

Tribute to The Ebony Hillbillies

Parker Gambino February 6, 2025

Back in the olden days, before it could be recorded and played back, music was of necessity live entertainment. Music was no different from written and oral knowledge lineages: there was tradition, appropriation, and creativity, with the fusion of these strands representing the evolution that continues to this day. The Ebony Hillbillies is what music would have sounded like in the olden days. Music that still stirs listeners, often (as intended) to also become dancers, or at least vigorous foot-tappers.

As with the Carolina Chocolate Drops (now disbanded for a decade), who also mined the old-time string band vein, the unabashedly African-American Ebony Hillbillies defy hokey wokeness with their name. They shine light on a shunted-aside aspect of the richness of American culture: the significant contributions of African slave lineages to the wide spectrum of American music, including the bluegrass genre, long considered to be the province of European descendants. Sorry, music knows no color!

The band had its humble beginnings in New York City, when like-minded Henrique Prince and Norris Washington Bennett met. As the group grew organically, there were many hours of busking in the New York City subway system (as attested to by multitudes of comments attached to their YouTube videos and elsewhere). Through sustained effort, the EHs gained renown and expanded their list of performance venues, perhaps most significantly (to me) to major enterprises with a mission to preserve and keep vital the memories and folk traditions of ancient times: the Smithsonian Institution, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, the Schoenberg Library, the American Folk Museum, and Levon Helm's New Year's Eve Ramble. (those last three, like the band itself, are based in New York). Bassist Bill Salter adds a touch of multi-Grammy pedigree shine, as co-writer of "Just the Two of Us" (together with Bill Withers, who had the hit) and "Where is the Love" (covered first by Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway).

The gig portrayed on the poster was one of the more bizarre sketching events that I've attended. Slattery Park is not exactly in the infamous South Bronx (it's more central), and it's a little short on the greenery that residents deserve. It's pretty much a nowhere-ville, as far as can be imagined from the glamour of the Carnegie Hall-ish other venues where the Ebony Hillbillies have performed. I'd actually played a few games of pick-up basketball at Slattery during my teen years. But 10:30 AM on a Monday? Seriously? As I recount in my blog post (<https://parkergambino.com/?p=1642>), "I was the only person who actually was there to see them, and as anticipated, (let's see how to best euphemise this) there was no trouble in viewing close and unobstructed. Some of the park patrons did stop by for a few numbers here and there." It was already work-up-a-sweat-from-just-sitting hot, so perhaps there was a logic to the early start.

I like expanding my sketching repertoire of different musical instruments, so Gloria Gassman playing the bones was a first for me. And these were not any of them modern wood or metal items, these were the real cut-from-a-carcass deal! The gig didn't last long enough for me to

satisfyingly create adequate portrayals of all five musicians, severely shorting the work on Bill Salter. Who knows, perhaps under the circumstances they just wanted to be done with it and get gone. When soliciting autographs I discovered that Norris Bennett was blind. But unlike some other blind performers I've sketched, his seemingly well-practiced signature did justice.

In the course of preparing this tribute I was saddened to learn of the passing of Norris Washington Bennett in 2020. His rendition of "Shenandoah" linked below is recommended as a touchingly appropriate farewell sendoff.

This closing quote, from founder Henrique:

"We are a string band. What we do is original music while extending the idea of ancient music. A lot of styles of string music encapsulate the survival technique. It was originally music played for the musicians' own sanity; then it became music audiences paid to hear."

=====

Suggested Links:

[The Ebony Hillbillies Official Site](#)

[Wikipedia Page](#)

[Bluegrass Standard](#)

Performance Links:

[Shenandoah](#)

[Busking in the subway](#)

[Liza Jane](#)