

Back Talk

History just seems to repeat itself

BackTalk is a weekly column written by County Line publisher emeritus Karen Parker of Ontario

Before the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the protest songs that accompanied it (think "We Shall Overcome" or "A Change is Gonna Come"), the famed jazz composer Charles Mingus wrote the "Fables of Faubus" in 1959. Mingus was a prolific artist with a discography of hundreds of songs; only Duke Ellington surpassed his productivity. He was recently honored by the Kennedy Center on what would have been his 100th year had he not died in 1979 of ALS (Lou Gehrig's).

There are few compositions in jazz that would be considered "protest songs," and of all his hundreds of works, "Fables of Faubus" is the most explicitly political of Mingus's work. His reference is to Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus. The governor refused to comply with a unanimous decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1954 case Brown v. Board of Education, and ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent black students from attending Little Rock Central High School.

Although Faubus had been accused of being a left-wing liberal and Communist sympathizer, his actions were not from belief, but were politically motivated. He hoped this manufactured crisis over integration would distract the public from recently imposed tax increases. Furthermore, it did not escape his notice the success his political opponents were having in using segregationist rhetoric to arouse white voters. It's sort of like now, when we are deluged with election commercials about the rising crime rate, but those commercials fail to note the crime rate actually fell to its lowest point in years but ratcheted up again during the pandemic, much of it attributed to homelessness and mental illness. Hm, some things in politics never change.

As it turned out, Faubus was no match for President Dwight Eisenhower, whose military skill played a part in America's victory in World War II. On Sept. 5, 1957, Eisenhower sent a telegram to Gov. Orval E. Faubus in which he wrote, "The only assurance I can give you is that the Federal Constitution will be upheld by me by every legal means at my command." Eisenhower did not bring out the big guns, however. Instead, he met with Faubus in Newport, Rhode Island, after which Faubus had a change of heart.

The quoted "friendly and constructive discussion" led to the governor claiming this desire to comply with his duty to the Constitution, personal opinions aside. The Arkansas governor stayed true to his word, and on Sept. 21, President Eisenhower released a statement that announced that the governor had withdrawn his troops, the Little Rock School Board was carrying out desegregation plans, and local law was ready to keep order.

But a little more than a week later, Little Rock Mayor Woodrow Wilson Mann sent a telegram to Dwight Eisenhower, stating a mob had formed at Central High School in Little Rock. State police made efforts to control the mob, but for the safety of the newly enrolled children, they were sent home. The mayor stressed how this was a planned act and that the principal agitator, Jimmy Karam, was an associate of Gov. Faubus.

Double crossing Eisenhower was not too bright. His response was to federalize the Arkansas National Guard, ordering them to return to their armories, which effectively removed them from 'Faubus' control. Eisenhower then sent elements of the 101st Airborne Division to Arkansas to protect the black students and enforce the federal court order.

Few people have not seen the film clips of the nine teenage girls shouldering their way through an irate crowd while being spit on and called names we cannot print here. It is likely Mingus saw those same news reels, prompting him to write "The Fables of Faubus."

The song was first recorded for Mingus' 1959 album, "Mingus Ah Um." However,

Columbia Records refused to allow the lyrics to the song to be included, so the song was recorded as an instrumental on the album. It was not until Oct. 20, 1960, that the song was recorded with lyrics, for the album "Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus," which was released on the more independent Candid label.

Although the lyrics easily could have gotten Mingus killed in those fractious periods prior to the Civil Rights period, looking at them now, they do little except lampoon Faubus. Take the first two stanzas, for example:

Oh, Lord, don't let 'em shoot us!

Oh, Lord, don't let 'em stab us!

Oh, Lord, no more swastikas!

Oh, Lord, no more Ku Klux Klan!

Name me someone who's ridiculous, Dannie.

Governor Faubus!

Why is he so sick and ridiculous?

He won't permit integrated schools.

I had never heard this story, and I bet you hadn't either, even though Mingus is considered one of the most talented composers America ever produced. The textbooks I grew up with and often the ones in use today waste very little space on black life. The incident in Little Rock was a major inflection point in the Civil Rights movement, but if you know about it, it might be from a dusty old news clip dragged from the vault for the anniversary of the event.

Consequently, I was disappointed at the governor's debate on Friday evening. Republican candidate Tim Michels said, "It's time public schools stop teaching CRT and get back to the ABC's."

And Gov. Evers (who all evening appeared to wish he was anywhere else but on the debate stage) responded with, "We don't teach critical race theory in grades K-12."

Well, isn't that just dandy. Evers is a lifelong educator, but perhaps for political reasons, he did not say, "We don't teach critical race theory, but we sure as heck ought to teach our racial history."

I hope he is watching Henry Louis Gate's recent documentary on PBS, "I Heard it Through the Grapevine." As Gates points out, from 1865 onward, blacks were developing networks designed to move the race forward. Hundreds of black schools were formed, followed by black colleges that still exist today (think Howard University).

Perhaps sensing they were not to gain full acceptance in the white community, they formed their own system on the other side of the color line, from banks to beauty shops, insurance companies, manufacturing, newspapers, magazines, churches, social organizations, and many other endeavors.

In Tulsa, a black community grew so successfully it was known as Black Wall Street. But in 1921, a white mob began a rampage through some 35 square blocks, decimating the community. Armed rioters, many deputized by local police, looted and burned-down businesses, homes, schools, churches, a hospital,

hotel, public library, newspaper offices and more. While the official death toll of the Tulsa race massacre was 36, historians estimate it may have been as high as 300. As many as 10,000 people were left homeless.

Bet you didn't read about that in your local history book.

What happened to all those early successes of black people after the Civil War? Was it the end of Reconstruction and the rise of segregation and Jim Crow laws? Was it more subtle activities such as red lining neighborhoods, discrimination in lending and hiring, or voting laws designed to make the process as difficult as possible. It's hard to believe, but this country that prides itself on freedom and opportunity for all waited until March of this year before President Joe Biden signed into law the first bill that specifies lynching as a federal hate crime. In 2015, the Equal Justice Initiative issued a report that detailed more than 4,400 documented racial terror lynchings of black people in America between 1877 and 1950. Yet it took more than 200 attempts dating back a century before Congress finally passed it..

Critical race theory, the latest bogeyman of conservatives like Ted Cruz and Mike Pence, and, yes, our very own Tim Michels for governor are totally clueless on CRT. It began as a complex theory that questions if the law is just and neutral. It certainly is too dense for anyone younger than the oldest high schoolers. Its goal is to increase our understanding and rectify the ways in which a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color in America has had an impact on the relationship between social structure and professed ideals such as "the rule of law" and "equal protection."

Now that is a mouthful. Think of it in simpler terms. Why, for example, are there so few black families in the farming industry? According to the Equal Justice Initiative, there were a million black farmers in 1914 and 18,000 in 1992. Quoting from the Atlantic, EJI's website states, "Starting with New Deal agencies in 1937, federal administrators often ignored or targeted poor Black people — denying them loans and giving sharecropping work to white people" became 'the safety net, price-setter, chief investor, and sole regulator for most of the farm economy in places like the Delta.' As small farms failed, large plantations mega into huge industrial mega-farms with enormous power over agricultural policy."

I cannot imagine how we will ever untangle ourselves from sins, errors and missteps of the past and move forward. But I do know that recognizing the errors of the past will go a long way toward avoiding the same mistakes in the future.

I didn't expect much from Tim Michels, but one would hope that a man who spent his life in education and prior to becoming governor, headed the DPI, would not head for a foxhole when the subject of critical race theory comes up.



FLOW BOARD, Science Committee members and volunteers seen at the Borrow Pit Lake along Highway 78 include, from left, Susan Graham, Dave Krueger, Timm Zumm, Dave Marshall and Jean Unmuth. The pristine water quality of the lake has been the subject of a recent study by the FLOW Science Committee.

FLOW Board hears water quality report

By GILLIAN POMPLUN Friends of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway (FLOW) held a brief meeting last week in Sauk City, at La Mexicana restaurant. At the meeting, they heard about an upcoming study regarding the importance of groundwater to water quality in the Lower Wisconsin Riverway.

"A key finding of the borrow pit study is that for protecting Lower Wisconsin State Riverway oxbow lakes, groundwater is everything," Science Committee member Dave Marshall said. "Groundwater dominates floodplain lake water quality, and when polluted by nitrates, water quality degradation follows."

Marshall explained that the borrow pit is a seepage lake that receives mostly clean groundwater recharge originating on Blackhawk Ridge.

"We find polluted oxbows elsewhere along the Riverway where the groundwater becomes contaminated from river terrace industrial scale agriculture and heavy applications of nitrogen fertilizers and liquid manure applications," Marshall explained.

The study was conducted by the FLOW Science Committee, a group of retired DNR Scientists who continue to volunteer their time to study and protect water quality and species diversity on the Lower Wisconsin Riverway. Funding for the study came from Dane County, who give \$600 for water quality testing. The study was conducted with all volunteer labor and will be released soon.

The winner of the borrow pit lake naming contest will be announced soon. The winning name will be forwarded to the DNR committee on place names.

Riverway safety

Dave Krueger, FLOW volunteer with the 'Kids Don't Float' kiosk program reported that all life vests have been withdrawn from the kiosks up and down the river, and stored for the winter.

Timm Zumm reported on an incident he had responded to on Sunday, Oct. 16, at Peck's Landing near Spring Green.

"I have eyes everywhere on the Riverway, and one of my friends called me to report that a vehicle had driven out on a sandbar and gotten stuck," Zumm said. "I

think of this as a 'teachable moment,' where people understand that driving out on sugar sand on a sandbar on the River is not a good idea."

Zumm said that he and his friend started to render assistance to the group of 20-year-olds by digging out the tires, and deflating them slightly.

"I was hoping it was only buried up to the axle, but it turned out it was buried up to the frame," Zumm said. "We called a tow truck, but they refused to drive out on the sandbar, and it basically came to using a shovel to dig them out."

Zumm said that before it was all said and done, the DNR Warden had become involved, and the individuals received both a fine from the DNR and a hefty bill from the tow company.

Events

Zumm reported that the event season is wrapping up for FLOW this season. He said he had taken 'Flo the Paddlefish' to a recent open house event at Taliesin.

"Taliesin is open to the general public for free very often, so it was a nice opportunity for families to get out and enjoy the property," Zumm said. "The kids loved Flo, and Allison Scoien and I got to talk to lots of people about FLOW's work."

The next meeting of the FLOW board will take place on Thursday, Nov. 17, at 6 p.m., at a location to be determined. No meeting is currently planned for December, and the FLOW Annual Meeting will take place in January where the 2022 Riverway Champion award will be announced.



FLO THE PADDLEFISH was the delight of children at a recent open house event held at Taliesin. The kids all wanted to pose for a picture with Flo, and FLOW volunteers Allison Scoien and Timm Zumm were able to let participants know about the good work of the Friends of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway.

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