

Blues Expert Albert Murray celebrated

Written by Herb Boyd Special to the NNPA



NEW YORK – Whether in words or music, the blues was an unavoidable topic for speakers and musicians at the memorial services for the author Albert Murray on Sept. 10 at Jazz at Lincoln Center in midtown Manhattan. Murray, who died on August 18 at his home in Harlem, was 97, and throughout his long and productive life, the blues was essential to his writing as it was to the life of Count Basie.

As befitting Murray's association with the African American music tradition, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis led a line of musicians into the Allen Room in a mournful dirge, invoking New Orleans and the homage that was to follow. LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs recited a poem by Elizabeth Alexander, referencing Murray's collection of essays "The Omni-Americans," which she called "Omni-Albert Murray."

"I can picture Bearden with his magazines and scissors," Diggs read, her voice low and even. "I can see guitar shapes, curves like watermelon rinds. Will I find names like Trueblood and the shapes for my collage? Omni-Albert Murray...Omni Omni...Albert Murray."

Romare Bearden, the great artist and collagist is the artist mentioned above and he, like the nod to Ralph Ellison in citing Trueblood, a character from his novel *Invisible Man*, are two icons who were intimate friends of Murray's. Perhaps none was as close as Ellison, and his name was conjured by several speakers, most notably by Col. Robert Spalding III, during his reading of letters between Ellison and Murray, many of which are collected in *Trading Twelves*. Col. Spalding's presence also reminded the large audience of Murray's career in the Air Force, after attending Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, in Alabama.

One of the most poignant moments in the celebration was tenor saxophonist Victor Goines' interpretation of John Coltrane's "Alabama," that was written in tribute to the four little girls who were killed in Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963 by explosive set by members of the Ku Klux Klan. In soft, tender tones, Goines continued the sweet impressions delivered earlier by writer Leon Wieseltier and Jimmy Heath in the same way it anticipated the insightful remembrances of historian Douglass Brinkley.

Both Heath and Marsalis demonstrated they are just as good reading as they are with horns

Blues Expert Albert Murray celebrated

Written by Herb Boyd Special to the NNPA

attached to their lips; Marsalis was particularly effective in capturing the nuances of language and mood in his presentation from Murray's first novel, *Train Whistle Guitar*.

Murray would have joined the appreciation extended to vocalist Brianna Thomas after she soulfully nailed "Goin' to Chicago," providing listeners with a female version of Jimmy Rushing, especially when the orchestra filled in her pauses with sharp vamps, emphasizing her "sorry but I can't take you."

The crowd loved Thomas but they stood and hailed bass clarinetist Joe Temperley's deeply meditative touch on Duke Ellington's "Single Petal of a Rose." As Eric Dolphy often said, the bass clarinet is not the easiest horn to control. But Temperley did it with an elegance that would have pleased Ellington and Murray.

The musical moments were nicely interlaced between the reflections from such speakers as Rob Gibson, once a creative director at Jazz at Lincoln Center; Paul Devlin and Jackie Modeste, who traded fours on 10 things to know about Murray; editor Errol McDonald; author Sidney Offit; and Murray's daughter, Michele.

"He always supported my desire to be a dancer," she said, recalling her days with the Alvin Ailey troupe that was given additional spice when Judith Jamison took to the podium to read from "The Magic Keys," Murray's final tale of Scooter, his alter ego.

Pianist Aaron Diehl, fresh from the Detroit Jazz Festival, soloed wonderfully on "Echoes of Spring," a tune by Willie "The Lion" Smith that Diehl burnished with an abundance of stride and boogie-woogie filigree. He was equally engaging with bassist Christian McBride on Monk's "Epistrophy."

The tribute ended as it began with Marsalis and crew assembling and marching from the room with a spirited rendition of "Didn't He Ramble." Murray certainly did.