

Black History Month – Impromptu Prompts

PROMINENT FIGURES

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Sojourner Truth – *Because of a famous speech amid a lifetime of activism. (Abolitionist, b. 1797 – 1883)*

Sojourner Truth, an escaped slave who lost her family, her first love, and children to the peculiar institution, turned her pain and Christian faith into triumph by helping others—especially women—recognize their worth.

“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me!”

That was the message that caught the attention of attendees during her spontaneous speech at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in May 1851. Although she is famed for that speech, it’s unlikely the words are exact: They come from a version published years later using a stereotypical Southern dialect, while Truth grew up in New York and Dutch was her first language.

Regardless, she was a prominent and frequent speaker on women’s rights and abolition. Born Isabella Baumfree in New York around 1797, she was the ninth child born into an enslaved family. She gave herself the name “Sojourner Truth” in 1843 after becoming a Methodist and soon began a life of preaching and lecturing.

Truth pursued political equality for all women and spoke against other abolitionists for not pursuing civil rights for all Black men and women. As the movement advanced, so did Truth’s reputation. Her memoirs—*The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*—were published in 1850, and she toured and spoke before ever-larger crowds. During the Civil War, she helped recruit Black troops for the Union Army, which granted her the opportunity to speak with President Abraham Lincoln.

Truth died in 1883 at her home in Battle Creek, Michigan. Four decades later, the constitutional amendment extending the vote to women was ratified.

– Kelley D. Evans

Madam C. J. Walker – *Because she found out you can never go broke working Black women’s hair.*
(Entrepreneur, activist, b. 1867 – 1919)

At first, it was all about hair and an ointment guaranteed to heal scalp infections. Sarah Breedlove—the poor washerwoman who would become millionaire entrepreneur Madam C. J. Walker—was trying to cure dandruff and banish her bald spots when she mixed her first batch of petrolatum and medicinal sulfur.

But what began as a solution to a pesky personal problem quickly became a means to a greater end. With the sale of each two-ounce tin of Walker’s Wonderful Hair Grower, she discovered that her most powerful gift was motivating other women. As she traveled throughout the United States, the Caribbean, and Central America, teaching her Walker System and training sales agents, she shared her personal story: her birth on the same plantation where her parents had been enslaved, her struggles as a young widow, her desperate poverty. If she could transform herself, so could they. In place of washtubs and cotton fields, Walker offered them beauty culture, education, financial freedom, and confidence. “You have made it possible for a colored woman to make more money in a day selling your products than she could in a week working in white folks’ kitchens,” one agent wrote to her.

The more money Walker made, the more generous she became—\$1,000 to her local Black YMCA in Indianapolis, \$5,000 to the NAACP’s anti-lynching fund. Scholarships for students at Tuskegee and Daytona Normal and Industrial institutes. Music lessons for young Black musicians.

In 1917 at her first national convention, Walker awarded prizes to the women who sold the most products and recruited the most new agents. More importantly, she honored the delegates whose local clubs had contributed the most to charity. She encouraged their political activism in a telegram to President Woodrow Wilson, urging him to support legislation that would make lynching a federal crime.

Walker was labeled a “Negro subversive” by Wilson’s War Department because of her advocacy for Black soldiers during World War I and her support of public protests against the East St. Louis, Illinois, riot. By the time she died in 1919 in her Westchester County, New York, mansion, she had defied stereotypes, provided employment for thousands of women, and donated more than \$100,000 to civic, educational, and political causes.

As a philanthropist and a pioneer of today’s multibillion-dollar hair care industry, she used her wealth and influence to empower others. One could say she was woke a hundred years ago.

– *A’Lelia Bundles*

Ida B. Wells – *Because she was part of the fourth estate pushing from within to make it see Black America. (Journalist, civil rights activist, b. 1862 – 1931)*

It's too bad there isn't more crossover between journalism and the practice of writing comics, because if there was, surely Ida B. Wells would be rendered with a superhero's cape by now. Known as a "Sword Among Lions," Wells faced down threats of death and torture for bringing international attention—not to mention shame—to the lynch mob terror that afflicted post-Reconstruction Black communities in the United States.

Our reluctance to believe the worst about fellow human beings, especially those we deem most familiar, is one of our most persistent shortcomings. Less than 100 years ago, many could not bring themselves to believe the atrocities committed in World War II concentration camps without journalistic evidence. Just a few decades before, Wells was sounding the alarm about the barbaric acts of her countrymen in the pages of the *Memphis Free Speech*, the newspaper she co-owned. She pushed for action in the face of widespread denialism.

Documenting the epidemic of lynching was miserable, disheartening work, but Wells also found time to advocate for the suffrage and civil rights of Black women like herself. She wasn't much concerned with being polite about it, either. For her troubles, Black men criticized her for being unladylike and *The New York Times* labeled her a "slandorous and dirty-minded mulatress."

Still, Wells rose to represent the best of the American journalistic tradition, and in doing so wasn't just an advocate for those most afflicted and least comfortable, but a defender and protector of democracy, justice, and freedom for all. She dared America to confront its hypocrisies head-on and live up to the ideals upon which it was founded.

Wells' crusade lives on, perhaps most directly, in the work of journalists who document the killing of unarmed Black people by the nation's police forces and the comparatively infinitesimal consequences for the officers behind those killings. It's not just journalists, though—Wells' work continues in the form of ordinary citizens who risk their own well-being to document fatal police violence with cell phone video, in much the same way Wells was spurred to raise the alarm about lynching after three of her friends were murdered by a Memphis, Tennessee, mob in 1892. She lives on in Black women who not only exercise their right to vote but take it upon themselves to run for office (Wells ran for a seat in the Illinois state Senate). She lives in the words and deeds of the NAACP, which she co-founded, and in the practice of intersectional feminism itself.

– *Soraya McDonald*

Richard Pryor – Because he was the comedian who reflected America’s racial pain and confusion.
(Comedian, b. 1940 – 2005)

Pain was always Richard Pryor’s comedic easel of choice. Look no further than his chillingly still relevant 1974 bit, “Niggers vs. Police,” from the Grammy-award winning album “That Nigger’s Crazy.” Pryor’s jokes were a therapeutic soundtrack for Black America and a no-holds-barred crash course for those who failed to understand what it meant to be an outsider in one’s own country a century after the abolition of slavery. That same year, Rolling Stone caught up with Pryor as he purchased a Walther .380 and Colt .357. At checkout, Pryor had but one question for the gun shop owner: “Like, how come all the targets you ever see are Black?”

Born December 1, 1940, in Peoria, Illinois, Richard Franklin Lennox Pryor III’s art reflected his life—hard, vulgar, sensitive, and, of course, hilarious. He was molested at six, abandoned by his mother, a sex worker, at ten, and was raised in his grandmother’s brothel.

No comedian has used the Black experience more effectively to express its complexities to diverse audiences. His was a comedy that Black folks usually heard in private that sometimes made White folks squeamish yet appreciative of the reality check. The recipient of one Emmy and five Grammys from 1974 to 1982—the last of which was for “Live At The Sunset Strip,” arguably comedy’s greatest standup routine ever—Pryor also had a number of exceptional movie roles, including credits in *Lady Sings The Blues*, *The Mack*, *Uptown Saturday Night*, *The Wiz*, *Jo Jo Dancer*, *Your Life Is Calling*, and *Harlem Nights*.

His life and career are a vision board of incredible highs, debilitating lows, tumultuous relationships, and the ever-present demon of drug addiction. Later, there was multiple sclerosis. Comedy legends such as Eddie Murphy, Robin Harris, Martin Lawrence, Bernie Mac, Cedric the Entertainer, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, and Kevin Hart are direct beneficiaries of Pryor’s flawed genius.

– Justin Tinsley

Sidney Poitier – *Because he was the paradigm shift who ushered in the modern Black leading man. (Actor, filmmaker, director, b. 1927)*

We all really should put the courtesy title “Sir” in front of acting legend Sidney Poitier’s name. He’s earned it.

In 1964, the legend became the first African American to win an Academy Award for *Lilies of the Field*, an important piece of cinema about a Black handyman who encounters a group of German, Austrian, and Hungarian nuns who believe that he’s been heaven-sent. Some may say the same about Poitier’s career.

At a time when Black folks were about to see the fruits of the civil rights struggle, the Oscar-winner challenged the American box office—and thus, the average American—about what a movie star looked like. He was undeniably Black, and in 1967, the year that Thurgood Marshall was confirmed as the first African American Supreme Court justice, Poitier was one of the year’s most successful movie stars. Change was a-coming.

The films that he created in 1967 were seminal—they all centered around race and race relations and tapped into conversations everyday Black folks were having around their dinner tables. *To Sir with Love* dealt with racial and social issues inside of a school in London’s East End. *In the Heat of the Night* introduced us to a Black detective who is investigating a murder in a small Southern town, and the much-referenced *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* addressed interracial relationships the same year that a landmark Supreme Court civil rights decision invalidated laws prohibiting interracial unions.

Poitier grew up in his parents’ native Bahamas, though he was born in Miami, and he came back to the States when he was 15. After a brief stint with the Army during World War II, he found his calling. He earned a spot as a member of the American Negro Theater after a successful audition, and by the end of the 1940s he was dipping his toe in film. And we’re all the better for it. Perhaps the most important thing Poitier pulled off was to understand the importance of having someone who looked like him step behind the camera and direct. Visual presence is paramount, and power comes at the hands of those who can shape it. He helmed a number of important cinematic moments for Black folks, including *Uptown Saturday Night*, *Let’s Do It Again*, both of which he also starred in, and the iconic comedic ebony-and-ivory pairing of Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder in *Stir Crazy*.

Poitier has established a lane that an actor like Denzel Washington—who is currently being celebrated for acting in and directing the poignant adaptation of August Wilson’s *Fences*—can comfortably walk in. Poitier’s pioneering presence helped make that happen. And now the cycle continues.

– Kelley L. Carter

Henrietta Lacks – *Because she was the subject of a medical experiment that is still saving lives today. (HeLa cell line, b. 1920 – 1951)*

Doctors stole her cells. Henrietta Lacks was an accidental pioneer of modern-day medicine; her cells are saving lives today even though she died in 1951.

Lacks was a 31-year-old mother of five when she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Just months before her death, doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore sliced pieces of tissue from her cancerous tumor without her consent—in effect, stealing them. It was another instance of decades of medical apartheid and clinical practices that discriminated against Blacks. Lacks was not a slave, but parts of her cancerous tumor represent the first human cells ever bought and sold.

Her cells, known among scientists as HeLa, were unusual in that they could rapidly reproduce and stay alive long enough to undergo multiple tests. Lacks' cells—now worth billions of dollars—live in laboratories across the world. They played an important part in developing the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, and in vitro fertilization. The HeLa cell line has been used to develop drugs for treating herpes, leukemia, influenza, and Parkinson's disease. They've been influential in the study of cancer, lactose digestion, sexually transmitted diseases, and appendicitis.

Lacks' story is an example of the often-problematic intersection of ethics, race, and medicine, a link to the dark history of exploitation of, and experimentation on, African Americans that ranges from the Tuskegee syphilis study to a 19th-century doctor experimenting with gynecological treatments on slave women without anesthetics.

– *Kelley D. Evans*

Jimi Hendrix – *Because no one can match his genius. (Musician, singer-songwriter, b. 1942 – 1970)*

For decades, a belief has taken hold among guitarists—to prove your ability, you must pay homage to Jimi Hendrix.

He was hailed by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as “the most gifted instrumentalist of all time.” Hendrix’s virtuosity looms so large that many guitarists still vainly attempt to emulate him. Just as whiz-kid classical pianists flaunt their chops by interpreting Mozart, so have guitarists such as Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Prince, and John Mayer felt the need to perform Hendrix classics such as “Hey Joe,” “Little Wing,” and “Foxy Lady.” That’s why rock’s magazine of record, *Rolling Stone*, named Hendrix the greatest guitar player ever.

While Hendrix’s guitar artistry is indisputable, it’s ultimately a puzzle piece of his panoramic talent. He was also a composer of accessibly complex songs, and a poet-caliber lyricist (“a broom is drearily sweeping / up the broken pieces of yesterday’s life...”). The rock legend has posthumously earned multiple Hall of Fame Grammy Awards, including the Recording Academy’s prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award.

But just what makes Hendrix rock’s greatest expressionist? His live performances were at times distractingly sloppy, his guitar tone ear-piercing. Curiously, it’s these stylistic eccentricities that make him singular. For Hendrix, music wasn’t about note-perfect performance, but rather a constant search for truth. If that meant playing long, solo-intensive songs illustrating the savageness of war, then so be it.

By the time of his death in 1970, Hendrix had so thoroughly changed musical perceptions that even jazz legends such as Miles Davis and Gil Evans were taking cues from him. It’s almost impossible to imagine influential jazz-fusion albums like Davis’ *Bitches Brew*—or acid-funk masterpieces like Funkadelic’s “Maggot Brain”—without Hendrix having laid the groundwork.

He leaped effortlessly from metallic fury to gossamer balladry and jazzy excursions. Arguably, Hendrix’s freakish talent is best demonstrated on his Woodstock performance of the “The Star-Spangled Banner,” where he performs guitar emulations of artillery and air-raid sirens in an audacious condemnation of American militarism.

Since his demise, a horde of guitarists has challenged Hendrix’s primacy, yet none have matched his genius. Sure, Eddie Van Halen is brilliant, but his solos tell us little about him, or his time.

By contrast, a Hendrix masterwork like “If 6 was 9” allows us a glimpse into the mind of a nonconformist and his anti-establishment generation. That’s why in the world of electric guitar, there are two ages—the monochrome era Before Hendrix, and the limitless, kaleidoscopic period After Hendrix.

– *Bruce Britt*

Frederick Douglass – *Because his voice rose from the horror of slavery to challenge the denial of Black humanity. (Abolitionist, author, b. 1818 – 1895)*

A slave. A free person among slaves. A free person who must still fight for full emancipation. Every Black person who has called America home has existed in one of these three states. Frederick Douglass endured them all and spoke to these unique human conditions while demanding complete Black inclusion in the American experiment.

With his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845, Douglass provided arguably the most influential slave narrative. Born in Maryland in 1818, the son of a slave mother and a White father, possibly his owner, Douglass escaped bondage by fleeing North. Through his vivid portrayals of brutality, the severing of familial bonds, and mental torture, he documented the iniquity of the peculiar institution and disproved the Southern propaganda of the happy slave.

Douglass rose to prominence in the abolitionist movement, partly due to his personal experience of having lived as chattel, but also he knew how to enrapture an audience. One observer described him as strikingly memorable. “He was more than six feet in height, and his majestic form, as he rose to speak, straight as an arrow, muscular, yet lithe and graceful, his flashing eye, and more than all, his voice, that rivaled Webster’s in its richness, and in the depth and sonorousness of its cadences, made up such an ideal of an orator as the listeners never forgot.”

Particularly relevant today, Douglass leaves behind a blueprint for challenging racism. In August 1862, President Abraham Lincoln invited Black leaders to the White House to sell them on the idea of Black immigration out of the country. Douglass called Lincoln’s idea “ridiculous” and believed the president showed a “pride of race and blood” and “contempt for negroes.” Through a subsequent friendship with Douglass, Lincoln learned he had erred.

Douglass was not always successful in changing the mind of a president. At the White House in 1866, Douglass told President Andrew Johnson that “we do hope that you...will favorably regard the placing in our hands the ballot with which to save ourselves.” Johnson continued to oppose Black suffrage, yet Douglass taught everyone the small victories to be reaped by simply resisting the shackles of oppression.

He died in 1895, but his spirit in standing before white supremacy and calling it by its name remains.

– *Brando Simeo Starkey*

Shirley Chisholm – *Because before ‘Yes We Can’ there was ‘Unbought and Unbossed.’ (Politician, b. 1924 – 2005)*

When thinking about how contentious things are in Congress today, imagine being the sole Black female congresswoman nearly 50 years ago, at the height of the civil rights movement. Shirley Chisholm was relentless in breaking political barriers with respect to both race and gender. She was a pioneer.

In 1968, Chisholm became the first Black woman elected to the U.S. Congress, representing New York’s 12th District for seven terms from 1969 to 1983. As both a New York state legislator and a congresswoman, Chisholm championed the rights of the least of us, fighting for improved education; health and social services, including unemployment benefits for domestic workers; providing disadvantaged students the chance to enter college while receiving intensive remedial education; the food stamp program; and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children program.

Chisholm noted that she faced more discrimination because of gender than race during her New York legislative career, while acknowledging the additional struggle that Black women encounter specifically because of their race. All those Chisholm hired for her congressional office were women; half of them were Black. “Tremendous amounts of talent are lost to our society just because that talent wears a skirt,” she said.

Before President Barack Obama’s “Yes We Can” slogan and Hillary’s “Stronger Together,” there was Chisholm’s “Unbought and Unbossed.” In 1972, Chisholm became the first Black candidate for a major party’s nomination for president of the United States, and the first woman to run for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination.

Chisholm remarked in words that still resonate today that “in the end, anti-Black, anti-female, and all forms of discrimination are equivalent to the same thing: anti-humanism.” The next time you queue up Solange Knowles’ album, “A Seat at the Table,” be reminded of Chisholm’s words: “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”

– *April Reign*

Mary McLeod Bethune – *Because the ‘First Lady of the Struggle’ left us an indelible legacy of love, hope, and dignity. (Civil rights activist, educator, b. 1875 – 1955)*

Though she was able-bodied, Mary McLeod Bethune carried a cane because she said it gave her “swank.”

An educator, civil rights leader, and adviser to five U.S. presidents, the “First Lady of the Struggle” has been synonymous with Black uplift since the early 20th century. She turned her faith, her passion for racial progress, and her organizational and fundraising savvy into the enduring legacies of Bethune-Cookman University and the National Council of Negro Women. She understood the intersections of education, optics, and politics and was fierce and canny in using them to advance the cause of her people.

Bethune, the 15th of 17 children, grew up in rural South Carolina and started working in the fields as a young girl. She hoped to become a missionary in Africa after attending Scotia Seminary in North Carolina and Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute, but was told Black missionaries were unwelcome. So, she turned to educating her people at home, founding the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in 1904 with \$1.50 and six students, including her young son.

Twenty years later, the school was merged with Cookman Institute of Jacksonville, Florida. In 1924, Bethune, one of the few female college presidents in the nation, became president of the National Association of Colored Women. A decade later, in a move to centralize dozens of organizations working on behalf of Black women, Bethune founded the influential National Council of Negro Women.

Bethune helped organize Black advisers to serve on the Federal Council of Negro Affairs, the storied “Black Cabinet,” under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. First lady Eleanor Roosevelt considered Bethune one of her closest friends. Photos featuring her with the president or first lady ran prominently in Black publications, helping to normalize the notion of Black faces in high places.

Bethune worked to end poll taxes and lynching. She organized protests against businesses that refused to hire African Americans and demonstrated in support of the Scottsboro Boys. She lobbied for women to join the military. She organized, she wrote, she lectured, and she inspired.

Perhaps her most enduring written work was her last will and testament:

“I LEAVE YOU LOVE ... I LEAVE YOU HOPE ... I LEAVE YOU THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE IN ONE ANOTHER ... I LEAVE YOU A THIRST FOR EDUCATION ... I LEAVE YOU RESPECT FOR THE USES OF POWER ... I LEAVE YOU FAITH ... I LEAVE YOU RACIAL DIGNITY ... I LEAVE YOU A DESIRE TO LIVE HARMONIOUSLY WITH YOUR FELLOW MEN ... I LEAVE YOU FINALLY A RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR YOUNG PEOPLE.”

– *Lonnae O’Neal*

James Baldwin – *Because he embraced the responsibility to be a voice of his nation. (Novelist, playwright, b. 1924 – 1987)*

James Baldwin knew it was his job to reveal the truth. The truth about his race. The truth about his country. The ugly truths of racism, poverty, and inequality that plagued the United States during his lifetime—and that continue even now, [more than 30] years after his death. He confronted American racism with fearless honesty and courageously explored homosexuality through his literature and in his life.

And he did it with style. His brilliant prose combined his own experience with the best—and worst—of that of the Black life around him: the joy, the blues, the sermons, the spirituals, and the bitter sting of discrimination. As he said in his essay “The Creative Process,” “a society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven.”

The work of Baldwin, a product of Harlem, New York, and a citizen of the world, consistently reflected the experience of a Black man in White America. His travels to France and Switzerland only nuanced his understanding of the social conditions of his race and his country. Although written abroad, his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953, illuminated the struggle of poor, inner-city residents and drew on the passion of the pulpit. His collection of essays *The Fire Next Time* explosively represented Black identity just as the country was coming to terms with just how much White supremacy was in its DNA. *Giovanni's Room* dove straight into the taboo that was homosexuality—elevating the notion of identity through sexuality and socioeconomic status without ever mentioning race once.

As an impoverished Black gay man, Baldwin was asked if he felt he'd had a bad luck of the draw. In fact, he believed he'd hit the jackpot. His identity informed his artistry. And his artistry strove to represent every individual whose access to American civil liberties was hampered by race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

Baldwin knew that as an artist he was among “a breed of men and women historically despised while living and acclaimed when safely dead.” So he unapologetically implored a nation to see its true self through the beauty of its most marginalized. The truth of his words is not a history lesson of American culture gone by, it is a reflection of the country alive and in the here and now.

– *Danielle Cadet*

Ella Baker – *Because she didn't let her gender keep her from defending her race. (Civil rights activist, b. 1903 – 1986)*

Proof that visibility is not necessary to make an impact, Ella Baker is one of history's lesser-known civil rights heroes, yet one of the most important. If Martin Luther King, Jr., was the head of the civil rights movement, Ella Baker was its backbone.

Born on December 13, 1903, in Norfolk, Virginia, and raised in North Carolina, Baker cultivated her passion and desire for social justice at a young age. Her grandmother, who was a slave, once told her a story of being whipped for refusing to marry a man of her slave owner's choosing—fueling Baker's desire for systematic change and justice for her people.

In the 1940s, she developed a grassroots approach as an NAACP field secretary to gather and convince Black people of the group's message—a vision that holds true today—that a society of individuals can and should exist “without discrimination based on race.” In 1957, Baker moved to Atlanta to help King form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, through which she facilitated protests, built campaigns and ran a voter registration campaign called the Crusade for Citizenship.

Baker did grow frustrated at the lack of gender equality within the group, and came close to quitting in 1960. But then, on February 1, four Black college students sat at a lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. After being denied service, they were asked to leave. Instead, they refused to leave and a movement was born.

A graduate of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, who during her time there often challenged university policies, Baker viewed young people as one of the strongest and most important aspects of the civil rights movement. Inspired by the courageous sit-ins, Baker laid the framework for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC became one of the most important organizations in American civil rights history because of its commitment to effecting change through Freedom Rides and its particular emphasis on the importance of voting rights for African Americans.

Baker earned the nickname “Fundi,” which is Swahili for a person who teaches a craft to the next generation. As a dedicated change agent, Baker taught young people that their spirit was essential to the movement. As long as they had the audacity to dream of a better, equal and brighter tomorrow—through the means of relentless peaceful protest and endurance—a fairer society awaited them. Baker died on January 13, 1986, on her 83rd birthday.

– *Trudy Joseph and Callan Mathis*

Maya Angelou – *Because she rose to greatness despite facing some of life’s cruelest hardships.*
(Poet, activist, b. 1928 – 2014)

Maya Angelou lived a life just as remarkable as the poetry and prose she crafted in her 86 years on this earth.

And it was the documentation of Angelou’s life that resonated with her audience and earned her a myriad of accolades, including three Grammy awards, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and a host of honorary degrees.

Despite horrific periods in her life, Angelou rose. At eight years old, she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend. After being convicted, Angelou’s abuser was found beaten to death. The once garrulous girl from Stamps, Arkansas, silenced herself for nearly five years, believing that her voice had killed the man because she identified him to her family. Instead, she memorized poetry during her silence, rearranging cadences and reciting Shakespearean sonnets in her head.

With the help of a teacher, Angelou was able to speak again. She used literature to recover from trauma, but got pregnant at 16. She found work as San Francisco’s first African American female cable car conductor and later worked in the sex trade and as a calypso singer to support her family. Angelou spoke honestly of her experiences, unashamed to walk in the truths of her past.

Later, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild and with help from friend and fellow author James Baldwin, went on to write *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969—the first in what would become a seven-volume, best-selling autobiographical series. Nearly a decade later, Angelou struck poetic gold with *And Still I Rise*, a collection that remains one of her most important works.

Angelou was also a fearless and determined civil rights activist, serving as the northern coordinator for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and working with Malcolm X to establish the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

Life tried hard to break Angelou, but in the face of it all, still she rose.

– *Maya A. Jones*

Alvin Ailey – *Because he brought dance and the beauty of Black bodies to the fight for justice.*
(*Founder of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, b. 1931 – 1989*)

Sometimes I play a little what-if game with deceased artists whom I admire. What if so-and-so were still alive? What kind of righteous, glorious, angry, transcendent art would he/she bring forth in our age of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, Aleppo, Syria, and Standing Rock Indian Reservation, Trayvon Martin and gay marriage, social media and gun violence?

Fortunately for us, Alvin Ailey, the legendary modern dance pioneer, choreographer, and civil rights artist-as-activist, left us his answers. Although Ailey died nearly 30 years ago, many of his best-known pieces have become as emblematic of vibrant, relevant American art as tap dance, jazz, the literature of Toni Morrison and hip-hop. Ailey explored issues of social justice, racism, and spirituality in the African American experience. This was during the height of the civil rights movement, when the notion of Black classically trained dancers moving to the music of Duke Ellington, gospel, blues, Latin and African pop was truly revolutionary, if not unfathomable.

Born into poverty in Texas in 1931, Ailey drew from his emotional well of close-knit Black churches, rural juke joints, fiery protest songs, and a lonely childhood as a closeted gay man to fuel his passion for dance. He befriended many of his fellow mid-century American masters (Maya Angelou, Carmen De Lavallade, Merce Cunningham, and Katherine Dunham, to name a few) while living in New York. After Ailey's death from an AIDS-related illness in 1989, the company and school grew into the premier repository for emerging Black choreographers, and is still the most popular dance touring company on the international circuit.

Ailey created “a human dance company and school that didn't fit any model,” said author and arts and dance patron, Susan Fales-Hill. “His dancers were and are multicultural, and his company was an amalgam of the African and European diaspora. He always addressed the pain of the African American journey, but he also celebrated the triumph and redemption of the human spirit” in pieces such as *Revelations* (1960), Ailey's most celebrated work. The up-from-slavery dance suite finds beauty in the midst of tragedy and pain, celebrates Black folks' resilience and humanity, and allows hope to overcome tribulation. “Ailey understood that the arts are a litmus test for who's civilized and who isn't civilized,” Fales-Hill said. “The fact that he raised people of color to the level of great, universally recognized artists was an enormous triumph.”

– *Jill Hudson*

Robert Abbott – *Because he gave voice to the voiceless. (Founder of The Chicago Defender, b. 1870 – 1940)*

The story of the pioneer of the Black press involves slaves, Nazis, and 25 cents.

Born just five years after the end of the Civil War, Robert Sengstacke Abbott founded a weekly newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, one of the most important Black newspapers in history, in 1905. Without Abbott, there would be no *Essence*, no *Jet* (and its *Beauty of the Week*), no *Black Enterprise*, no *The Source*, no *The Undeclared*.

The success of *The Chicago Defender* made Abbott one of the nation's most prominent post-slavery Black millionaires, along with beauty product magnate Madam C. J. Walker, and paved the way for prominent Black publishers such as Earl G. Graves, John H. Johnson and Edward Lewis.

The son of slaves, Abbott grew up with a half-German stepfather whose relatives eventually joined the Third Reich during the 1930s. Ironically enough, young Robert was taught to hate racial injustice, despite encountering it at every turn in his life, from his early foray into the printing business to his time in law school in Chicago, all the way to religious institutions.

An alum of Hampton University (then named Hampton Institute), Abbott was a catalyst for the Great Migration at the turn of the 20th century, when six million African Americans from the rural South moved to urban cities in the West, Northeast, and Midwest, with 100,000 settling in Chicago. Like a politician promising tax breaks to out-of-state companies to inspire relocation, Abbott took it upon himself to lay out the welcome mat for the millions of Blacks abandoning the Jim Crow South to head to the Windy City, where manufacturing jobs were awaiting as World War I approached.

What started off as 25 cents in capital and a four-page pamphlet distributed strictly in Black neighborhoods quickly grew into a readership that eclipsed half a million a week at its peak, numbers that mirror the *Miami Herald* and *Orlando Sentinel* today. The paper's rise in stature and circulation was due in large part to Abbott being a natural hustler. *The Defender* was initially banned in the South due to its encouragement of African Americans to abandon the area and head North, but the Georgia native used a network of Black railroad porters (who would eventually become the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters) to distribute the paper in Southern states.

After the influx of Blacks in the Midwest following the Great Migration, Abbott and *The Defender* turned their attention to other issues afflicting Blacks in the early 20th century, including Jim Crow segregation, the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, and the deadly 1919 Chicago riots that mirrored recent-day demonstrations seen in Baltimore, Maryland, and Ferguson, Missouri.

Abbott's nephew, John H. Sengstacke, took *The Defender* over in the 1940s, eventually heading Black newspapers in Detroit, Michigan, and Memphis, Tennessee, and the historic *Pittsburgh Courier*.

– *Martenzie Johnson*

Ta-Nehisi Coates – *Because he won the 2015 National Book Award for nonfiction and wrote one of the best-selling comics of 2016. (Journalist, author, b. 1975)*

If we could seriously elect one cultural ambassador for all of Black America, Coates would be a top contender. His work as a national correspondent at *The Atlantic* is always astute analysis on agendas, politics, and issues, particularly race. His *New York Times* best-seller, *Between the World and Me*—penned as a candid letter to his teenage son—earned the distinguished National Book Award for nonfiction in 2015. On top of that honor, he’s also a superhero (sort of). Coates’ *Black Panther* for Marvel was one of the best-selling comics of 2016, proving that he pretty much stays winning when it comes to this writing thing.

Colin Kaepernick – *Because he is a professional football player who first sat, and now kneels, during the national anthem to protest the way Blacks are treated in America. (Professional football player, activist, b. 1987)*

This season, San Francisco 49ers backup quarterback Colin Kaepernick decided to kneel during the national anthem so that he could stand for the sanctity of Black lives. Kaepernick’s action has set off a wave of solidarity from athletes all over the country—from junior high school students to professional competitors in other sports. Though some peers and fans have spoken against Kaepernick’s action, many are supportive, as evidenced by his jersey going to number one in sales (the proceeds of which he says he will donate to charity, in addition to \$1 million). In the tradition of activist athletes like Muhammad Ali and Jim Brown, Kaepernick is this generation’s shining Black prince on the field. Salute.

Josephine Baker – *Because she was a dancer and singer who became wildly popular in France during the 1920s and devoted much of her life to fighting racism. (Singer, dancer, activist, b. 1906 – 1975)*

Born Freda Josephine McDonald on June 3, 1906, in St. Louis, Missouri, Josephine Baker spent her youth in poverty before learning to dance and finding success on Broadway. In the 1920s, she moved to France and soon became one of Europe's most popular and highest-paid performers. She worked for the French Resistance during World War II, and during the 1950s and 1960s devoted herself to fighting segregation and racism in the United States. After beginning her comeback to the stage in 1973, Josephine Baker died of a cerebral hemorrhage on April 12, 1975, and was buried with military honors.