

Black cultural history defies stereotypes

by Robert Lothian

Two African art and music experts, in Portland to train teachers in the Portland School District's African education curriculum, spoke at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church on Jan. 7.

They were Michael Harris, art professor, poet and artist from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and songwriter and television personality Oscar Brown, Jr., Chicago.

The media continues to portray Blacks negatively, said Harris, while history and the actual art produced by Africans denotes a high degree of intelligence and sophistication.

Racial stereotypes — he showed slides of "uncivilized" Blacks in Africa taken from book illustrations and cans of "mammie yams" — are really continuations of the slave driver mentality "used to manipulate us," said Harris.

"They don't have to be violent, they can be subtle, but their overall effect in the long run is the same. The accumulation of that pain begins to affect you.

"The images can be used as weapons and the important thing is, how these images beat children into submission, how they bloody their psyches."

Harris said he couldn't escape the racial stereotypes during a recent trip to Hong Kong. A shopkeeper there tried to tell him that Black American athletes are so good because they have bigger lungs. Watching television later, he realized that people there are being bombarded with the same negative images. "So it's more important than we realize," he said. "These images got over there and turned him around."

Harris also showed what looked like before and after slides of Michael Jackson, suggesting that the entertainer had plastic surgery to disguise his facial features. "His talent is awesome, but did he have to dilute his racial characteristics to appeal more to a white audience?," asked Harris.

Harris also referred to the Big Lie about Africa. "Egypt has always been in Africa, and Black Africans created Egypt," he said. A Black leader, Memes, united upper and lower Egypt in 3100 B.C. and a city, Memphis, was named after him.

Greek civilization, the first European civilization, didn't come along until about 2,500 years later, and much of what Greece contributed to western civilization had roots in Egypt, he said. Harris showed slides of ancient African sculpture "on the level of the greatest Greek work," and then he brought the discussion up to date with slides of the work of modern African Black artists.

"Maybe 20 million of us died in the

Middle Passage, but what is African in us did not die," said Harris.

Oscar Brown, Jr., made parallel observations about music. "The music of Africa starts with the drum, the music of Africa starts with the dance," Brown said as he began his dramatic oral history presentation backed by a drummer and piano player. "Even after so many years after having left Africa, we still carry that rhythm of the drum with us," he said.

But with slavery, said Brown, "The children of the drum became the children of bondage." Work songs and spirituals kept the music alive and led to the blues, and then came song-

writer Scott Joplin.

Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* became the first million seller in the history of the world, said Brown. "Ragtime by the turn of the century had taken over the country and a large part of the world. The rhythm of Africa began to take over, and a lot of white people hated it."

Joplin spent most of his small fortune trying to produce a ragtime opera and ragtime ballets. Though his music is popular and influential to this day (his tune *The Entertainer* was the theme song for the movie, "The Sting"), Joplin was impoverished when he died and he was buried in an unmarked grave.

With Louis Armstrong and King Oliver, jazz began to upstage ragtime and take over the music scene, producing "perhaps the greatest American composer" — Duke Ellington.

"The Africans had a very complex sense of rhythm, very syncopated, and Europeans had a very confused sense of time. The Europeans had to resist because the drums made them uncomfortable. . . . they couldn't enslave this sense of rhythm."

"When we met the white people they were doing the polka and the minuet. . . . now they're trying to do the boogaloo as hard as they can. So don't be ashamed that God gave you rhythm," said Brown.



Michael Harris and Oscar Brown, Jr., were in Portland recently to train teachers in the history of African and Black American art and music. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

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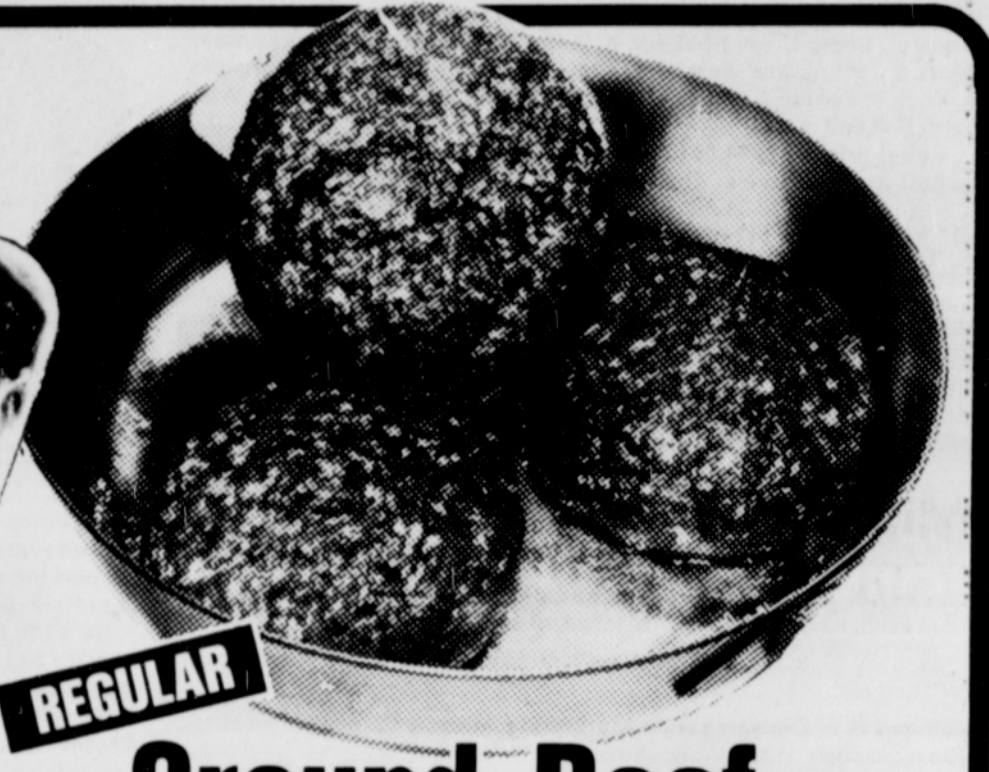


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METRO

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alert the Black community to Metro's A.A. inactivity. "I'm disappointed to hear they have not made any progress.

But Metro's A.A. record is the rule and not the exception. There is no A.A. activity at the County, City or State level. People who are committed to fairness must put pressure on Metro. If not, institutions such as Metro will only come out with bogus EEO reports that are as phony as a three-dollar bill."

Dapo Sobemehin, Employment Specialist for the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, said he felt that lip service to A.A. ought to be against the law. "Institutions have no respect for A.A. They know they can get away with it. One should not wonder why there is a high unemployment rate in the city among minorities. Institutions refuse to hire them."

Willie Harris, Regional Civil Rights Director for the Department of transportation, said, "If Metro is not achieving their goals, then they are not adhering to their affirmative action plan."

William Fort, Civil Rights Officer for the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA), annually reviews Metro's A.A. compliance. As a grant recipient of Federal Highway dollars Metro must comply with UMTA's A.A. provisions. These provisions call for a goal, policy and timetable.

Metro's Council adopted an A.A. ordinance on December 20, 1983. The problem is not recruitment but hiring and retention. Fort said he will evaluate Metro in context of their goals. In light of this investigation Fort said he will review Metro's A.A. compliance "with heightened awareness." He does not expect the review to be completed or conducted until October 1985.

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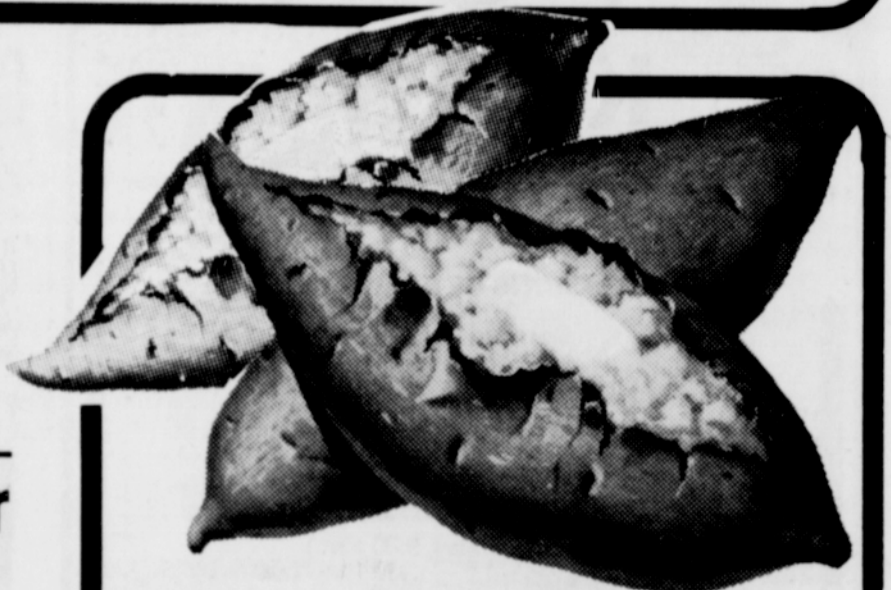
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