HOW WE SEE IT

"If our past doesn't help us understand the present, there's something dangerously wrong with our history. It's time to question it, revise it and put both our history and our democratic ideals to work."

Archon Khephra Burns

The great bassist Charles Mingus once acknowledged that he held the unique if dubious distinction of being the only musician ever asked to leave the Duke Ellington Band. According to Mingus, Juan Tizol, a longtime trombonist with Ellington, had asked him to play a solo he'd written that required bowing the bass, and when Mingus raised the solo an octave, where the bass isn't too muddy, Tizol allegedly insulted both his musicianship and his race in the most ethnographically taboo of terms. Mingus chased him out of the rehearsal room, and what followed thereafter is perhaps best left to his own telling:

> You leave the rehearsal room, proceed toward the stage with your bass and take your place, and at the moment Duke brings down the baton for "A Train" and the curtain of the Apollo Theater goes up, a yelling, whooping Tizol rushes out and lunges at you with a bolo knife. The rest you remember mostly from Duke's own words in his dressing room as he changes after the show.
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> "Now, Charles," he says, looking amused, putting Cartier links into the cuffs of his beautiful handmade shirt, "you could have forewarned me – you left me out of the act entirely! At least you could have let me cue in a few chords as you ran through that Nijinsky routine. I congratulate you on your performance, but why didn't you and Juan inform me about the adagio you planned so that we could score it?
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> "I must say I never saw a large man so agile – I never saw *anybody* make such tremendous leaps! The gambado over the piano carrying your bass was colossal. When you exited after that I thought, 'That man's really afraid of Juan's knife, and at the speed he's going he's probably home in bed by now.' But no, back you came through the same door with your bass still intact. For a moment I was hopeful you'd decided to sit down and play, but instead you slashed Juan's chair in two with a fire axe!
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> "Really, Charles, that's destructive. Everybody knows Juan has a knife, but nobody ever took it seriously – he likes to pull it out and show it to people, you understand.
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> "So I'm afraid, Charles – I've never fired anybody – you'll have to quit my band. I don't need any new problems. Juan's an old problem, I can cope with that, but you seem to have a whole bag of new tricks. I must ask you to be kind enough to give me your notice, Charles."

Duke was so charming, Mingus added, that he almost felt honored as he shook his hand and resigned.

This is not at all how Juan Tizol remembered the incident, especially the allegation of racial epithets. And neither Juan's account nor Mingus's bears any resemblance to Ellington's. That Mingus left the Ellington band is an historical fact, but the truth of how and why and what it all meant lies somewhere in and among the varied Rashomon-like remembrances of those who were there.

Memories, we know, are malleable and tend to shift over time as we re-remember our pasts to fit our present. Beyond that there are matters of perspective and the myriad and sometimes questionable uses made of the past. All historical judgments involve persons and points of view. Where we stand while observing an event shapes what we see. Where we stand – i.e., in our assumptions and biases – gives us each a particular slant. We can safely assume that Mingus's intent in telling this story was to entertain and, perhaps, dramatize with a bit of hyperbole the overreactions and paranoid fantasies to which we're susceptible when we've reached our limit with perceived discrimination.

But the content of history is often much more serious and the particular perspectives from which it's presented far less innocuous, as in the malicious and inaccurate portraits of black misrule in the South during Reconstruction; a picture that was largely historical agitprop, as Archon John Hope Franklin showed in his book *Reconstruction After the Civil War*. There, as in *From Slavery to Freedom* and his many other volumes, Archon Franklin addressed the historical denial of any significant contribution to America and the world by African Americans. In setting the record straight, he also initiated the integration of African American and American history. He brought an alternative perspective to the social and psychological history of Southern whites in *The Militant South*, and in doing so, opened the American narrative to legitimate commentary by non-white historians.

"Americans are not telling or being told the truth about who we are and where we've come from," he said. "And if our past doesn't help us understand the present, there's something dangerously wrong with our history. It's time to question it, revise it and put both our history and our democratic ideals to work."

Finally, to provide a multiplicity of perspectives on future historical research and writing, Archon Franklin trained thirty-two Ph.D.s in history.

In this issue THE BOULÉ JOURNAL remembers Archon John Hope Franklin. Ω