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THE BLACK SCHOLAR

ARTICLES ABOUT THE BLACK SCHOLAR

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Sausalito-based magazine explores 'the black experience'

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By Don Keown

"To understand the black experience, read *The Black Scholar*, the cutting edge of contemporary black thought," the promotional material of the Sausalito-based periodical exhorts prospective readers.

Sources as disparate as the New York Times and the Black Muslims' Muhammad Speaks have agreed with that assessment.

"... *The Black Scholar* is providing much needed independent research on the black experience and it remains a journal in which the writing of many of today's finest black thinkers may be viewed," the Times editorialized.

"*The Black Scholar* is perhaps the most influential black-oriented intellectual publication," Muhammad Speaks asserted.

Robert Chrisman, now the publisher, tells why he, Allan Ross, now deceased, and Nathan Hare, who left the magazine as publisher two and a half years ago, founded the *Black Scholar* in November, 1969:

"There was a real cultural need for black people to be given an opportunity for expression. White people have tended to define what the black experience is. But they don't speak from the proper framework. Their perspective is limited. And the result has been a lot of wrongfully determined policies.

"Daniel Moynihan's pronouncements were a prime example. He blamed black sociology for black problems, whereas in truth the black is basically healthy sociologically. It is his economic condition that is pathological."

Too often, says Chrisman, this



Preparing an issue of *Black Scholar*
Robert Chrisman and aide Jackie Shimbrot discuss artwork

practice of whites of speaking for blacks has resulted in a condition where "the victims become the accused."

The Black Scholar was started in one room in Sausalito, rented from Graphic Arts of Marin, the magazine's original printer. Later the operation was moved to 1,600 square feet of floor space in a brand new building at 2658 Bridgeway in north Sausalito.

"We finished the premises ourselves, and our landlord, Robert H. Greene, gave us a very good lease," Chrisman says.

The magazine that began with a circulation of 5,000 now publishes 11,000 copies of each issue. Most of those copies are mailed to subscribers, but about 3,000 are sold at retail outlets and 1,000 are used for promotional purposes.

"It is rather surprising," notes Chrisman, "that our heaviest circulation is east of the Mississippi, although we do quite well here in northern California."

But it is not so much the number of copies distributed as the types of people to which they go that makes the magazine influential.

The bulk of those readers, Chrisman says, are "college oriented and trained, liberal to radical in their ideologies, professionals and community activists — the decision-makers."

Chrisman estimates that *The Black Scholar* readership is 80 percent black, "although we reach a good many whites interested in black thinking and black culture." Influential white publications, orga-

nizations and individuals are included, and make frequent reference to *The Black Scholar*. "We are cited regularly in the *New York Times*," Chrisman says.

The *Black Scholar* is published monthly, except for January-February and July-August when special expanded bimonthly issues are produced. Subscriptions sell for \$12 a year, \$30 for three years. The single copy price is \$1.50.

Each issue carries a theme, which the contributors explore.

"We focus on a topic, and then permit the writers to elaborate," Chrisman says. "It is no-holds-barred. No censorship."

The summer, 1977, special issue was a "Report From Cuba" by a party of black American artists, educators and writers. Chrisman was a member of the traveling group. His photographs illustrate the issue, and he wrote the keynote article, "National Culture in Revolutionary Cuba."

Wrote Chrisman: The Cubans are hard workers, they are formidable fighters, and they have made great sacrifices to preserve their revolution and support the revolutions of other countries. Their happiness in the face of these struggles and sacrifices suggested that brotherhood, generosity and unselfishness were not foreign to human nature, but perhaps at its very core."

In turn, anthropologist Johnetta B. Cole, music critic and scholar Phyl Garland, actress-producer Theresa George, poet Lance Jeffers, editor-publisher Samella Lewis, actor-educator William Marshall, singer and scholar Bernice Reagon and poet-novelist Alice Walker offered their impressions from the trip.

Other issues of *The Black Scholar* have taken up such subjects as the black media, the non-aligned nations and peoples, repression of blacks, black fundraising, "The Crisis of The Cities," Southern Africa, "The

Black South," alcohol abuse in the black community, black popular culture, black literature, black politics, black women's liberation, black history, black labor, black youth, plastic arts and crafts, and "The Black Community."

One of its greatest services, Chrisman feels, is that the publication often presents full texts of speeches and documents by blacks, or affecting blacks, that would be available nowhere else.

By far the most of the writers are blacks. But *The Black Scholar* has carried the words of whites.—Herbert Aptheker, President Jimmy Carter, a Stanford University research team that looked into institutionalized racism or "racism without racists."

Founder-publisher Chrisman, 40, was born in Yuma, Ariz., and settled in San Francisco with his family in 1948. He still lives there.

He was educated in California schools, including two years at City College of San Francisco, and holds a bachelor's degree from the University of California, majoring in English literature, and a master's degree from San Francisco State in English with a creative writing emphasis.

With minors in journalism and philosophy, he was editor-in-chief of U.C. and San Francisco State literary magazines.

He has taught at the University of Hawaii, Contra Costa College, San Francisco State and the University of San Francisco, as well as conducting special courses at the University of California's Irvine and San Francisco campuses.

He, Hare and Ross founded *The Black Scholar* at the height of the interest in black studies programs.

At the same time they also established the non-profit The Black World Foundation "to generate and distribute black educational materi-



Editorial aides in conference

Rica Jacobsen and assistant publisher Robert L. Johnson

Magazine explores black experience

Continued from page 35
als." It is the publishing organization behind The Black Scholar.

The foundation also sponsors a speakers' bureau that is being called upon with increasing frequency for appearances in schools to discuss black affairs. Chrisman would like to see a similar demand for Black World Foundation speakers from adult organizations in the area.

A prisoners' subscription program conducted by the foundation places about 500 copies of each issue of The Black Scholar in state prisons across the nation.

The foundation also collaborated with Bobbs-Merrill in the publishing of two books, "Contemporary Black Thought: The Best From the Black Scholar" and "Pan-Africanism," both anthologies from the magazine.

Once a year the foundation produces a roundup report on black books as a supplement to The Black Scholar.

Robert L. Johnson, the assistant publisher of The Black Scholar, is in charge of program development for The Black World Foundation. He holds a bachelor's degree from Franklin College and a master's degree from Indiana University. He has been a college professor, and has had extensive experience as an administrator and fundraiser for foundations and universities.

Editor Robert L. Allen is currently on leave, after receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship to research the origins and consequences of the Port of Chicago disaster of 1944 in which an explosion of two munitions ships killed more than 300 Bay Area residents, most of them blacks.

His responsibilities have been assumed temporarily by Chrisman and editorial assistant Janice Bevien, whose sister-in-law, Glory Bevien, is the magazine's business manager and the foundation's vice president for financial affairs.

The Black Scholar lists a board of contributing and advisory editors of more than 40 names including boxing's Muhammad Ali, James Baldwin, Shirley Chisholm, Dr. Price Cobbs, Angela Davis, Harry Edwards, Carlton Goodlett, Maulana

Ron Karenga, John O. Killens, Floyd McKissick, Max Roach, Sidney F. Walton Jr. and the Rev. A. Cecil Williams.

Other bylines and interview subjects that have appeared in the magazine include Julius Nyerere, Patricia Roberts Harris, Arthur Ashe, William W. Sales Jr., Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, Maya Angelou, Conyus, Jony Conyers Jr., Shirley Better, S. Jay Walker, Ron Dellums, Bobby Seal, Chuck Stone, Marguerite Ross Barnett, Alex Haley, John Henrik Clarke, the late Shirley Graham Du Bois, Walter Rodney, Frances M. Beal, Julian Bond, Cheddi Jagan, Charles C. Diggs Jr., Sekou Toure, Fidel Castro, Charles B. Rangel, Alice Walker, Elizabeth Catlett and Mae C. King.

Barlowe and Sons Printing Co., Novato, has been The Black Scholar printer for the past four years, and is lauded by Chrisman for the quality of its work.

The maintenance of high literary and printing standards has been a deliberate decision, Chrisman says. "We are not a mass circulation magazine," he declares. "Our magazine is one of a kind in this country. And one of very few in the world, dealing every month with black culture."

In its present role with continued improvement and effective promotion, Chrisman sees for the magazine a potential circulation of from 20,000 to 30,000 copies per issue.

It is, he notes, indicative of the quality of The Black Scholar's contents that past issues have been repeatedly sold out and then reprinted to meet a continuing demand.

From The Black Scholar and his lecturing, Chrisman says he manages to make "a modest living." There are seven full-time employees on the racially integrated staff of the magazine and foundation, and an internship program has been started.

A CETA grant received in September bolstered the program's financial support and opened the way for expansion.

The Black Scholar's prestige climbed another notch in August of this year when Chrisman appeared before the United Nations Committee on Decolonization as chairman of the U.S. Peoples' Delegation, comprised of some 30 groups, to speak on behalf of independence for Puerto Rico. His statement was reprinted in the October, 1977, "Black Repression" issue of The Black Scholar.

In keeping with The Black Scholar's no-holds-barred approach to controversial topics, the lead editorial of that issue began: "Recent evidence suggests that the economic and political repression of blacks, during the reign of Richard Nixon has not eased with the first nine months of Jimmy Carter's administration . . ."

In the January-February, 1976, issue, writing on "Blacks, Racism and Bourgeois Culture," Chrisman asserted: "The United States is a dangerous and dying animal, and while its demise is going to be a long and torturous process, we must prepare ourselves now to survive it, to develop for us and our future generations, a powerful and progressive black humanism that will be an inspiration not only to ourselves, but to embattled peoples throughout the world."

If the Black Scholar is blunt in its analysis of the problems and repression of blacks and other minorities, it can also be optimistic in its assessment of the black potential for developing a meaningful black culture.

Writing in the same issue, educator-musician William H. McClendor said: "As knowledge increases about the black existence in America, revelations about black struggles on many other fronts also disclose that there is an expanding confidence in eventual black liberation . . ."

One goal of The Black Scholar and The Black World Foundation, Chrisman says, is to make Southern Marin a center for the kind of black intellectualism needed to achieve that liberation from repression.

The Last Word: The Black Scholar

By MEL WATKINS

The first black publication appeared in America before the Civil War, but until recently there have been few scholarly magazines or journals that have both analyzed the black American experience from an independent black perspective and directed their commentary specifically to black readers. Newspapers such as the former Negro World and the present-day Muhammad Speaks have offered definitive black ideologies, but have not attempted a serious analysis of black culture. Magazines that did ostensibly concentrate on analyzing black culture have usually done so from the "objective" perspective of the dominant white society. And since the norms of that society are generally alien to black culture, black behavior was regularly viewed as deviant. Other journals, though striving to analyze black culture on its own terms, have had to depend on a largely nonblack and unsympathetic readership. But perhaps the most nagging obstruction to the development of independent black journals has been an overriding ethos of integration, which has led black intellectuals to ignore unique aspects of black life while extolling the black community's "progress" in adopting middle-class manners. Also in the twenties and thirties, black intellectuals' connections with Communist and socialist groups further inhibited their expressing nationalistic concepts, and magazines such as A. Philip Randolph's Messenger, Cyril V. Briggs's Crusader and The Liberator failed to provide much independent analyses of black culture.

In recent years, however, the theory that African cultural remnants were effectively destroyed during slavery has been invalidated, and the black community has become increasingly aware of its unique cultural traits. Among the best of those journals responding to this situation is The Black Scholar, a monthly journal published by a nonprofit organization, The Black World Foundation. In counterpoint to what some black critics have called "the dictatorship of white definition," the magazine's stated aim is to "provide meaningful definitions of black existence," that is, to define black life in terms that are meaningful to blacks.

Present categories, perceptions and applications of the social and political sciences have not accurately assessed the black experience, so The Black Scholar has set out to modify them. (Terms such as "democracy" and "free enterprise" used to describe America, for instance, do not describe the black experience of disfranchisement and job discrimination.) Further, the magazine has dedicated itself to providing a forum from which an ideology of black liberation might evolve. That ideology must be revolutionary, the editors state, since there is "no change in society (fundamentally) if there is no ideology of revolutionary change."

With these goals, the first issue of The Black Scholar was published in November, 1969. That issue, focused on the politics of black culture, included articles by Sékou Touré, Stanislas Adotevi, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Imamu Amiri Baraka and John O. Killens. Later issues have emphasized the writings of young scholars who have generally brought vigorous discipline and new approaches to their analyses of various aspects of black life. Exceptional among these young writers have been Joyce Ladner and Walter W. Stafford ("Black Repression in the Cities"), James Turner ("The Sociology of Black Nationalism") and Linda La Rue ("The Black Movement and Women's Liberation").

The April, 1970, issue on black cities, for instance, assessed the historical roots and sociological pressures that have brought about the emergence of primarily black cities such as Newark and Washington, and provided well-researched articles on the organization and governmental functioning of several others. Their research led to programmatic conclusions, showing how blacks might exercise power in those cities. Other issues have concentrated on areas such as black labor, black psychology and black politics with similar results.

One reason for The Black Scholar's success has been its well-defined audience—primarily students and other black intellectuals and professors. It has thus avoided a problem that besets black magazines such as Freedomways and Black World: the need for resorting to emotionalism and apothegms such as "right on" and "power to the people" as substitutes for hard scrutiny of facts, in deference to the diversity of its audience.

The Black Scholar's most obvious weakness lies elsewhere. Having set out to establish a framework for the disciplined and relevant analysis of black life, there has necessarily been some groping and experimentation. (With the exception of the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson and E. Franklin Frazier, there are few precedents for this kind of scholarship.) Consequently, some of its articles present bland intellectual froth by authors who are content with merely categorizing past events without clarifying and reinterpreting their meaning for the present.

This criticism has recently been voiced in an excerpt from Harold Cruse's forthcoming book in a notable issue of Black World (January, 1971); the May issue presents a reply by The Black Scholar editor, Robert Chrisman. Cruse also offers some illuminating observations on the ideological differences between himself and Chrisman. Both agree that revolutionary change is necessary for black liberation. Cruse feels, however, that America's particular circumstances necessitate a "cultural revolution." While Chrisman, like many Third World ideologists, apparently leans toward a modified Marxist and nationalist revolutionary stance.

But despite its editor's persuasions (if, indeed, this reading is correct) and its lapses into academic twaddle, The Black Scholar has transcended rigid, political dogma and generally avoided academic irrelevance. It has adhered to its goals of establishing a valid forum for black intellectuals and of attempting to establish a viable redefinition of black life.

There are, of course, issues that one wishes the journal had covered: for instance, black economics and its relationship to the world monetary system or the concept of race itself. There have also been notable omissions in its analysis of certain subjects. The issue on religion, for example, lacked any probing essay on eschatology. And, as Harold Cruse has pointed out, The Black Scholar's most significant failure is that it has yet to formulate the "ideology of revolution" or liberation that was one of its goals. It has not synthesized its research to provide a comprehensive theoretical overview of black life that might be used by blacks to ameliorate their oppression. These criticisms may be premature, however; future issues may correct these shortcomings. For now, The Black Scholar is providing much needed independent research on the black experience, and it remains a journal in which the writings of many of today's finest black thinkers may be viewed. ■

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