Black Humor Makes Points

By Al Williams

One way to recognize the tone of Black American attitudes is to examine the humor of its comedians. Comedians are persons usually skilled in the art of eliciting laughter from an audience.

The humor of blacks, often comes in the form of satire. Satire prompts laughter by taking a look at real life ironies and absurdities.

Talk of black comedians usually begins with the mention of Bert Williams. Williams, called by some, the greatest comedian of all times — black or white — received national acclaim during the early 20th century. While earning up to $1,000 per week, Williams maintained two repertories of humor, one directed toward whites and one directed toward blacks.

Williams patronized white audiences and embraced their funny bones by joking about blacks feigning ignorance and at the same time, outfoxing whites.

An example of this is a joke Williams told about a black man on trial for alleged chicken thievery. The white judge was curious as to how the chickens were stolen while trained watch dogs were present. The black man told the judge, "Hit wouldn't be no use to try to explain things to you all, if you was to try it you would as like as not get your hide full of shot an' get no chickens either. If you want to engage in any rascality, judge, you bettah stick to the bench whar you am familiar."

This type of humor is consistent with a familiar theme of the 1900s, "Call me anything, just be sure and call me at dinner time." Ironically, in 1915, during Williams' heyday, the NAACP scored its first victory. The grandfather clause which required prospective voters to be at least third generation Americans, was struck down.

Although Williams' humor is a good example of the relationship between black humor and black sentiments, black humor is usually thought of in more contemporary terms.

While many black comedians came after Williams, their audiences were segregated. During the depression years, comics like Redd Foxx, Dewey Pigmeat Markham, and Jackie Moms Mabley emerged, joking about problems of the times. Foxx recalled his father saying, "The garbage man is here. Better have him leave some."

In the 1940s and early 1950s, a period of seemingly political inactivity by blacks, a carefree kind of humor prevailed. Likewise the humor of Amos and Andy and Stepin Fetchit, exemplified a carefree lackadaisical black man.

Bert Williams was a member of the vaudeville team of Williams and Walker. After George Walker died, Williams went on to play the Ziegfeld Follies from 1912 to 1919.

With the rise of desegregation efforts in the late 50s and early 60s, black humor followed suit. "I was driving through Mississippi and got pulled over by the police. He said don't you know you drove through a red light? I said certainly. I saw all the white folks driving on the green light. I thought the red light must have been for us," recalled Moms Mabley.

Here, Mabley reduced the notion of "separate but equal" to its lowest form of simplicity. A true to life situation is exposed as ridiculous and hilarious.

At the same time an apathetic outlook toward themselves was perpetuated by blacks. A humor without themes of social change could be found. Blacks seemingly accepted stereotypes of sexual virility and uncouth personalities. Years before his ascension to stardom on television, Redd Foxx burned many an ear with his raunchy monologues about blacks' wild sexual adventures.

Look at the character of Shine. Shine was jet black, unintelligent, full of athletic and sexual prowess. Shine is best remembered by his adventures on the sinking Titantic.

For the sake of self preservation, Shine disregarded the white captain's offer of money and ignored the captain's daughter's offer of her sexual treasures in return for their rescue. Shine sped past whales and dared sharks to bother him, as he swam the Atlantic Ocean. He reached Harlem and was half drunk before anyone knew the Titanic had sunk.

Satire took a brief pause with the humor of Bill Cosby in the 60s. Cosby's humor is reminiscent of the peace corps of the same period — not favoring any race, but compatible to all. Cosby elicits chuckles by telling of his own funny childhood experiences. In doing so, he never mentions the ghetto, white folks, or soul food.

Black humor as well as the black man, issued a more serious challenge in the late 60s. Cities were burning, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and Dick Gregory was rapping. While assailing such sacred documents as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, Gregory made it all sound funny in view of the mistreatment of black citizens.

Gregory said "When they drew up the Constitution, they only made one mistake. They forgot to write 'for white only.' We're so dumb, we'll mess around and believe all that equality stuff was meant for us too."

Although Gregory is thought of as a comedian today, his insistence on governmental reform is so strong that often times humor is merely coincidental to his message.

As the cavalcade of black humorists continued, they seemed to share the belief, "I'm black and I'm proud." Flip Wilson became the first black man to enjoy a lengthy run on national television. Wilson joked about subjects heretofore not joked about in mixed company.

Wilson invented characters to simulate portions of everyday black life. While he drew the wrath of many righteous blacks, the Rev. Leroy and the Church of What's Happening Now caused more than one Cadillac-driving black minister to stop and think.

Although he made a complete turn about from his so-called "blue humor." Redd Foxx has enjoyed television success as Fred Sanford. Contrary to his usual brash, straight forward approach, Foxx as Fred Sanford is subtle but manages to satirize effectively.

In one exchange between Fred and

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Black Humor followed historic activities down through the years

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