

THE BUFFALO NEWS

https://buffalonews.com/news/an-in-depth-look-into-the-world-of-race-and-television/article_cae25f5f-cabb-5699-879b-ae4839cb07b8.html

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK INTO THE WORLD OF RACE AND TELEVISION

By JESSICA D. THORPE Mar 4, 2001

Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television

By Donald Bogle

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

512 pages, \$30

Deep in the heartland of American pop culture - that TV-land ideology that says all wives should do their housework in Sunday dresses and all fathers puff pipes and know best - there is a completely different national reality. That's the main point of Donald Bogle's "Primetime Blues - African Americans on Network Television." Part nostalgia but mostly historically enlightening entertainment stuff, the film historian's latest book is an evocative, delightful and painstakingly thorough dissertation on black images in a white-dominated medium.

Bogle, who grew up in the 1960s in a quiet suburb of Philadelphia, admits he spent most of his spare time in his formative years either at the movies or plopped in front of the TV. "Before I could consciously express it, I think I was aware, as was most of Black America, of a fundamental racism or a misinterpretation of African-American life that underlay much of what appeared on the tube," he writes in the introduction. For Bogle, that early infatuation with the idiot box turned into a lifetime commitment: He is today acknowledged as one of the nation's foremost authorities on African Americans in film.

Currently a teacher at the University of Pennsylvania and New York University, Bogle is the author of three award-winning books. "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films," is a definitive classic on Hollywood stereotypes of African Americans. PBS turned "Brown Sugar: Eighty Years of America's Black Female Superstars" into a four-part series, and "Dorothy Dandridge: A Biography" received critical acclaim.

The dynamic of this newest discourse is dizzying. "Primetime Blues" is an epic chronicle - some 520 pages from cover to cover - which could easily have become lost in its own ambition. But Bogle's intent is untainted, balanced evenly with a wry sense of humor, an easy conversational narrative and an educator's innate gift for making learning fun.

Skillfully, without skipping a beat, "Primetime Blues" simultaneously fuels NAACP President Kweisi Mfume's call for African Americans to boycott network television, and champions African Americans who have eroded tough barriers to make great contributions to the genre.

Chaptered into decades that highlight the sociopolitical evolution of the nation, "Primetime Blues" begins in 1939 ("The 1950s: Scraps") with blues singer Ethel Waters making broadcast history. The NBC radio network asked her to perform for an experimental new medium and Waters performed a dramatic sequence with African American actresses Fredi Washington and Georgette Harvey, from her hit play "Mamba's Daughters."

"With that early Ethel Waters Show, a one-night-only event, the National Broadcasting Company hoped to see if such a television transmission could be effectively executed," Bogle writes. Waters, whom Bogle canonizes as a cornerstone of America's boob tube legacy, did not return to television until 11 years later -- as the star of "Beulah" (1950-53), in a role that "misused her talents and, more often than not, distressed the actress herself."

The role of Beulah, the big, big-hearted black maid who lived only for her white employers, was also played by Hattie McDaniel (the only African American woman to receive an Oscar, in 1939, for her portrayal of Mammy in "Gone With the Wind"), and by Louise Beavers. The Beulah character, and others like it, became an archetype in defining the black presence in TV-land early on. Other favorite stereotypes of the era include Willie Best as Charlie the elevator "boy" in "My Little Margie" (1952-53), and the "dazzling communal coonery" of "Amos n' Andy" (1951-53), a much maligned show that established the standard sitcom formulas we see today.

"Serious African American characters on the primetime series were almost nonexistent," Bogle writes of early commercial TV. "So too was any serious thought that the mass audience might give to African American life -- or the place of the Negro in American society."

Actually, not much has changed. Still, "Primetime Blues" takes care in crediting the actors and actresses who endured racist denigration in order to pioneer a path for those to follow. "Their dialects, double takes, attitudinizing, their body language were all cultural signals that energized the early series, sometimes giving them an edge, sometimes spicing up otherwise routine and bland material. Had television given them something different to express, there's no telling what they might have accomplished."

Traveling through time

Bogle's primetime "trip" -- with tongue firmly in cheek -- encompasses the rise of "The Nat 'King' Cole Show" (1956) and its quick fall to Jim Crow opposition; Sidney Poitier's pivotal portrayal of Tommy Tyler in the Philco Television Playhouse live presentation of "A Man is Ten Feet Tall" (1956); as well as contemporary players like Dr. Peter Benton (Eriq LaSalle on "ER," 1995 to present) and Lisa Nicole Carson ("Ally McBeal," 1997 to present).

"Primetime Blues" makes stops at familiar favorites (Cliff and Clair Huxtable's Brooklyn brownstone and Oprah's talk show set), and at forgotten old series with important story lines featuring black characters: Dorothy Dandridge in "Blues for a Junk Man"; a 1962 episode of the series "Cain's Hundred" (starring Peter Mark Richman, aka Spock's father on "Star Trek"); Ossie Davis in "Star Spangled Ghetto," and James Earl Jones in "Non-Violent," both episodes of "The Defenders."

In its entirety, "Primetime Blues" examines pop culture mythology in terms of the personal and professional contributions of crossover characters like Uhura (Nichelle Nichols in "Star Trek," 1966-69) and Link Hays (Clarence Williams III in "The Mod Squad," 1968-73). It reminds us that Denzel Washington got his start as Dr. Philip Chandler in "St. Elsewhere" (1982-85); and links Jackie Chiles (Phil Morris), the lawyer character on "Seinfeld," straight back to Kingfish (Tim Moore) on "Amos 'n' Andy."

It champions young characters and comedians who have gone on to become respected producers and directors: Thomas Carter and Kevin Hooks from "The White Shadow" (1978-81) and Eric Lanueville from "St. Elsewhere;" Keenen Ivory Wayans, the creative genius behind "In Living Color" (1990-93, where Jim Carrey jumpstarted his career), who directed last year's mega-hit, "Scary Movie."

Role playing

What makes "Primetime Blues" so critical, though, is Bogle's intimate take on how the roles they played affected the African Americans who played them. Bill Cosby, during his groundbreaking tenure as Alexander Scott on "I Spy" (1965-68), was asked to walk "a dozen thin lines." "I had to dress and talk like 'them' or I was considered uneducated," he told *Essence* magazine in 1977, adding that he drew inspiration from Jackie Robinson. "But if I dressed or spoke too well, as in better than, then I was threatening and that was no good. With all of this, I still had to live with me in that role, making the character acceptable not just to white America but to me and to blacks everywhere."

Everyone from Ethel Waters to Diahann Carroll ("Julia" 1968-71) to S. Epatha Merkerson ("Law and Order," 1990-present) tells a similar story. "I'm a black woman with a white image. I'm as close as they can get to having the best of both worlds," Carroll said in a 1970 TV Guide interview. And Merkerson, who plays police lieutenant Anita Van Buren, once asked: "Why am I in a position of authority yet you rarely see me on screen?"

Yeah.

How come Lt. Fancy (James McDaniel on "NYPD Blue," 1993-present) is so seldom on camera?

"Primetime Blues" could be an overbearing rant on the evils of American racism, but to Bogle's great credit it is instead a comprehensive and profound analysis of the influence of television on race in America.

Join the party

For African Americans in particular, "Primetime Blues" is a big TV-party with everybody there: Remember Otis Young as a bounty hunter in "The Outcasts" (1968-69), James McEachin as the detective "Tenafly" (1973-74), heartthrob Phillip Michael Thomas from "Miami Vice" (1984-89) -- and the triumph of Cicely Tyson bending to drink from the fountain ("The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman," 1974) and the mini-series "Roots" (1977)?

There's C.C.H. Pounder and Tyra Farrell ("ER," 1994-present), and George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley) with Anna Marie Horsford and Clifton Davis from "Amen" (1986-91). And over there is Raymond St. Jacques with Clint Eastwood ("Rawhide," 1959-66), and Sammy Davis Jr. hugging Archie Bunker, and "Webster" (Emmanuel Lewis, 1983-87) and Madge Sinclair from "Trapper John," M.D. (1979-86).

Isn't that Peggy (Gail Fisher on "Mannix," 1967-75) with Taurean Blacque and Michael Warren from "Hill Street Blues" (1981-87)? How 'bout that Jada Pinkett ("A Different World," 1987-93) marrying "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" (Will Smith, 1990-96)?

Hey. Why were "Living Single" (1993-98) and "Roc" (1991-94) canceled anyway? What's the point of Michael Boatman's "Spin City" (1996- present) character being gay? And whoa: Who knew about "The Hazel Scott Show" (1950)?

If you have ever watched anything on TV, "Primetime Blues" is a fundamental reference work for your bookshelf. It translates, enlightens, transcends and utterly captivates. Right on, right on, Professor Bogle. Here's to PBS turning this into a series real soon.