is not something that will ever be celebrated in either of my brothers' homes. They have an inexplicable

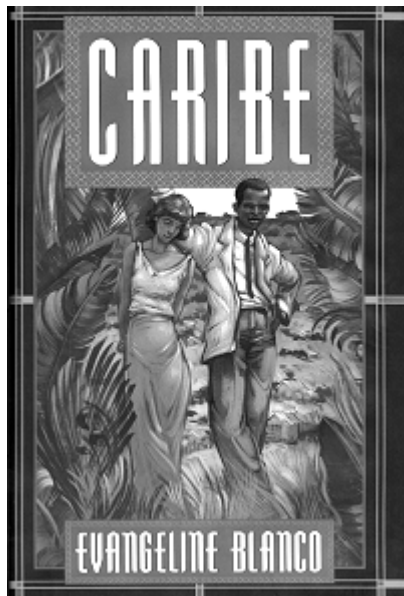


sneak peak

Caribe

Evangeline Blanco

Doubleday



Set against the lush and magical backdrop of Puerto Rico, Evangeline Blanco's stunning debut novel, *CARIBE*, begins a the turn of the last century, when this tiny island-prized for its rich resources and mystical beauty-is torn apart by mighty colonial powers. Divided along racial lines as well, Puerto Rico's "white" Spanish population constantly seeks to oppress the island's many black inhabitants.

With the poetry of Martin Espada, the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the storytelling power of Rosario Fent, Evangeline Blanco spins a lush and evocative tale of love, intrigue, and political upheaval. Interlaced with folktales about a latino "Simple Simon's called "Juan Bobo," *CARIBE* unfolds across a hundred years of Puerto Rico's complex racial and political history. This meticulously researched but simply told novel weaves legend, fable, and history into a chronicle of three families struggling to survive in a land at odds with its own cultural origins.

distaste for the conventions of the lifestyle that reared them. I remember Mtume haughtily proclaiming "there's more to life than not eating hamburgers" when I expressed surprise at his choice of meat from a dinner menu. Even as a high school student he had rejected the constrictions of our staunch pro-Black, vegetarian lifestyle. Before he developed his pro-human perspective, he befriended a white person on a deeper level than any of us ever had. He had that friend come to our house in the ghetto to spend the weekend. My little sister and I were seized by a savage attack of the giggles, so tickled were we at the prospect of a white person coming to our poverty-ridden neighborhood. Brother had to keep his friend outside upon arrival, throwing a football around, while my mother quieted us down. Now Mtume has fully developed his humanist theories and tenets. Those beliefs cause him to reject one of my projects, an independent magazine called *Red Clay Magazine*, as too Black and lacking in class consciousness. When we are pressed in discussion, though, Mtume and I find we share more theoretical common ground than it appears.

Understanding our common ground has helped me grasp fundamental fact of my brothers' resistance. Where their desires and actions seemed the very antithesis of the values my parents taught us, they have dutifully absorbed the principles of respect, self-discipline, and independence. What they have rejected is the Afrocentric, vegetarian wrapping in which the principles were delivered. They peeled away at the African print that covered our upbringing and swallowed the essence of our lessons life-giving vitamin C. It is this essence that informs their lives today.

The seriousness of our upbringing influenced them to echew dating and womanizing and to

make important love selections, marrying and settling down at early ages. Mtume Ya Salaam, which means "prophet of peace", is a record representative for Warner Brothers and Atlantic. At twenty-five years old, he has been happily married for three years. Our upbringing allowed my brothers to become homeowners during their twenties.

Tutashinda nchi na Salaam means "we will win land and peace" He is a driver for the New Orleans airport shuttle. At twenty-one years old, he is the proud father of a three-year-old daughter, a homeowner, and a husband. The emphasis my parents placed on responsibility made Tuta claim his space as an equal partner in the rearing of his daughter without hesitation.

The irony of my negative reaction to the "strange" beings I think my brothers have developed into is that Mtume and Tuta have become the bedrock of my family. Now, when we sisters go back to New Orleans, our childhood home no longer welcomes us. It houses another family with other dreams and other lives. My father lives in a house across the river which my family never crosses, on the west bank of New Orleans with his significant other. My mother lives in a dorm in Baton Rouge at Louisiana State University, where she is pursuing a master's degree. Consequently, when we visit home, we go to our brothers' homes. Mtume and Tuta juggle my sisters and my mother in their guest bedrooms, bearing the responsibility for our shelter. Their choice of stability is essential to our flight. It is Mtume and Tuta's seemingly incongruent choices that make it possible for us to make the impossible leaps our upbringing encouraged us to take. They also uncompromisingly chose their own paths, no matter how Black or African our upbringing prepared them to be, no matter how middle-class our intellectual level bred them to be, they chose homes, families, and New Orleans.

Kiini Ibura Ya Salaam is a native of New Orleans and a graduate of Spellman College

Granddaddy by Brooke Stephens

When Charles Garrette Stephens, Sr., was born in 1885, the ninth of eleven children, birth certificates weren't issued for midwife deliveries in sharecropper's cabins in Alabama. The family Bible had been lost, and the Monroe County courthouse burned down in 1912. Granddaddy traveled the logging camp circuit as far west as Louisiana, up to Tennessee and North Carolina, glad to have the work and excited by the camaraderie. He was unaware of the dangers until the day he saw a man cut in half by a wild swing saw. The accident terrified him, but even worse was seeing the man's body buried in a shallow grave, with only his first name, "Jim," scrawled on a flimsy raw pine cross since no one knew where he came from. It took Granddaddy seven years to save the \$600 he needed to buy land and to pay taxes, get supplies, and have enough to live on until the first crop came in.

Charlie, as everyone called him, had lived in Monroeville, Alabama, so long that during the 1990 family reunion the local weekly newspaper had come to interview him about life in Monroe County at the turn of the century. His memory was clear enough to recall the days before the town had telephones, electric lights, and indoor toilets, and the nights when the Ku Klux Klan rode through the countryside terrorizing Negroes who complained about bad housing, poor schools, or unfair wages for cotton pickers. When he returned home after earning enough money working in the logging camps to buy his farm, he didn't leave Monroe County again until he attended my father's college graduation from Tuskegee Institute, twenty-eight years later.

More than one hundred relatives came from everywhere for his funeral - Oakland, Ann Arbor, St. Louis, Cleveland, Dallas, Richmond - to pay their respects to the last of a generation that we had taken for granted, since he had been



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with us for as long as we could remember. The new young Black sheriff provided a motorcycle escort through the town. As the funeral cortege of thirty cars wound its way from the farmhouse to the church, in a small-town southern tradition that was new to me, traffic stopped on both sides of the road. All of the people in the town square stopped to watch. Men removed their hats. Women paused on the sidewalk and shushed children for a moment of silence.

Until I was sixteen and needed my birth certificate to get my driver's license, my mother hadn't bothered to tell me that the man I'd been calling "Daddy" all those years, wasn't. She didn't exactly lie - but she never explained. After she told me the truth, my questions about my real father

continued on page 17

interview

Eric Jerome Dickey

CROSSES THE GENDER LINE WITH HUMOR, SENTIMENT AND SOUL!

By Pat Houser

Eric Jerome Dickey has clearly struck gold with his new smash hit, *Friends and Lovers*. In this second spectacular novel from the author of *Sister Sister*, Dickey introduces Debra, Shelby, Leonard and Tyrel, friends who become lovers and learn first hand lessons on living, loving and letting go. From the start, Dickey embarks on an emotional roller coaster ride. Not only does he write across the gender line, he grabs hold of the female psyche and doesn't let go until he reaches the dramatic climax ending! A highly gifted artist, Dickey is writing at top form. Want to know what's up with Eric Jerome Dickey? Read on!

PH: Eric, I thoroughly enjoyed your debut novel, *Sister Sister*. I was amazed at how you not only crossed the gender line to write about women, but you also captured our true feelings and depicted real relationships. You tapped right into the psyche of thousands of sisters, like you were peeping our dreams while we were sleeping and stealing all of our secrets. Was it hard to write cross gender?

EJD: Thanks for the compliment. No. It wasn't hard to write cross gender work at all. I have female friends and I watch their actions, listen to their words and gauge their reactions to certain situations. Then I write about it.

PH: How long did it take you to write *Sister Sister*?

EJD: It took about six months to write *Sister Sister* and I have loads of rejections before I finally landed an agent. I was going to send everyone who rejected me a copy of my book but when I saw how high the rejection stack had grown, I said no way. I wasn't giving away that many free books! Even as *Sister Sister* was being published, I was still receiving rejection letters.

PH: What prompted you to keep going?

EJD: I've done a few plays and I used to do stand-up comedy. Sending out my work was a lot like acting. I was just auditioning my written work. After I finish a project, I'd drop it off, and then I'd move on. I don't sit around waiting for a response. I just keep on working.

PH: I've seen you at readings in New York and noticed your ease with the audience. You were so in tune with the crowd it was like you were talking to an intimate circle of friends. How do you achieve this level of comfort?

EJD: Again I think it has something to do with my background in acting and comedy. Doing stand-up allows a close interaction with the audience. When I'm doing a reading, I take in the setting, listen to the audience and pay attention to the reaction from the crowd. I feel the vibe, and then I incorporate everything that's going on into my readings. I crack people up cause I'm doing my thing my way.

PH: Which of your characters did you enjoy developing the most?

EJD: They're all so different it's hard to say. But I had a lot of fun working with Inda. Inda is like the girl who comes to work on Monday morning and tells everybody in the office about her fascinating weekend. I patterned Inda after myself—talking and being funny. Sometimes I'd get too serious with her and have to remind myself that she was funny. A lot of people think they're like Val or Chiquita, but they probably wish they could be more like Inda. Inda does what most people only think about.

PH: What authors do you enjoy reading?

EJD: I like Walter Mosley and Stephen King. Walter Mosley has a way of turning a city into a character and that's something I try to do. If I chose to write in another genre, I'd do something like Stephen King. Tananarive Due is a best kept secret. This woman should be huge. I picked up a hard cover of her book, "The Between" in Los Angeles for five dollars from a discount table. I figured how good could it be for just five dollars. The book was the bomb. Tananarive Due is very motivating. There are a number of new authors coming out also. Sharon Mitchell (Nothing But The Rent) and Franklin White (Fed Up With The Fanny). There's a lot of fresh talent out there, new people coming out every day. We need to read a large variety of authors and keep this renaissance alive.

PH: Can you describe the writing lifestyle?

EJD: Writing is a very individual thing. You don't get to meet or tour with a lot of your peers. Audiences aren't familiar with the bumps in the roads, the hills in the valley. They don't see the reality of the profession, the endless plane rides, the different hotels each night, all the different airports, going hungry when all you get is a trisket on the plane. This is a job where first impressions and performance count for everything. That's why when I come off tour, it's just me and the sand man playing hard. But I wouldn't do anything else.

[**EJD:** If all goes well. I'm also working on my next project tentatively entitled, "Milk in My Coffee."

PH: Milk in My Coffee? The title alone has a thousand thoughts running through my mind.]

PH: How do you come up with your story lines? Do you start with a character, a plot, a theme?

EJD: My stuff is not relative to what other people are writing. It's about what I need to say. I start with a concept. With Sister Sister, I had a concept of a family, a sister and a marriage. Then I asked myself what would it take for this woman to consider having an affair? I thought about it for a few days and then I started writing.

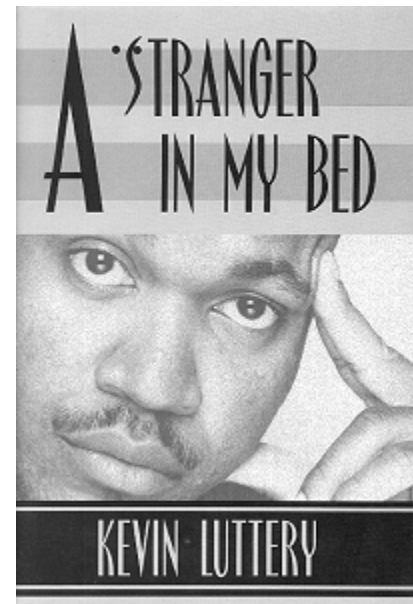
PH: Your follow up to Sister Sister is Friends and Lovers. This is one of my personal favorites. I'm sure loads of sisters identified with your characters, especially Shelby and the way she always ran away from a good thing. I even saw a little bit of myself in this character.

sneak peak

A Stranger In My Bed

Kevin Luttery

Bryant & Dillon



A Stranger In My Bed is a narrative nonfiction book that examines the social and psychological elements which influenced Mr. Luttery perception of an interracial relationship in which he was involved. This personal experience forced the author to take a closer look at the woman he thought was destined to be his wife. It prompted revealing self-analysis, during which Mr. Luttery came to the disturbing relaxation that not only was his White girlfriend a "stranger" to him but that in an almost sacrificial manner, he had become a stranger to himself. His subsequent acknowledgment of those feelings and beliefs initially suppressed made it clear to the author why it is necessary that he have a Black woman in his arms, in his life.

continued on page 16

bestsellers

Ascension Books

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Non-fiction

1. **Blacked Out Through Whitewash** Suzar
2. **Jesus & The Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls** Barbara Thiering
3. **Historical Origins of Christianity** Walter Williams
4. **Soul Vibrations: Astrology for African Americans** G. Davis & G. Matthews
5. **Mutiny on the Amistad** Howard Jones

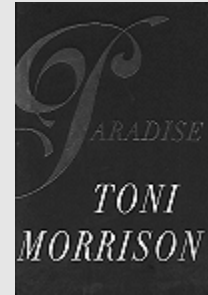
Fiction

1. **Amistad : A Novel** by Alexs D. Pate
2. **Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned** by Walter Mosley
3. **Where Evil Sleeps : A Tamara Hayle Mystery** by Valerie Wilson Welsley
4. **Tryin' To Sleep in the Bed You Made** by Virginia Deberry & Donna Grant
5. **Genocide Files** by N. Xavier Arnold

Afri-Ware

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1. **Miseducation of the Negro** Carter G. Woodson
2. **Black Mutiny -The Revolt of the Schooner Amistad** William Owens
3. **From the Browder File - 22 Essays on the African American Experience** Anthony T. Browder
4. **Stolen Legacy - Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy** George G. M. James
5. **The Isis Papers -The Keys to the Colors** Dr. Frances Cress Welsing
6. **The Psychopathic Racial Personality** Dr. Bobby E. Wright
7. **The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A. D.** Chancellor Williams
8. **Culture Bandits vol. 1** Del Jones
9. **Acts of Faith** Iyanla Vanzant
10. **The Between** Tananarive Due



TITLES TO LOOK FOR

Style Noir

by Constance C.R. White

The first how-to guide to fashion written with Black women in mind, includes a history of Black's contributors to fashion and a resource guide to dozens of Black designers. Berkley (\$15.00)

Tempest Rising

by Diane Mckinney-Whetstone

Tempest Rising tells the story of three sisters Bliss, Victoria, and Shern growing up in West Philadelphia in the early sixties. When their father's catering business fails and he is presumed dead, they are forced to live in a foster home with Mae, a politically connected card shark. William Morrow (\$23.00)

Soul: Black Power, Politics, Pleasure

by Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green

Interrogating the concept of Soul as a site of power, politics, and pleasure, the book offers readers an unconventional understanding of a crucial aspect of Black modern identity. New York University Press (\$18.95)

The Devil's Backbone

by Robert Greer

Richly detailed, from the parking lot father-and-son New Age black Houdini act to Denver's colorful Bail's Bondsman's Row, The Devils' Backbone is a classy, mystery novel set in the new American frontier. Mysterious Press (\$22.00)

The Monkey Suit: And Other Short Fiction on African Americans and Justice

by David Dante Troutt

In this genre-bending series of short stories, David Dante Troutt has fictionalized the history of ten classic legal cases involving African Americans, Transforming his research into tales of rare force and craft. The New Press (\$24.00)

Pride

by Lorene Carey

Four African-American women friends since childhood, all on the verge of 40 deal with crisis, heatbreaks, passions, and triumphs life has to offer. Doubleday (\$23.00)

bestsellers

Black Book Plus

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1. **Paradise** Toni Morrison
2. **Amistad** David Pesci
3. **In The Meantime: Finding Yourself and the Love You Want** Iyanla Vanzant
4. **One Day My Soul Just Opened Up** Iyanla Vanzant
5. **Lest We Forget** Velma Maia Thomas
6. **Dorothy Dandridge** Donald Bogle
7. **Black Legacy** William Loren Katz
8. **Amistad : A Novel** Alexs D. Pate
9. **Black Mutiny -The Revolt of the Schooner Amistad** William Owens
10. **Behind Closed Doors** Kimberla Lawson Roby

Nkiru Books

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Non-fiction

1. **The Sisters' Rules** Deneen Millner
2. **In The Meantime** Iyanla Vanzant
3. **One Day My Soul Just Opened Up** Iyanla Vanzant
4. **Lest We Forget** Velma Maia Thomas
5. **I Make My Own Rules** LL Cool J

Fiction

1. **The Trumpet is Blown** David Lamb
2. **Some Love, Some Pain, Some Time** J California Cooper
3. **Paradise** Toni Morrison
4. **A Do Right Man** Omar Tyree
5. **Gone Fishin** Walter Mosley



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by Marita Golden
As a young woman comes to terms with the complexities of an adult life, her inner strength and maturity assure us that her future will be bright.
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A Black Women's Journey Through Depression
by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah
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by June Jordan
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One Day My Soul Just Opened Up
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When Private Investigator Nina Halligan searches for the missing daughter of a slain civil rights leader, she finds herself in the crossfire of a brewing political battle between hip hop nationalism and negro marketplace evangelism. Shadowed by the thugs and the NYPD, Nina discovers Black Heat and exposes the corruption of today's black elite.
Cool Grove Press (\$12.95)

TITLES TO LOOK FOR

feature

Southern Comfort: Louisiana's Black Writers

by Rosa Lili

Everyone knows about Louisiana cooking and New Orleans jazz, but there is also a lot to say about this state's local writers. There's a written tradition by blacks there which dates back to the 19th century. The first black anthology written in the United States, *Les Cenelles*, was authored in Louisiana and today local authors are best sellers and recently one has garnered a Pulitzer prize.

Probably most well-known in the book world is Ernest Gaines, whose *Lesson Before Dying* (Vintage Books) was chosen by Oprah for her book club. He is the author of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *Bloodline* and *A Gathering of Old Men*. There are other books by Gaines and about him. Many of his books are set in the Louisiana and feature the experiences of growing up in the rural parts of the state.

Yusef Komunyakaa, a native of Bogalusa, La., won the Pulitzer for his Wesleyan University Press book called *Neon Vernacular*. It also garnered the Kingsley Tufts Award and the William Faulkner Prize from Universite de Rennes. Other books he has written include *Magic City* and *Dien Cai Dau.*, about Vietnam.

Fatima Shaik has a new book, *Melitte*, by Dial Books for Young Readers. It was chosen by the American Booksellers Association as a fall 1997 Pick of the Lists. It is a first person history of slavery, as seen through a young girl's eyes, that *The Horn Book* called a "heart-rending novel". Shaik also authored a children's illustrated book called *The Jazz of Our Street*. About a neighborhood brass band's spontaneous parade, the book will premier at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage festival. Her third new book for kids is called *The Jazz of Our Street*. About a neighborhood brass band's spontaneous parade, the book will premier at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage festival.

Louis Edwards is the author of two books set in New Orleans, the most recent from Dutton

is called *N: A Romantic Mystery*. His previous book called *Ten Seconds* was called "a moving account of a young black man's life," by the New York Times. Edwards lives in New Orleans and is at work on a new novel.

Brenda Marie Obey is a poet whose recent book, *All Saints: New and Selected Poems*, came out from Louisiana State University Press. Her previous books, often written about New Orleans mysteries, are named *In These Houses* and *Desperate Circumstance, Dangerous Woman*.

Constant on the New Orleans scene is Kalamu Ya Salaam who began publishing in decades ago and most recently completed *What Is Life?: Rediscovering The Black Blues Self*. It is published by Third World Press. He is the father of Kiini Ya Salaam, whose piece about her father and brothers is featured in *Brooke Stephen's Men We Cherish*.

And a columnist for the New Orleans Times-Picayune who has found another spirit of the south is Lolis Eric Elie who authored *Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbeque Country*, a travel journal and book of recipes with photographs by Frank Stewart.

All of these books are now in print and available at bookstores and on-line.

Writing in Louisiana does not seem as if it will slow down, as many local authors keep turning out books. They are becoming more well known for providing good literature in the 20th century. The sources of inspiration that have created so many writers in this local may remain as mysterious as Louisiana legends. But there is a chance, maybe, that it's the same spirit that inspired the food and the music.

Rosa Lili is a writer who will forever live in Louisiana but pays rent in New York City.

excerpt

All American Dream Dolls

by David Haynes

“Calvin” I said, “There’s a herd of buffalo over there”
He didn’t say anything.

“Did you hear me? What is a herd of buffalo doing in the middle of Wisconsin?”

“I think we ought to break up,” he said.

I guess I don’t have to tell you that such is not the answer to the question about what a herd of buffalo is doing in Wisconsin. I swiveled my head over in the nigger’s direction to make sure I’d heard him right. “I beg your pardon?” I said.

“I think we ought to break up,” he repeated, and I said, “Oh.”

I guess he couldn’t have been more direct, could he? Still, it left me sitting there on my vacationing behind with a whole lot of questions. Like: Why? And: Why are you telling me this now? And: If that’s how you feel, why is your car still going seventy-one miles an hour away from the city where we both live? But, you know how sometimes you get the feeling that in the play you are performing everyone but you has somehow missed their cues, that whatever your next line is supposed to be isn’t readily apparent? Yes, I had fantasized a whole lovely story about our trip. I had imagined such charming sentiments coming from my mouth as: “Wisconsin sure is beautiful in the summer,” and “Don’t you just love the way the waves break over the rocks,” and “Why don’t we stay right here in this bed all day long.” I had not imagined that on my romantic vacation I would be responding to bullshit like this. And, while I consider myself to be both mentally quick and verbally agile, at the moment the best I could come up with was that pathetic and thinly aspirated, “Oh.”

The thing is, when you are in a car traveling somewhat over the legal speed limit, dressed in a cute summer outfit (in my case, an adorable Hawaiian print shirt I found at Lane Bryant-liana leaves and orchids in the most delicate earth tones you could imagine; and white tennis shorts, cinched in the middle with an old Boy Scout belt), with a man who has just dumped you and who also, as it happens, knows a lot of personal information about you, such as the location of various moles on your body and the specific brand names of the feminine hygiene products you use (who happens to have a whole routine of not particularly funny jokes about “things with wings”), I think it is vital to respond appropriately to being unceremoniously dumped. Maybe if he had hired a brass band or some out-of-work actor in a gorilla suit to present me with the bad news,

I’d have had a more cogent reaction. As it was-presented with this sound bite as coolly as if he were asking me to try a new brand of mustard-I was unsure how to respond.

One might, I imagined, begin weeping. Silently would be nice-though my preference has always been for full-throated out-and-out wailing. There is much to recommend this approach, the first and by far the most important advantage being that men are completely incapacitated by tears. Tears are to men what kryptonite is to Superman: they have the capacity to turn the most intelligent rational he-man you know into a sniveling wimp. I am not a crier. It’s a cheap trick-lazy, demonstrates a lack of ambition and must only be used for the most dire emergencies, such as finding yourself trapped at a kick boxing match at the St. Paul Civic Center, so that leaving on your own would require fighting your way to the exits through throngs of drooling, domestic beer-poisoned men. So crying was out.

I thought about getting physical. I recall thinking that I should look in my purse to see if there was anything to cut him with. A fingernail file. A pair of cuticle scissors. Despite what many people think, as a black woman, no, I do not carry a switchblade. Just one of those hair picks with the sharpened metal tips-maybe I could ram it into the motherfucker’s side. Just kidding. The only “ethnic hair care” (as they call it at K Mart) item I had was one of those pink brushes with blunt black knobs on the end. Lacking possession of anything sharp, I would have had to resort to pummeling him. I could work him over with the brush-leave for the police a body with evenly spaced grids of circles all over it. Give forensics something to puzzle out. But, no, something big and blunt would be better. My fist-or a brick maybe! I gave assault some serious thought: the pure adrenal joy of just beating the shit out of him. I know that many of you sisters share this particular fantasy. I have to confess that when I was growing up, one of my heroines was Aunt Esther on Sanford and Son. Girl, when Lawanda Page pummeled Redd Foxx with that big old purse of hers, it made my day. Calvin, he is one of those scrawny men (scrawny and thin everywhere, if you know what I mean. More on that later). One good swipe, I could’ve knocked his narrow behind through the windshield. Of course violence breeds violence, and while I had no knowledge or experience of Calvin the abuser. . . well that’s the problem, you see, I didn’t know. He sure didn’t look like one or act like one. But, then again, he never looked or acted like the sort of man who would dump his girlfriend on the way to their vacation.

I thought about reaching over and twisting his ear off or yanking out a hank of his nappy hair. Or just slapping him. Hard. Having earlier ruled out killing myself, I figured it probably wasn’t a good idea to start duking it out with the driver of the car in which one is a passenger. And, yeah girls,
continued on page 18

The Literary Life

by Mo Fleming

Congratulations. You wrote a book, found a publisher, and are on your way into print. Now you can sit back and wait for your publicist to schedule the book signing appearances that will make you a household name.

Have you read *HOME REPAIRS?* *VOODOO DREAMS?* *VIRGIN'S TRIANGLE?* Have you even heard of these novels by Trey Ellis, Jewell Parker Rhodes and Kevin Baldeosingh, respectively? Each novel was released over the last few years, the former, just a few months ago. Each is notable for its originality and style. So why are these books unfamiliar to many readers?

All major publishing houses have departments devoted to selling their books. Most medium and small houses have at least one somebody whose job it is to tell the world to read this book by so-and-so. If you want your book to sell, to reach your natural constituents, DO NOT abandon your book to your publicist, and sit back and wait for miracle promotions to materialize.

"Publishing houses don't seem to devote much of their resources to new writers," suggests Lisa Saxton, author of *'Caught In A Run Down'*. Blair S. Walker agrees. Co-author of the nonfiction bestseller, *'Why Should White Guys Have All The Fun?'* with the late Reginald Lewis, Mr. Walker only received regional support from his publisher, Avon Books, for *'Up Jumped The Devil'*, a mystery released late last year. Despite a proven track record, he was offered no cross country tour, no major magazine advertising, no media promotion.

"Publishers don't extend much to black authors," Walker said, sadly. "Horror stories abound of black authors being treated like stepchildren. Our books are virtually abandoned to sink or swim."

"As an author you want your publisher to give you the works—or at least a decent tour so you have the opportunity to promote your book," Saxton agreed. Her publishing house, Scribner, booked her an interview on National Public Radio, and only

scheduled a handful of local appearances. "It's disappointing to receive next to nothing," she added without malice.

As a book seller with eight years of experience in black literature I can personally vouch for these statements. I have contacted publicists to inquire about a writer and met with complete ignorance. I have had to reintroduce myself to the same publicist several times trying to schedule one writer for a book signing and never gotten anywhere. I have had requests for materials flatly ignored after sending faxes, email, hard copies and calling by phone, while making it clear at every juncture that I was trying to promote and sell books written by their authors!

"Some publishers may not have a special affinity for the black market," is Saxton's diplomatic take on the situation.

While this may not sound like good news, Walker encourages writers not to despair. Mr. Walker, Ms. Saxton and other writers simply took matters into their own hands. Saxton did 85% of her own promotion. Walker organized and paid for his own abbreviated book tour.

"Once you've written your book the job is only 1/3 over," according to Walker, "Advertising and promotion will now take up most of your time."

Tara Brown, a publicist with Viking/Penguin who is handling the tour for Barbara Neely's new book, *'Blanche Cleans Up'* brings up an important point, "This is your book, you have to care about it because this is your baby."

Ms. Brown suggests that authors come up with ideas to recommend to their publicists, "Get on the Internet. Be self-motivated and diligent. Get out there, talk to bookstores about your book, ask bookstores if they're carrying your book. Create interest, attract attention," she suggests.

Walker concurs that this is the time to roll up your sleeves and do what needs to be done. He offers Blair's B's, 1) Rely on 'Black Booksellers,

2) Develop relationships with ‘Black Media’ (pay special attention to black radio), 3) contact ‘Black Book Clubs’, 4) ‘Black People’ are your main source to reach the other b’s.”

Another route is for authors to hire freelance publicists like Julia Shaw of the Shaw Literary Group. Lolita Files (Scene From A Sistah) and Suzette E. Webb (Moments of Truth) employ Cecil D. Rolle of Ellor Associates, Inc. a business management firm, to promote their books, deal with in-house publicists and, when necessary, work with freelancers.

This is not to suggest that authors should give up on the publicists assigned by their publishing houses. I have had the pleasure of dealing with publicists who are very dedicated to their authors. By all means, make every effort to develop a positive working relationship. Ms. Brown gives high praise to Clifton Taubert (When We Were Colored) as an author who constantly comes up with fresh suggestions to promote and help her to promote his books.

“When Mr. Taubert knows he’s going to a city, he sends invitations to everyone he knows in that area.”

For his latest book, ‘Eight Habits of the Heart’, Mr. Taubert gave Ms. Brown a list of important people to send the book to. “Cathy Keating (wife of Oklahoma’s governor) took time to send me a warm letter of thanks for her copy. And Linda Johnson Robb (daughter of President Lyndon Johnson) received a copy and expressed her intention to share it with friends. She even attended one of his book signings.”

Self promotion reaps dividends. Ms. Brown says it best, “Publicists are willing to go the extra mile because you are.”

Other black authors can also be helpful with encouragement, support and advice. Walker singles out E. Lynn Harris (Invisible Life) and Anita Richmond Bunkley (Starlight Passage) as writers who have extended themselves to him.

Whether you are a first time author or have a number of books under your belt, marketing savvy and a bit of aggression are important assets in spreading the word about your work. Do the research. Take control. Develop relationships and alliances with your publicist, book sellers, the media, and the public to sell, sell, sell.

Mo Fleming is a freelance writer.

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sneak peak

Blue

The Murder of Jazz

By Eric Nisenson

St. Martins Press



In the Introduction to BLUE: The Murder of Jazz, Nisenson writes: “The cry that ‘jazz is dead’ has been so ubiquitous throughout jazz history that it has almost become a tradition in itself. So let me state the obvious: The Murder of Jazz is not an obituary for jazz, because jazz is quite clearly not dead.” Yet he doesn’t flinch explaining why it is being killed off.

Nisenson cites examples that are contributing to the demise of this venerable art form: corruption via marketing, appropriation by the mainstream, superficial media coverage and sheer lack of artistry. Spontaneity, reaction to cultural and social mores and improvisation have all been sacrificed as the listening culture has changed. And a select cadre who has a chokehold on the most vital components of jazz itself is controlling the entire jazz industry.

continued from page 9

EJD: So what are you running away from?

PH: No comment. Anyway, is six months the average time needed for you to complete a project?

EJD: It took about six months to write *Friends and Lovers*, but the rewrite took another nine months. My first drafts are like building a car. Cars are nice when they're being assembled, but they'd look better if someone put the doors on. I admit that I'm not that good at writing the first time and it's good to go. Adding the doors is what makes the difference between good and great. Once I lay the foundation, finish the construction, and add the doors, I move on.

PH: In *Friends*, there was so much to enjoy, especially the comedy. It makes me wonder why you gave up stand-up. Chiquita from *Sister Sister* also appeared in *Friends and Lovers*. Do you foresee any of your other characters coming back in future projects?

EJD: Not right now. If I did a book on any character though, it would probably be Chiquita. She has a west coast, down south thing going on and she's not as stable as some of the others. She makes for good drama.

PH: It must feel great to have two smash novels behind you. What's next for Eric Jerome Dickey?

EJD: The director of *Soul Food*, George Tillman along with Debra Chase, have put together a package that they are shopping to Disney for *Friends and Lovers*. Disney has the first right of refusal for all of Whitney Houston's projects.

PH: Does this mean that we may see a screen version of *Friends and Lovers*?

EJD: If all goes well. I'm also working on my next project tentatively entitled, "Milk in My Coffee."

PH: Milk in My Coffee? The title alone has a thousand thoughts running through my mind.

EJD: It's like *Guess who's Coming to Dinner* meets *Imitation of Life*. All done with the Dickey flare for drama-drama-drama!

PH: When can your readers expect to see it?

EJD: Probably sometime later this year or early next year.

PH: I thought I heard about something called *Cheaters Caught Up in the Game*. Care to clue me in?

EJD: You heard right, but clues aren't necessary. The title speaks for itself. I'm also working on book number five, but I'll get back to you on that one.

PH: Enough said. I heard mention of Eric Dickey, Cappuccino, and Hollywood. Can I ask what all this means?

EJD: Sure. I wrote a screen play called Cappuccino. It's a psychological-suspense that a friend of mine, Craig Ross, directed and shot. It screened at Universal Studios and Craig is actively shopping the project. It will be showing in Los Angeles at the Pan African Film Festival on February 10th and the 12th.

PH: Do you have any words of wisdom for aspiring writers?

EJD: Write in spite of rejection. Don't stop. When I got my publishing contract, I had a version of *Sister Sister* and a version of *Friends and Lovers*. You have to keep writing.

PH: Lastly, which one of your forthcoming books is erotic?

EJD: Book number five is more erotic than the rest. More love than *St. Louis has gold teeth*, but it goes deeper too. It's about relationships, romance, connection, emotional involvement, and about physical creatures with a mutual attraction. .

PH: I can't imagine anything having a deeper connection than *Friends and Lovers*. If I may borrow a phrase from one of your characters, this book was the one, two, three, four and five! Much future success to you.

EJD: Thanks. Keep those three keys jingling until bow-legs and dimples come along. The password is: Obispo.

Pat Houser is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn, New York. She is the founder of The Ebony Book Club and a New York Chapter Facilitator for the nationally acclaimed Go On Girl Book Club. She has recently completed her debut novel, Sweet Hellos and Sad Goodbyes.

continued from page 7

were answered with slammed doors, an icy stare across her coffee cup, and a very firm, "That's none of your business." We fell into a carefully choreographed silence, but I never stopped wanting to know. I got bits and pieces of information in furtive talks with other relatives, who exchanged shocked glances when they realized how little I knew. I spent less and less time at home after graduating from college because I couldn't participate anymore in the dance of denial.

Finally, in the summer of 1974, I went looking for my father's family. I'd had enough of the rumors, half-truths, and vague whispers that just led to more questions.

I spent a weekend in North Carolina with Aunt Nell, Mother's older sister, who had shared a few secrets with me. After about six vodka tonics we got around to the subject at hand, and she told me enough for me to know that it was worth a trip to Alabama.

On a hot Saturday morning in July, I flew to Mobile and rented a car. I crossed the Tensaw River around eleven o'clock and headed up Route 65, flying past tall pine trees, red clay hills, and small towns with funny names I'd never heard before. Satsuma, Bay, Minette, Perdido, Atmore, Uriah. They meant nothing to me. I wasn't searching for a favorite tree, an old schoolhouse, or some special setting to trigger a fond memory. I wanted a living, breathing testimony to my past. A live human being who could tell me more about myself than I could ever imagine wanting to know. I was looking for me.

Around one, I reached the center of the small town and shivered, thinking this could have been home. It was Hicktown, U.S.A., redneck country Alabama style. I found the nearest pay phone and local directory in a small grocery store. I had only my father's name to go on. Charles Stephens, Jr. Maybe there was a Charles Stephens, Sr. Would he still be alive? He would have to be at least eighty! I had visions of a senile old coot in a rocking chair, drooling tobacco, spitting on himself, and gazing off into a vague past that he could not share with me. Then I saw the name at the top of the page.

I stopped for a long moment, wondering what I would say. How do you walk into a stranger's life and introduce yourself as a long-lost grandchild? Would he remember me, or a worse fear, would he care? I took a deep breath and mumbled a silent prayer before I dialed the number. I noticed that I couldn't stop my fingers from shaking.

He answered after the third ring.

"Mr. Stephens; did you have a son who was a Tuskegee airman who died in a plane crash?" I asked. The question came out of nowhere. Silence. "Mr. Stephens?" my voice quivered. "Yes," he answered cautiously. "Why do you ask?" "Then that makes me your granddaughter," I whispered. I heard a quick intake of breath on the other end. Ohmigod! Had I given him a heart attack?

"Marilyn?" he said, softly. "Is that you, Marilyn?" I blushed and giggled trying to find words. This man knew me! Only close family members ever called me by my middle name.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"At a grocery store - the Piggly Wiggly near the court.

"Oh my god," he shouted into my ear. "I'm on my way! I'm driving a yellow Ford!" and slammed the phone down.

My mind raced while I waited. What had I done? What was I doing standing in the sweltering heat of a small Alabama town in God-knows-where county, where I might have spent my whole life waiting for some faceless stranger I didn't know and wondering how different things might have been if I had grown up here? What do I call him? Grandpa? Grandfather? "Mr. Stephens" sounded too formal. Will I like him? Will he like me? What will Mother say? Whatever happened at this meeting, I knew I could never go back to being who I was before now.

Within minutes a rusty-fendered old yellow Ford caked with red clay dust pulled into the parking lot. Out stepped a tall, broad-shouldered man dressed in khakis and wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. He had strong bright eyes, thick gray hair, and a joyful smile. So this is what a grandfather looks like! I didn't know what to say-I'd never had a grandfather to talk to before. I waved to him, feeling too shaky to move.

He saw me. Without a word, he crossed the distance between us with a quick lanky stride, and before I could say anything he picked me up in his arms as if I were still the four-year-old girl who had been taken away from him twenty-three years before. He crushed me to him, laughing and crying for at least ten minutes as he kept saying, "Thank you, God. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Now I can die happy. All of my children have finally come back to me."

Wrapped in those strong arms and caressed by the calloused hands of this huge, loving stranger, I was humbled to realize that there was someone in the world who loved me completely without knowing anything about me, because I was family. When I looked into his eyes I saw that I had never left his heart. I had no idea who this man was, but I knew I was home.

"Granddaddy" took me back to his farmhouse, where I found a small shrine in his living room for my father and me. There were baby pictures of me that I had never seen, and ones of a man in uniform. I knew, without asking, that this was my father. Even I could recognize my face in his: the same nose, eyes, and forehead. A pair of bronzed baby shoes sat on a coffee table. I picked them up, dusted them off, and found my name and birthdate on them.

Later, we sat outside under a huge pecan tree on a white metal glider as chickens and kittens played around our feet. A cow was mooing in the large barn behind us. He talked for the next few hours and I listened. I finally got the courage to ask some of the questions that had brought me there, such as what really had happened between my parents.

He looked at me with a tranquil smile on his face. And he looked. He just sat and looked. He looked at me, through me, past me, inside me, with the steadiest, clearest pair of gray eyes and the most intense gaze I had ever fallen under. I could almost feel his eyes moving, tender and slow, across the contours of my face, gently touching my forehead, caressing the bulge of my brows, tracing the bump on my nose, stroking the hollow of my jaw. Searching my face

continued on page 19

continued from page 13

for a minute there I did think about killing myself. But only for a minute. Pills is the only way I'd even think of doing it, and, expecting a week in paradise, I'd neglected to pack for this contingency. The best I could have done would have been to open the door while the car was moving and get out. My luck, I'd survive. My ample booty would have bounced a couple of times and all that would have happened was I'd get some nasty cinders in my knee, ruin a cute outfit, and people back in Minneapolis would point at my ragged and bruised body and say things, such as, "There's that girl who tried to kill herself over a man." They would shake their heads and make clicking noises with their tongues. Personally, I hate a public spectacle. More importantly, and as we all know, nine times out of ten, that's what they want, these men. They want you to do something crazy so they can sit around the bar and tell their friends, "See, I told you the bitch was sick."

An update: We were still going seventy-one miles per hour down 1-94 in Wisconsin. There were some more trees and some more cows.

I knew I was going to have to talk my way through this. I only needed to come up with the exact right words.

"Calvin," I could have said, Baby, can we talk?" Or, "Sugar, I'm having just a bit of trouble understanding why you're saying such a thing on our vacation. Can you share your thoughts? Sweetie? Please?"

And I knew what he was going say. He'd say: "I'm sorry. It's just the way I feel," or "Can't we be friends now," or "You see, there's this woman who And we all know that bitch: "This Woman Who." Why do we always have to find ourselves in the middle of this same damn conversation? You can't win. It's as if every one of these dogs out there has the same damn script. I bet that in sixth grade, while the hygiene teacher was showing us girls that simple-ass Girl to Woman movie, the gym teachers took their ornery butts down the hall and handed out condoms and wallet-sized cards with this crap already printed up on it.

I wasn't playing that scene again.

So I figured I'd just cuss his black ass out. Call him every kind of low-down, filth-sucking, son-of-a-tree-stump-motherfucker I could come up with. That sure would feel good.

But you know what? Men like it when you call them names. They do. Especially dirty names. It gets them all excited. Also, you have to be mad to do a good cuss out. Red hot mad, and when I thought about it, I wasn't that upset.

I ought to have dumped his ass myself.

Which was my next plan: to say, oh yeah, well, I dump you first, or I dump you back. As if this were junior high school all over again. I have to tell you that it pissed me off worse than a sticky toilet seat that Calvin got to dump me before I dumped him. Wasn't that always the way? Hadn't it always been the way? Why was that always the way? Why?

I wasn't so much upset that it was this man, or that it was this man in this particularly bizarre set of circumstances. I was thirty-seven years old. I had had my first date when I was twelve. Rather than this specific bad day, I think it was my realization that I was at the back end of about a quarter of

a century of Calvins.

I reviewed all my options and chose to do nothing. I decided that this was as good a time as any to begin my nervous breakdown.

I can't say that I can pinpoint exactly the moment when my breakdown began. It's not as if I was riding along 1-94 and I thought to myself: I will have a nervous breakdown. I do however, think that decide is the correct word.

I remember sort of oozing back into the bucket seat and running my fingers around the soft gray upholstery. The cushion felt like my stuffed bunny, Crinkles, and I thought to myself, I'll dissolve into this seat and disappear. Dematerialize, like when they got beamed up on Star Trek. I had no thought of reassembling in another place, like on a tropical island or in the arms of another lover. I thought how nice it would be to have fragments of my essence wandering the world, silently but generously dispensing loving goodwill, like the maiden aunt on a soap opera. At the same time I was aware that outside my window there were more trees and more cows. And that I had still not responded to whatever it was that had been said to me a while back.

I believe that an hour or so went by. We had come through that part of Wisconsin where the landscape looks like breasts in cone-shaped bras. I imagine it must have been awkward for Calvin, sitting in a car with someone who had not responded to something as provocative as he had put forward.

Please believe me when I tell you that at the time I was about was worried about how Calvin felt as I was about the price of eggs in Taiwan. His feelings just didn't happen to cross my mind. As to his tossed-off remark, the gauntlet he'd thrown, somewhere in the interim the words had lost all meaning and presently denoted nothing. As far as I was concerned he could have said, "See Spot run".

Aha! Denial, you pop psychology fans will say, and I have certainly watched enough episodes of Oprah to recognize the symptoms. In fact, somewhere out there in the haze of mush that had become my brain, I had a vision of myself standing in her audience. Draped across my hack was Oprah's powerful arm-I could feel it, muscular and fleshy and warm, through several layers of thick luxurious silk-both Oprah's and mine-drawing me to her, hugging me to her. I could hear her say, "Girlfriend, you're gonna have to deal with this." Mushy and hazy because at the time I had an idea-a vague one-that my brain was busy filing away my troubles in a box. This is the actual image I had: a small wooden box, the size of a three-by-five card, decoupage, the kind one picks up at the endless craft fair at the Har Mar Mall, and on the front of the box, instead of saying "Recipes," it said "Deneen's Troubles," and I saw those troubles-career troubles, man troubles, my so-called biological clock, this ongoing and nagging inability I had to find an attractive nonmaternity jumper-organizing themselves on index cards and drifting into place in the box.

So it would make perfect sense, wouldn't it, that the next thing out of either of our mouths would come from me, and it would be me saying, "Shall we stop for a snack?"

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continued from page 17

for evidence of my father in me, reawakening the memory of the

old me and merging it with this new me, this woman who had returned here after all these years. Recalling the little four-year-old girl and comparing me with the image of the child he had been carrying in his mind for years.

Instead of answering me, he disappeared into the house with a quick step and a look of mischief. He returned a few moments later with a faded velvet hatbox tied with a tattered red ribbon. Inside, wrapped in tissue paper, were a little blue coat, a faded white cotton dress trimmed in pink ribbons, and some hand-knitted sweaters -perfect fits for a two-year-old.

"Essie Lee just couldn't seem to part with them after you left. Even when the other grandbabies came along." He handed me a blue-and-white knit cap. "It was the last thing she made for you." I was sniffing with tears as he began to talk about my parents.

"There was a war on at the time, and they were like everybody else was, scared to death and trying to live life in a hurry. Nobody really knew what to expect, and we were all worried about what we would wake up to the next morning. Charles was moving around all the time in the army, and Grace was trying to work and go to school. Unfortunately, those two young people said and did a lot of things that hurt each other. But they both loved you very much. Other than that, you don't need to know the details. I just hope your mother is happy now. You seem to have had a good life." His words were spoken with so much love and understanding that I didn't realize until three days later that I got no answers at all. It would be another fifteen years and many more visits before he would finally tell me the truth about how he had taken care of me for four years when my mother had abandoned me in the hospital and disappeared.

I will miss Granddaddy's stories, which were always full of loving lies and nonsense. "Me and my brother Webb came home from the logging camp on Saturday night and brought our money to Mama. After church on Sundays, we'd go walkin' and lookin' at the girls. They'd eye me with a big grin, sayin' 'Hey, Charlie, wanna walk with me?' Then they'd look at Webb, like they wisht he weren't there, 'Oh, hey, Webb.' When the railroad came through here we'd spend a nickel for a ride down to Burnt Corn and walk the seven miles back. Somebody's Mama or Daddy always came along to chaperon us but sometimes we managed to hold hands on the train. That's how I courted your grandmother, Harriet. Webb was always jealous 'cause he swore he saw her first, but the minute I laid eyes on her, I knew she was mine." I heard these tales hundreds of times, and even when I could mouth the words along with him, I never got bored. When I asked him about his feelings about the racism he had lived through, he answered with the simple wisdom of his experience, "I did all this so you don't have to.

If I was in the kitchen, he would drape an arm around my shoulder and ask, "What do you think you're doing?" and start another story with a naughty grin and a wink of his eye.

"I used to be a cook, you know . . . I lied to the head cook to get the job 'cause it was a raise in pay to a dollar and a half messed up the first batch of bread and hid the stuff in the woods. Then this ol' wild boar came up to the camp next day covered with flour and batter. I lost a whole day's pay for that."

Then he would offer advice from his days as a short-order cook with a drop-dead serious look. "The secret for making a perfect yellow cake is to take some slime from the underbelly of a frog. It adds an extra-special taste and gives a real bright color to it." He'd break into hilarious guffaws as I stared in horror. Now the world he had created, full of down-home wisdom mixed with backwoods myth and outdated memories laced with bodacious humor, was gone.

Although his spirit has left his body, Charlie Stephens's legacy is still with us. It is obvious in Cousin Billy, who shows his flirtatious humor as he winks at every pretty girl he meets; in Uncle Alvin's gentle sensitivity wrapped in a constant stream of jokes; in Cousin Pat's gregarious storytelling; in Uncle Raymond's slow-talking manner when he gives you a firm "No! And that's all there is to it" on any idea that he thinks is stupid. Aunt Clara has his sweet smile, and Aunt Ethel can stare you down with his same no-nonsense attitude as she quizzes you, like a drill sergeant, about your job, your love life, your trips to the dentist, and are you saving any money.

As we sat in the airport waiting for our return flight, the careful composure of the last few days began to crack when it hit me that this would be my last trip to Monroeville. Granddaddy wasn't here anymore. There was no reason to come back to this dinky little town, where they didn't even have a movie to go to when we didn't want to sit on the porch and listen to the crickets at night. A place where we complained about the smell of the hog pen, and the fireflies dancing in the dusk wasn't enough to distract us from our boredom, and the fresh pecans, sweet corn straight off the stalk, tender collard greens, field peas, and peaches were taken for granted as we picked them out of the back yard each day.

If it is true that a child's personality is molded in the first few years of life, then my sense of self was shaped by a man who had loved me enough to let me go, yet still welcomed me back with such an abundance of love when I returned that it frightened me. Granddaddy's generous spirit and boundless love and humor set a standard of appreciation and approval that spoiled me for any other man who would ever compete for my heart.

We boarded the plane and I sat shaking in my seat, the growing pressure in my chest finally giving way to the wall of tears that I had pushed away for four days. As the jet engines revved up, the vibrations rattled through my body and I finally couldn't hold back any longer. With a deafening blast at take-off that lifted us into the sky, I screamed as loudly as I could.

Brooke Stephens is the author of Talking Dollars and Making Sense, a former financial analyst whose work has been published in numerous magazines including Ms., Essence, and Working Woman. She lives in Brooklyn.

omar tyree
lolita files
bebe moore campbell
maya angelou
june jordan
richard wright
virginia hamilton
timmothy mccann
evangeline blanco
david haynes
toni morrison
marita golden
walter mosley
octavia butler
sandra cisneros
kimberla lawson roby
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