

The Legacy of Cicely Tyson: Pioneer for Representation in Film, Fashion and Television

Harlem-born public figure has been hailed for contributions to the image of African Americans and women in the arts

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In the January and February issue of Essence magazine excerpts from a newly released autobiography by Cicely Tyson, Just As I Am, provide insights into the nearly one century life's journey of a legend within the entertainment and cultural milieu in the United States.

Essence, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2000, is a publication designed to illustrate the role of African women in history and the modern world. Tyson, 96 years old, passed away on January 29 of natural causes.

She was born to immigrant parents from the Caribbean island of Nevis. Tyson came into existence in 1924 during the period that is popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance. Beginning in the first decade of the 20th century, Harlem was rapidly transforming from a European immigrant community to one which became largely occupied by Black and Latin American peoples.

During this period which began many years prior to the 1920s, witnessed a flowering of African American literary, musical and political contributions to the overall struggle for freedom and self-determination. Personalities such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Bessie Smith, W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Josephine Baker, among many others, gained prominence domestically and internationally during this period.

People of African descent from the southern U.S. and the Caribbean flooded into New York City and other urban areas in what later became known as the Great Migration. Although this category of mass geographic movement is associated with the rise of industrial capitalism, the people who participated in this migratory phenomenon were not just seeking economic improvement. Many saw the large and medium-sized cities to which they fled as potential avenues for greater social and political liberation.

Tyson writes in her book that:

“The United States has never been ‘one country under God’ but several nations gazing up at him, dissimilar faces huddled beneath a single flag.... The era I grew up in both deepened my racial wound and soothed it with the

healing balm of the arts. My childhood spanned the 1920s and 1930s, two of the most economically memorable and culturally rich decades in American history –a period when Negro literature, music and culture flourished.”

The author mentions some of the hallmarks in Harlem such as the Savoy Ballroom and the Cotton Club along with musicians Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton, whose contributions shaped the consciousness and cultural life of the early decades of the 20th century. Tyson acknowledges the philosophical reflections of Alain Locke, author of *The New Negro*, published in 1925 and the works of James Weldon Johnson, a songwriter and poet who composed the Black National Anthem, entitled “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” She mentions the classic book, “*The Souls of Black Folk*,” published at the dawn of the 20th century in 1903 by Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, which was still being read voraciously by the successive generations of the 1920s and 1930s.

The Economic Crisis and the Struggle for Liberation

Of course, with the stock market crash of October 1929, African Americans and African Caribbean people were disproportionately impacted by the Great Depression which lasted until the beginning of the U.S. intervention in World War II. Tyson reviews the mass mobilizations surrounding the Scottsboro Boys case, which originated on the borders between Alabama and Tennessee in 1931 where nine African American youth were falsely accused of raping two white women on a freight train. In addition, the book reviews other horrors of the 1930s such as the U.S. government’s sponsored Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, where African American men were recruited to participate in a longitudinal study on the impact of the deadly disease. The men were promised free healthcare while in fact being denied treatment for Syphilis long after penicillin was discovered as an effective treatment.

Tyson goes on to point out that the Depression years resulted in a consolidation of legalized segregation and national oppression against Black people:

“The attack on our humanity continued in 1934. That year, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) established redlining, a set of racially discriminatory real estate and bank-lending practices that barred Blacks from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods—and thus set the stage for wealth disparity between Black and white households that remains to this day. Home and land ownership are the primary means by which Americans have historically amassed wealth, and when Blacks were locked out of bank loans and segregated into slums, we were robbed of the potential to build fortunes. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal brought a measure of relief for poor Blacks, but some of its policies, such as redlining, made the New Deal a raw one for us.”

Transcending Barriers and Achieving Recognition

While coming of age in Harlem, Tyson’s mother vehemently opposed her entering the acting business. Her mother felt that it was a profession filled with criminality and debauchery. However, Cecily continued to pursue her dreams.

She came to the attention of *Ebony* magazine, founded by John Johnson after the conclusion

of World War II with a small loan from his family. By the 1950s, Ebony, Jet and other media projects sponsored by Johnson Publications, became a mainstay in the households of African Americans.

Tyson modelled for the fashion ads so prevalent in the magazine. Later she made appearances in a number of television and film productions. In 1963, she became one of the first African American women to wear natural hair over the television series entitled “East Side/West Side.” By 1967, she would appear on the cover of the groundbreaking Miles Davis album entitled “Sorcerer.” Tyson became a partner of the legendary Jazz icon, known for his innovative sound and fashion. The two of them were often photographed while in public setting trends for African Americans and broader segments of the population.

According to [an article in Variety magazine](#) the day after her death:

“Tyson broke into movies with the 1959 Harry Belafonte film “Odds Against Tomorrow,” followed by “The Comedians,” “The Last Angry Man,” “A Man Called Adam” and “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.” Refusing to participate in the blaxploitation movies that became popular in the late ‘60s, she waited until 1972 to return to the screen in the drama ‘Sounder,’ which captured several Oscar nominations including one for Tyson as best actress.”

In 1974, she played the leading role in a television drama entitled “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman”, based on an actual book released in the early 1960s chronicling the life and times of an African American woman born into slavery and living through Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. She also appeared in another television drama mini- series centered upon the novel by Gloria Naylor, known as “The Women of Brewster Place.” The 1989 series was produced by Oprah Winfrey.

The same Variety review of her career mentioned above says: “She was nominated a total of 16 times in her career, also winning for supporting actress, in 1994 for an adaptation of “Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All”; she was nominated five times for guest actress in a drama for “How to Get Away With Murder.”

Cecily Tyson through her own work and interventions in the movements of the African American people has secured a position within history. Her efforts will continue to motivate women and oppressed peoples in the generations to come.

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