



Ben Vereen as "Chicken George"

Eighty million Americans watch *Roots* on TV

Last week America, black and white, confronted its racist past on nationwide TV.

Eighty million people watched ABC's week long dramatization of Alex Haley's *Roots*, more people than watched the Superbowl or *Gone With the Wind*. As a commentator said on Thursday, after this TV will never be the same. Probably not. If money can be made by depicting slavery from the point of view of blacks, prime time is due for a new set of issues.

Techniques from every kind of Hollywood film went into *Roots*, especially those from Westerns. But with a difference. This time it was blacks who were shown as heroes and heroines, and the slaveowners of the South were, for once, painted in something like their true colors. "The Triumph of an American Family" used America's most popular cultural form to repudiate one of America's most pervasive ideas—racism.

It even made good points about sexism. There were portraits

of strong black women. Rape of black women by white men was shown as a common and terrorizing aspect of the Old South. A white woman explained to her obviously more intelligent slave that she guessed God made all white folks smarter than black ones, "just like he made men smarter than women."

When *Roots* topped *Gone With the Wind*, it was more than just ratings. It was the image of a strong, heroic black family edging out the myth of contented "darkies" under slavery.

Roots, too, is the stuff of myth. It gives America a new set of popular ideals.

Like the Western, it might be accused of making its characters larger than life. Not all blacks emerging from slavery were as merciful as Tom Harvey who, in the final episode, declines to whip the white who has humiliated and beaten him. Blacks, too, sometimes committed desperate and inhumane acts. Yet it's a better myth, closer to the truth about slavery, and much

closer to the realities all Americans need to face about themselves.

Sixty years ago D. W. Griffiths made cinema history with *Birth of a Nation*. He showed what film could do as a new art form, but his content was post-Reconstruction Southern, including heroic Ku Klux Klanners. *Roots*, on the other hand, breaks no new artistic ground, but its viewpoint on black history, never before expressed on prime time TV, has, as Haley says, changed the culture of America.

It's a story that reveals clearly how, as one white character in *Roots* remarks, property is power, and always will be.

—Judy MacLean

In These Times will print in upcoming issues a broad spectrum of reactions to the TV showing of *Roots*. Included will be the experience of teachers—school and college—who used the material of the book and TV show in class; civil rights activists, black and white; as well as historians.

The executives who control what America sees and hears on its airwaves are always excusing their product by saying, "We give the public what it wants." No one rises to refute them because there are no Nielson ratings for what audiences would really like to see/hear. And if there were, it wouldn't prove much because there's no way to opt for what you have never experienced.

There are, however, indications that, given a chance, Americans would pick something better than—or at least different from—what they're getting now. One straw in the wind is the popularity of BBC-produced soap opera, comedy, and drama. Another is the growing response to non-commercial radio.

Radio is more sensitive to listener-reaction because it's cheaper to produce and thus less dependent on Big Advertising. There are more channels—especially on FM—and thus more opportunity for picking and choosing. And in the case of most non-commercial radio, it has to please its listeners or go hungry.

There have been non-commercial stations in the U.S. ever since FM sets appeared on the market. Most are affiliated to some sort of educational institution, though even this type of station is now frequently supported in large part by funds solicited from the public. But thanks to an FCC regulation that reserved a number of frequencies for community use, it has always been possible to establish and operate a community-controlled, or "listener-sponsored" radio station—something that would be almost impossible on TV.

As early as the 1950s, some of the more successful listener-sponsored stations combined in a loose federation that eventually became Pacifica Broadcasting. The group—which now includes five stations—shares on a use-what-you-like basis the material



Alternative networks give public a chance

Listener sponsored radio offers better programs and freer discussion of public concern.

produced by each, and gets limited financial and technical aid from a private foundation. KPFA and KPFA, the Berkeley and Los Angeles stations, fought successful defense actions against political repression, triggered by their inclusion of radical commentators during the '60s.

►A real national network.

But not until 1970 was there a real national network of such stations with a central organization dedicated to "producing, acquiring, and distributing" high quality programs for a token yearly fee, now \$100.

National Public Radio (funded by a small slice of the funds Congress allocates to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting) has grown from the original 90 member stations to 200. Its coverage reaches from Alaska to Puerto Rico. Seventy percent of its stations are licensed to universities or colleges, which pick up some of the tab. The rest are licensed to public and state school systems, public library systems, or community organizations. In practically all cases, listeners contribute a vital part of the budget and share the responsibility for policy-making.

NPR does not cover all non-commercial, community radio in the U.S. To join the network a station must meet certain minimum standards, which are constantly being revised upwards:

- A broadcast day of at least 18 hours, 365 days a year;
- a full-time staff of at least five persons;
- a budget of at least \$75,000 a year;
- power of at least 250 watts for AM, 3000 watts for FM.

Any station that meets these criteria can join NPR and avail itself of its weekly 36 (approximately) hours of programming: news, commentary, educational material, music and cultural discussions. The rest of the 126 hours must be filled by the member station's own resources or acquired elsewhere.

The NPR contribution is of remarkably high quality and variety, although it tends to be a little high-brow in its musical selections (opera, symphony, some jazz, and a good deal of ethnic-folk) and in its "informational" programming. One weekly feature called "Options" uses lectures from the Brookings Institute and the Chautauqua series and bills itself as a "free univer-

sity of the air."

Of wider appeal is NPR's full coverage of Congressional and other government hearings and major speeches delivered at the Washington Press Club. Top banana in the news department is unquestionably the hour-and-a-half "All Things Considered," which has won the prestigious Peabody Award for overall excellence and the Ohio University Award for one of its anchorpersons, Susan Stamberg. A new series called "Pauline Frederick and Colleagues" will headline the veteran U.N. correspondent and a changing panel of experts on foreign and domestic news.

As it heads into 1977, NPR is geared to an attack on the problem of "lack of public awareness." Even in those parts of the country best served by member stations, there is a vast public that doesn't know NPR exists or what it has to offer. Also there is shaping up a struggle for a larger cut of the CPB budget pie.

►"Radio Free Radio." Meanwhile, a new national network of non-commercial stations is getting its act together and pressing CPB on another flank. "Poor People's Radio," or "Public Access Radio," or "Rad-

io Free Radio"—call it what you will—is a wildly heterogeneous collection of non-commercial stations that either do not meet the "minimum standards" of NPR or do not choose to affiliate for other reasons.

From 10-watt local "radio freaks" to some of the powerful Pacifica stations, the 50 members of the new National Federation of Community Broadcasters have little in common except the lack of institutional sponsorship. They offer each other a service called Possible Tape Exchange; a yearly meeting at which to air problems and explore answers; and an ably articulated attack on CPB's "exclusionary" policies.

The problem is not simply that poor, weak, understaffed stations can't avail themselves of the goodies provided by taxpayer money—though this is a legitimate beef. There is also, as of 1976, a direct subsidy paid out of CPB funds to listener-sponsored stations who meet NPR standards. For every dollar such stations can raise from their listeners, CPB will pay them 12 cents. It adds up. And as the NFCB critics see it, it's another case of the rich getting richer at the public trough.

This controversy can't do anything but good from the viewpoint of NPR as well as NFCB. The more hassle, the more publicity, and the more likely that the short-changed American audience will become aware of its power.

Public radio under any aegis offers more than an alternative to commercial programming. It is the last open road to free communication between different sections of the community, uncensored by government, network, or advertising executives.

The citizenry can still squeeze on to its own airwaves if it will only organize itself to seize the time.

—Janet Stevenson

Lincoln

Continued from Page 14

powerful capitalist class and a more stratified, less egalitarian society.

In avid pursuit of individual liberty in the marketplace, or "free enterprise," an emergent capitalist class was able to relegate the majority of whites and blacks to positions of propertylessness and political dependence. As long as Lincoln and the Republicans held to the idea that private property rights were inseparable from human rights—the fundamental conception of their bourgeois era—there could be no true equality and no durable liberty for anyone except those able to accumulate productive property.

Few during the war anticipated such an

outcome. What union soldier would have fought to become what he considered a "wage-slave?" And what slave joined a strike against his masters with the expectation that Northern and Southern capitalists would combine in the post-war period to make black civil and political rights a dead letter?

But it is beside the point to blame Lincoln for the outcome of the Second American Revolution, just as it would be to blame the Jacobins for the outcome of the French Revolution. The ideals and achievements of Lincoln and the Republican movement, properly understood, form a basic part of our heritage.

Lincoln and the Republicans were able to link a revolutionary movement for human liberation to the immediate aspirations of the majority for a free-labor, small property system, by showing how

their aspirations made the overthrow of slavery both necessary and possible. They raised the fundamental questions of social class and property systems within the framework of the American political system, as a prelude to breaking beyond it to new frameworks. The armed struggle of the Civil War proceeded from more conventional forms of political struggle, and then played its part in effecting revolutionary change in American political and economic life. But neither armed struggle nor revolutionary change were possible until the Republican party won a mass base within the existing system of legitimacy and seized control of the political apparatus, forcing the slaveholders to deny the legitimacy of Republican electoral victories and to act the part of rebels. John Brown's guerrillas offered a noble and inspiring act of exemplary virtue, but

the Republicans succeeded in galvanizing a mass revolutionary movement against the slave system.

The Republican movement ultimately failed to realize its goal of liberty and equality in a democratic society. Its identification of liberty and equality with private production led not to the realization of liberty and equality but to the rapid development of capitalist property—and the corporate system of our own time.

The task today is to realize the Republican goal of liberty and equality for all, creatively building a mass movement against the extension of the corporate power and looking toward its eventual extinction, in the interests of social, economic and political democracy. In our time free labor means the working people's control of their means of work and livelihood, as well as of their government.

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—AT&T

"The System Is the PROBLEM"

—THE PROGRESSIVE

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"Government and business share the assumption that problems will disappear as production increases; the corollary is that big business offers the surest way to increase production. Open government is impossible so long as corporate-sponsored economic growth is regarded as the highest good."

David P. Thelen
"Our Government: A Wholly Owned Subsidiary"
in *THE PROGRESSIVE*

"Solar energy has begun to capture the American people's imagination. Clean, inexhaustible, capable of heating and cooling,

convertible to electric power, the sun offers the ideal solution to the world's energy crisis. It could become America's energy cornucopia—if Congress doesn't turn it into just another corporate asset to be exploited for the sake of private greed."

Mark Northcross
"Who Will Own the Sun?"
in *THE PROGRESSIVE*

"The ad in *Forbes* is simple but seductive, the message clear: Come to North Carolina, where wages are low, profits are high, and unions are almost non-existent. North Carolina's "commitment" to a "favorable" atmosphere means that the state uses its unflagging power to guarantee a supply of cheap, abundant, submissive, and—most important—unorganized labor."

Barbara Koepfel
"Something Could Be Finer Than To Be in Carolina"
in *THE PROGRESSIVE*

"Because the Defense Department and the corporations have the money, they can endow the schools with "free" or "inexpensive" materials that perpetuate militaristic values, racist attitudes, and sexual stereotypes. Our schools are cluttered with militaristic indoctrination and with conservative propaganda. . . . I wonder why progressives are always on the defensive in these controversies."

Betty Medsger
"The 'Free' Propaganda That Floods the Schools"
in *THE PROGRESSIVE*

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