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## FILM, MEDIA, AND MUSEUM REVIEWS

# Kings and Diamonds: Negro League Baseball in Film

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*Kings on the Hill: Baseball's Forgotten Men*, directed by Molly Youngling, written by Rob Ruck, produced by Rob Ruck and Molly Youngling; 60 minutes in VHS, available from the University of Pittsburgh Press, Ruskin Hall, 120 Ruskin Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15262, \$19.95.

*Black Diamonds, Blues City: Stories of the Memphis Red Sox*, written and directed by Steven J. Ross, produced by John R. Haddock and Steven J. Ross; 56:30 minutes in VHS, can be purchased from John R. Haddock, Dean's Office, College of Arts & Sciences, 217 Mitchell Hall, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152, \$24. Make checks payable to the University of Memphis.

The recent releases of *Kings on the Hill* (1993) and *Black Diamonds, Blues City* (1997) confirm the adage that valuable gems will often be found in pairs. Both films illuminate an important, frequently ignored aspect of sports history and American social history; both films ask hard questions of the society and the athletic subculture that allowed Jim Crow to call the pitches for more than half a century. Former Dodger Joe Black, who appears in both these films, could have also said for *Diamonds* what he said at the outset of *Kings*: that this is the story of baseball "in all its ugliness and all its glory."

*Kings on the Hill* focuses primarily on the Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords. Drawing heavily from his *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (1987), historian Rob Ruck wrote this script, and later served as an historical consultant for *Black Diamonds*. In *Kings* he chronicles the Homestead Grays from their sandlot beginnings around the turn of the century in the steel mill settlement of Homestead along the Monongehela River, then explains how the Grays became a professional, highly successful club under the ownership of former player and manager Cumberland Posey in the 1920s. During the Depression era, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, owned by Gus Greenlee, emerged to challenge the Grays' local dominance. In fact, the two teams utterly dominated the Negro

National League for most of the decade of the 1930s. Their combined rosters included names recognizable even to people scarcely familiar with Negro League baseball: Smoky Joe Williams, Oscar Charleston, Cool Papa Bell, Judy Johnson, Buck Leonard, Satchel Paige, and Josh Gibson.

By contrast, the names featured in *Black Diamonds*, *Blues City* ring few bells. Who knows of Larry Brown, a catcher who reportedly taught Roy Campanella his craft? Who has ever heard of Verdell “Lefty” Mathis, who might well have preceded Joe Black and Don Newcombe to the Dodgers had he not undergone major surgery on his pitching arm just prior to inquiries from Branch Rickey? And what about Ted Radcliffe, who got his nickname “Double Duty” from frequently catching one day and pitching the next? These men, joined by the likes of little-known Clinton “Casey” Jones, Josh Johnson, Marlin Carter, Frank Pearson, and Bobby Robinson, all played for the Memphis Red Sox, one of the several southern clubs in the Negro American League. Founded in 1923, the Red Sox thrived for almost forty years before they succumbed to the same integrationist irony that killed the Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords. *Black Diamonds*, *Blues City* is the story of these other Red Sox.

For all their common attention to the rise and fall of Negro League baseball, at several points these two films are as different as the baseball cities they represent: northern industrial Pittsburgh of the Negro National League, southern riverboat Memphis of the Negro American League. Differences in structure and tone invite comparisons, but first, some tactical and thematic similarities need to be mentioned.

They begin in identical fashion. Prior to the appearance of the title, former Baltimore Elite Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher Joe Black briefly addresses the viewers of *Kings*, and former Red Sox player Bobby Robinson does the same for *Diamonds*. Whereas Black presents a scripted overview of the drama that is to follow, Robinson more personally admits that he never thought racially integrated baseball would ever happen. “It just came along too late for me,” he laments.

Both films fully exploit the techniques now most associated with Ken Burns, whose several multi-episode series include a nine-part history of baseball. Off-camera narrators (actors Ossie Davis in *Kings* and Samuel L. Jackson in *Diamonds*) read scripts that are illustrated by old film clips and photographs, enlivened by appropriate background music, and enlightened by “talking heads.” The talking heads come in two guises. Academic authorities feed the viewer interpretations as well as facts; veteran participants deliver provocative, firsthand commentary on people and events. For *Kings*, an aged but handsome Monty Irvin concludes simply, “We were young, we had some talent, and we enjoyed doing it.”

Of all the players profiled in these two films, Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson receive most coverage. Gibson, a native of Pittsburgh, played for both the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords; Paige pitched with, or against, just about everybody in the Negro Leagues. Former athletes in both films recall being totally intimidated by Saige’s humming fast ball: none of that “funny stuff” (curve balls and change-ups) in his youth. They also stood in awe of Gibson’s cat-like agility behind the plate, his rifle-arm, and the batting power that exploded

from his sturdy torso. After leading the Negro League with a .393 batting average in 1946, Gibson died at age 36 in January 1947, just a few months before Jackie Robinson played his first game with the Dodgers. By the time Paige played briefly for the Cleveland Indians, the King was over the hill.

Yet to the end he played with soul music ringing in his ears, just as it does throughout these two films. Far removed from Ken Burns' mournful fiddle and nostalgic folk tunes, the airspace here is filled with the sax, a lively piano, and blues lyrics. Nathan Davis for *Kings* and Marvell Thomas for *Diamonds* composed and arranged the music, and even threw in some bouncy gospel organ for good measure.

Music and black baseball seem to have been made with each other, for each other. Crawford's Grill, where the Pittsburgh Crawfords got their nickname, showcased musicians like homegrown pianist Harold Garner and singer Mary Lou Williams, and the barnstorming Billie Holliday. The Grill was more of a music and party center than an eatery. The close connection of black baseball and music is all the more explicit in the Memphis story. The Red Sox field, Martin Stadium, stood near Beale Street, the fabled home of rhythm and blues. Black musicians like the young B. B. King, a native son, effectively called attention to home games by performing around the pitcher's mound prior to the game.

Another Memphis musician, Rufus Thomas, fancifully suggests a direct link between his youthful baseball spectatorship and the innovative spirit that produces jazz. He tells of chasing foul balls, squirming through holes in (and under) the wooden fence at Martin Stadium, and of climbing onto horses, boxcars, or neighbor's porches to watch the game without paying admission. "Anything, just to see that ball game," he says. "Look," he concludes, "we are the greatest improvisors in the world. Nobody can improvise like black folk. We can make something out of nothing." The ball park was one of many sites where black youths learned to improvise.

If common themes are indicators of significance, post-season barnstorming tours were supremely important to black baseball players. At season's end they could pick up extra money to tide them over the winter months. Moreover, they could test their skills against white major league opponents. As English professor John Edgar Wideman, a former Penn basketball star and Rhodes Scholar, explains in *Kings*, even if black barnstormers did not win, they "produced, in the folk, stories that were better than winning, in which the exploits get exaggerated and fabled."

In Mexico and the Caribbean, they found a social acceptance denied them in the United States. Before shortstop Willie Wells played out his career with the Memphis Red Sox, he left the Newark Eagles for a Mexican team. "Not only do I get more money playing here," he explained to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "but I [also] live like a king. I didn't quit Newark and join some other team in the United States. I quit and left the country. I found freedom and democracy here, something I never found in the United States. Here, in Mexico, I am a man." In a wonderfully bizarre anecdote that underscores the ludicrous character of racial segregation, Larry Brown, Jr., the son of the Red Sox light-skinned catcher Larry

Brown, tells about his father being urged to play baseball in Cuba, learn Spanish, and return to play in the major leagues as a Cuban.

Shortly after World War II, time ran out on racially segregated teams and leagues. As the *Kings* narrator succinctly phrased it, "For the Negro Leagues, integration meant extinction." Unfortunately, the Jackie Robinson saga seems to have seduced the scriptwriter and director of *Kings on the Hill*. More than a quarter of the film is given to the sequence of events that led to Robinson's breakthrough and its dolorous effect on the racially segregated game. Integrated baseball meant the exclusion of black owners and black umpires, and largely even of black fans. Despite the predictable nod to the sad absence of Josh Gibson from the first group of black major leaguers, the *Kings'* narrative loses the Grays and the Crawfords in the dust of Ebbets Field. Or at the least their stories are blurred in more general ruminations about the national results of baseball's "great experiment."

By way of contrast, *Black Diamonds, Blues City* keeps its focus on the Red Sox to the very end. Old Red Sox players personalize integration's death blow to their baseball world. "From here to St. Louis," says Clinton "Casey" Jones, "it wasn't nothing for the road to be full of cars going to St. Louis to see Jackie Robinson. And we [were] playing right out here. Ain't nobody there." In 1960 Martin Stadium was torn down without any public ceremony. "We didn't make no money," Frank Person concludes simply but emotionally, "but we had a lot of fun."

These nuances represent some fundamental differences in the texture of these *two* films. *Kings on the Hill* is admirably balanced, strong on contextual and narrative details. A history professor could well have written the script as a somewhat popularized version of classroom lectures. And so he (Rob Ruck) did. An Emmy Award and the Gold Apple award at the National Educational Film and Video Festival testify to the technical and scholarly quality of *Kings*. Major League Baseball distributed over 1500 copies of this videotape and study guides to schools and educational institutions, especially in the cities of Cleveland, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Miami.

For viewers who know little about the history of racially segregated baseball, *Kings* provides a highly informed, liberal slant on the subject. Splendid photographs, music, and film clips prevent this film from ever being dull despite a lineup of eminently respectable and thoughtful talking heads. If their commentary lacks surprises except for the occasional imaginative turn of phrase, they are consistently sound.

*Black Diamonds*, on the other hand, has a less authoritative, more sprightly tone. The scriptwriter and director, Steven John Ross, is no academic historian. Rather, he is a professor of communications at the University of Memphis, who came to this project after it was conceived by John Haddock, a mathematics professor and director of research and graduate studies at the same institution. Communications and mathematics: an unlikely combination that has produced an unusual and lively documentary.

Compared to *Kings*, this narrative is less dominant, the material more crisply edited. The story-line depends heavily on the numerous vignettes and sparkling one-liners Ross and Haddock have drawn out of the Memphis old-timers they rounded up for on-camera interviews. These aged athletes are less practiced, less polished, and thus less predictable than their *Kings* counterparts. Diamonds they are, but in the rough.

Delightfully so. They are all aged but still playful, humorous, sentimental, and assertive. In some cases, they come across as naughty old men. Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, 90-something years of age when interviewed for this film, explains the baseball origins of his nickname, then adds that his friends all call him "Duty." His lady friends gave him that moniker, he insists, "Because they know I would do my duty." When the anti-humor police join forces with the guardians of political correctness, they will have to take B. B. King along with Double Duty Radcliffe to the clinker. With eyes aglitter, King recalls the excitement of large crowds at old Martin Stadium: "Ah man, lotta people and pretty girls."

Amidst all their recollections about the physical and economic difficulties of life in Negro League baseball, the Red Sox frequently laugh, sometimes at each other. "He was a good ballplayer. He could throw, he could hit, he could catch, and he could pitch," said Marlin Carter of one of his old teammates. Then, with an impeccable sense of timing, Carter added, "And he could tell lies."

More frequently, the Red Sox laughed at themselves. Lefty Mathis could hardly restrain his perverse giggles at his own youthful stupidity when he recalled once becoming agitated as the decrepit Red Sox team bus careened down a steep hill, about to cross a narrow bridge. Despite his mates' insistence that he calm down, Mathis jumped out and went tumbling, scraping the skin from both his hands and his backside. No black doctor could be found in the next small town, so the wounds had to await racially appropriate treatment in Kansas City. Behind this yarn, of course, lay the larger truth of the discomfort, if not outright danger, of life on the road in Negro League baseball. But Lefty Mathis and his friends instinctively wrapped the somber truth in humor. Fortunately, the editors of *Diamonds* left the humor in.

They also refrained from the temptation to excise refreshingly candid lines, even when they reflected negatively on other blacks in the Red Sox story. Of the four black owners of the Sox, the Martin brothers, one was "a slicker," declared an outspoken player on-camera. "He would slick you, his brother, and everybody else out of a buck" All the Martins were "cheap," chimed in two other players. They were "the cheapest sons of bitches who ever lived," added the unfailingly colorful Double Duty Radcliffe.

These views suggest more than mere outspoken candor. They represent a kind of class-consciousness akin to the stance that director Steve Ross dramatized earlier in *At the River I Stand*, a documentary about the Memphis sanitation workers' strike of 1968. In a subtle us-versus-them issue, old players in *Diamonds* brag about negotiating a set fee rather than a percentage of the gate for their exhibition games—especially for any game that might be canceled because of rain.

More explicit defiance of authority occurred at the 1943 Negro League All-Star game in Chicago. As Lefty Mathis tells the story, in previous years this annual gathering of the best black players had attracted large crowds, lining the pockets of the owners. According to Mathis, each player received only a cheap wristwatch for playing the game. In 1943, however, players met secretly on the day before the game. They agreed to take batting practice the next day, but would refuse to play the game unless the owners negotiated in good faith. Each player finally received \$100 for his day's work. "We got a hundred dollars apiece," concludes Mathis, "but they got away with murder. They was taking in from eight to ten thousand dollars *apiece*."

Towards the end of *Diamonds*, the viewer is once again confronted with Marlin Carter telling about his Memphis Red Sox of more than half a century ago, only to have his voice fade out to be replaced by the narrator informing us that the neatly attired, personable, and articulate Carter died before the film was finished. That emotional blow—graveside scene and all—is soon followed by another, more positive tug on the heart strings: a Negro League reunion in 1994 that is reminiscent of the final scene of *A League of Their Own* (1991). Still in character, Double Duty Radcliffe plays to the crowd by recalling some "son of a bitch" who couldn't hit a fast ball. Jazz musician Rufus Thomas cracks a joke: "See, I knowed the boy when he wasn't, and he ain't yet."

After all their various mixtures of playful and serious recollections, both *Kings* and *Diamonds* end on similarly upbeat summaries that draw on memory for inspiration. Clergyman Harold Tinker, once a center fielder and manager of the Pittsburgh Crawfords, recalls "a lot of glorious memories" that reminded him and his Negro League comrades of "the way we came from nothing to be somebody, respected by both white and black." Another clergyman, Benjamin Hook, Jr., sees the history of Negro League baseball in larger community terms. "Something about community pride was involved in it. And for black Memphians, a lot of people didn't know anything about baseball but they knew what the Red Sox were and where they were located," says Hook, a Memphis native and NAACP activist. "So this ability to build a life, to build a culture, to build a society in a rigidly segregated society that told you you were nobody, well we were proving to folk that we were somebody, and most of all to ourselves....We built a tremendous life within this closed circle."

For those of us whose fluke of birth spared us the necessity of building our lives within that closed circle, *Kings on the Hill* and *Black Diamonds, Blues City* help to diminish our ignorance of it. They also stir our own memories, or lack thereof, of fellow Americans whose athleticism our parents hid from view. I, for one, grew up in the 1950s in north Georgia near Chattanooga, Tennessee, a few hundred miles east of Memphis. I cheered the Chattanooga Lookouts when they played against their in-state Southern League opponents, the Memphis Chicks, but I never even heard of the Memphis Red Sox. Like so many others in these racial matters, I paid a high price for privilege.