

Being Black

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Television

Spring Break was always one of the best parts of any school year. I mean who wouldn't love a week where they can kick it and sit back and be free of the annoyance of school and the crap that comes with it? Seventh grade was a bit different in that regard. Not only was I getting some time off from those dreaded high school applications, but I was going to spend a few days at my cousin's house! Coming from my dad's side of the family, my cousins Bill and Kennedy were always around my grandmother's house during the weekend. If I had time I would hang out with them and we'd have fun for hours on end. Whether it was playing some board games or playing Super Mario Bros on our Nintendo DS's, it was always a blast going hanging out and messing around with them.

The one activity I always found us participating in the most above all else was watching Television. TV was a great way to pass the time, especially when that TV belonged to my grandparents. With what felt like an infinite amount of channels available to us, we would always flip around and take a look at what we would watch. It could be the sports channel, Cartoon Network, or ABC's random game shows. We always would find something to watch and something to explore within the endless sea of content.

Naturally, the first big thing I did when I showed up to my cousins' house on a glorious Friday night was ask what they had on TV. In Bill's words, they had "everything you can think of." If I'm being honest, I couldn't think of any statement that would be any better than that. We spent hours in the basement just watching random stuff that came on the TV. In that time, we managed to find some absurd shows and channels that I still find myself looking at now. Whether it was the three different versions of ESPN, or watching the absurdity that was Ridiculousness, we laughed so much that day you would think we were at a circus.

During our infinite surf the two of them had to take care of some chores assigned by my uncle. It had taken a while so I figured I would spend some time clicking through some channels while I waited for them to come back. While I kept flipping through I saw something that caught my eye on Adult Swim. I couldn't tell what the deal was at first. Perhaps it was the way the characters talked. Maybe it was the presentation of animation. Hell it could have just been the fact that this was the most amount of black characters I saw on an animated show. No matter what it was, I found myself glued to the screen.

"Oh shit that's the Boondocks!" Bill said, seemingly hearing the TV as the two of them ran back down to the basement. "I can't believe the show is on right now!"

“You know this show?” I asked.

“Oh yeah we both watch it all the time” Kennedy told me. “It’s one of my favorite shows!”

I knew the two were brothers but I didn’t think both of them knew a show like this. Kennedy is about my age whereas Bill was in high school, so I was always thinking there were some things he knew more than us. This show was on Adult Swim after all, and most of the time I wouldn’t be awake to watch it. So to know about a show that Kennedy AND Bill knew was a bit of a weird moment to process. I needed to know more so I asked the obvious question of “what’s the show about?”

“Oh it’s the most black show ever dude!” Kennedy said quickly. “It’s really funny and talks a lot about black stuff!”

“Oh yeah it’s funny as hell,” Bill replied. “We should check the schedule right quick. I bet it’s gonna be on for a while.”

His guess was right. The show was gonna be on until about 3 AM. I don’t know if it was a marathon or something of the sorts, but I wasn’t gonna turn this down. I wanted to be a part of the group and understand what was going on. So we watched some episodes, with some being simple while some being crazy. One minute I was seeing a chicken flu incident, and then the next the old man was coming back from the dead and possessing someone. It was a crazy show that I had so much fun experiencing for the first time, especially with all the nods to black culture.

One episode that stuck out to me was an episode that focused on the nature of Barack Obama’s election. The episode was meant to be a commentary on the way black people approached the election. Some of the cast found it as a means to promote products and become extremely popular. Others assumed Barack would be the end all solution to all the black issues. While it was funny there was a sense of reality that hit me during this time. Being 2014, this was around the time Barack was running for his second term, and I was forced to become a lot more aware of the politics around him. For every one moment that I laughed, another moment I had to really consider the circumstances of my status as a black man in the current society.

“What did you think?” Bill asked me, clearly excited to see my response. We had been watching hours of the show, so I needed to say something.

“It’s unique.” I said while laughing. “I don’t think I’m supposed to watch this show right now.”

“Every black kid gotta watch Boondocks at some point!” Kennedy said. “It’s a show made for every black kid.”

I thought about it for a second. Then a few seconds. Then almost a minute. I've seen many shows, but Boondocks was a show that spoke to me and me alone. It wasn't something I thought anyone could fully understand if they weren't the same skin color as I. Thankfully, I had two cousins right there who looked just like me.

"Is it airing tommo-I mean later tonight?" I asked.

Bill looked at the schedule for the night time program. "Yep. A good few hours."

As I began to head upstairs to the sleeping couch I made sure to leave one last message: "Let's make sure to watch it again." The two of them nodded in agreement, leaving me with only one thought in my mind after that.

"I gotta see more."

Winter 2008

Another year, another time to set up the Christmas tree. At least that's what it should've been. I was young and silly and didn't exactly have the most object permanence going on. What I did appreciate even back then was the beauty of music. If there was a song on the radio I loved, you bet your ass I was dancing and prancing around the room. It got so notable that my mom even went as far as to set up little dance parties before I went to school. From the classics like Mozart, to the modern hits like Maroon 5, I was always jumping and hopping around like a spring.

However, something changed this year as we were waiting on the Christmas tree to be delivered. As my mom was preparing the radio, she just simply asked if I had "ever heard of Louis Armstrong?" I had shaken my head no at the time cause well...I didn't know. Her eyebrows perked up a little, but she shook her head and said "You got a lot to learn about your history." At this point I was still lost but intrigued by this unknown figure, and waited for my mother to put on a song.

The song she put on was "What a Wonderful World." At first I couldn't fully get what mom wanted me to see in it. Then I listened for longer and longer. I wasn't dancing or moving or jumping around the room like I normally would. I was silent and completely mesmerized by the sounds I was hearing. It felt like stepping into a different world for the first time. This was SOUL music, something which I didn't realize I would love until now.

"This music is so cool!" I told mom, my face brightening up like a lightbulb. "I wanna hear more!"

My mom smiled and simply said, "Now that's what I wanted to hear." She went through her phone and prepared to open up a new piece of music, this time

with Michael Jackson at the helm. This time she played the song “Beat It,” which unlike the last song had me back to my old bouncing self. It was a different tone and structure, but still full of that life and soul that the past song had. I was still invigorated by the sounds and the way my body snaked around the room. I had danced before, but not to this degree, and it felt less wild than I did before.

But would you believe that STILL wasn’t the end? My mom and I spent the 40 minutes playing all sorts of music from black history. One minute she was playing songs from Tupac, then the next it was NWA. I was being exposed to not just music, but black music. But something that stuck out just as much as the music, was my mom. It had been the most amount of time me and my mom spent together, and the most I had ever seen her smile at that point in my life. She was never an unhappy person, but this moment was different. We weren’t thinking about the tree or any issues in life. All we were thinking about was how cool the music was at the moment. It was above all else pure bliss. Me and mom always spent time together, and yet this time around it felt like we became closer than we ever were.

Eventually I needed to rest after all of that hopping and jumping around. While I laid there, relaxing and thinking about what I heard, my mom plopped right next to me with a wide grin on her face. “This music is your history, son,” she told me in a light tone. “I know you’ve listened to tons of music in the past, but this is a bit different from that. This music is YOU. And you have no idea how happy I am to see you appreciate it.”

“Thanks mom.” I said. Simple response sure, but it’s one that I think was enough to get my love across. It seemed to work, as she hugged me shortly after the exchange. Just in time for the tree to finally arrive.

Hair

Waking up from a long car ride is a relaxing if odd experience. My mom had just shaken me up to display to me the area she had been excited to show me the entire day. Once my eyes adjusted to the concept of light I witnessed a glowing neon sign that simply read “HAIR SALON.” Just before I could answer even a simple question, my mom dropped me off and told me she’d be back in an hour. To say I was lost would be the understatement of the year.

I walked in and noticed the smell of the room. The air had the scent of roses outside of a garden. It was shockingly clean to boot. For how wide and big the area was, there was practically no speck of hair or broken materials anywhere. It almost felt like I was being pranked. To drive about 20 minutes to get here could only mean that whatever this place was, Mom must have loved to come here, at least I assume.

“Heyo, you must be Tyler!” a voice said. Breaking me out of my trance, I saw a man who looked like he had a Malboros every day. His face looked like it would break if I hit him too hard. I didn’t want to be rude however, so I simply

responded.

“Hey uh, who are you?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m yo barber Pete. Yo mom said you needed a fresh cut for Picture Day tomorrow!”

I hadn’t really thought about it, but it was picture day tomorrow. I usually don’t really think about it too much and I just kinda get it over with. I guess since it was my freshman year of high school mom wanted me to actually have a proper picture.

“So what are ya getting little man?” Pete asked.

“Just do whatever. I’m not picky,” I told him.

Clearly that struck a chord, because right after that Pete asked “You want a lining? How bout a solid fade? I could give you a shape up if that’s all you need.”

I was lost. I’ll admit. The only term I fully knew was “lining,” as that’s what I would get if I wasn’t getting a cut. All I could say was “uuuuuhhhh” when he asked me those questions.

Pete simply laughed. “You gotta know your hairstyles, maaaaan. It’s what makes the black man whole!”

I gave a weird crooked smile and gave an honestly shit response. “Well, I mean, it can’t be that important, it’s just some hair.”

“Aight, just hold on for a second.” Pete told me. “I think I know what you need.”

I found myself in the chair getting a cut, but something was different. It felt more natural, slow, and collected. In the past my haircuts tended to be fairly straightforward. About 20 minutes or so. This one took about 45 minutes, but each minute felt impactful. There was a purpose to the cuts. I almost fell asleep and let him take the wheel. Despite his looks, he damn for sure knew what he was doing.

“I’m done, little man. Check it out,” Pete told me.

I grabbed the mirror and I gotta say, I damn for sure wasn’t ready for this. My afro, which was once unshaped and all over the place like a hedgehog’s spikes, felt contained proper. It had a real circular shape, big enough to be an afro but small enough to pick. I was so focused on the first real cut I received that I didn’t even notice Mom walk into the shop.

“He must like it,” she told Pete, giving off a smile that almost seemed smug.

“Yeah, I gave it some of the magic touch,” Pete replied. “Bet you he’ll take his hair seriously now.”

“You like it?” my mom asked me.

“It’s awesome,” I told her. “How do I keep this?”

“It’s about effort, man,” Pete told me. “Black man’s hair ain’t like nothing else. You can’t just brush it and it looks good. You gotta put that soul into it.”

I looked at myself in the mirror one more time before looking at Pete. My eyes were as wide as the room itself, and before I could speak he simply asked, “You need my number? I can help you out, lil bro.”

Of course I said yes to that request. I had to learn more! As I left the shop, Pete simply told me one more thing: “Black Hair is real hair!”