

Remembering Howard Ellsworth Rollins Jr.

Howard Ellsworth Rollins Jr. seemed destined for movie stardom and a long acting career. However, this actor, often deemed "the next Sidney Poitier," died at the age of forty-six. His short-lived period as a well-known and easily recognizable thespian is instructive for persons of any generation.

Rollins was born in Baltimore, Maryland, the youngest of four children, on October 17, 1950. His father was a steelworker, and his mother was a domestic. As he matured, he witnessed the struggles of individuals and families, and he dreamed of a career as a teacher. That dream was interrupted when he took up a peer's suggestion to try out for a role in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* at a local theater. He obtained a role and had an epiphany, goal-altering experience. Acting became a calling for him.

After graduating from high school, Rollins attended Towson State College, noted for training teachers. Because his aspirations had changed, he left Towson in 1970 to partake in a role on the PBS soap opera *Our Street*. Subsequently, he moved to New York City to pursue various acting opportunities. Soon, he landed a role on the television series *Roots*: The



Courtesy Photos
Howard Ellsworth Rollins Jr.

Next Generations, in addition to bit parts on Broadway.

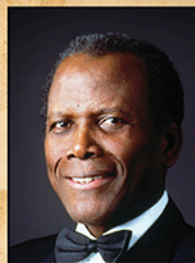
Arguably, Rollins' most signature role came in 1981 with the leading character of Coalhouse Walker in the movie, *Ragtime*. He had triumphed over two hundred

other actors, including O. J. Simpson. He was nominated for both Golden Globe and Academy Awards. It was at this time when comparisons with Poitier began.

His success with *Ragtime* did not lead to increased offers for other roles. Finally, in 1984, he attained the part of Captain Richard Davenport in *A Soldier's Story*. The cast was star-studded, including Adolph Caesar, David Alan Grier, Arthur Evans, David Harris, Robert Townsend, and Denzel Washington. The competition for adulation was intense. Rollins received generally complimentary reviews, but some movie critics panned his role as bland and mediocre. The movie performed very well due to its stellar ensemble cast. It was regarded as one of the top ten films of the year, and Caesar won nominations from the Golden Globe and Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor and an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actor in a Motion Picture. He had reprised his role from the Broadway stage production of *A Soldier's Play*. Washington was still early in his career.

Based on his cinematic accomplishments, Rollins secured the role of Detective Virgil Tibbs in the television series *In the Heat of the Night*—a role made famous by Poitier in the original film.

Below, Sidney Poitier, right Carroll O'Connor standing with Howard Ellsworth Rollins Jr.



Hence, the comparisons between Rollins and Poitier continued.

Rollins did not enjoy the work environment because of the true-to-life racism on the show. Although he was treated with respect at the onset, he felt isolated and alone because of his own experiences with racial prejudice. Perhaps these feelings led to the development of unhealthy coping mechanisms, which began to plague his personal life and, eventually, his public persona.

While filming his role as Tibbs in Louisiana in 1988, Rollins was arrested for possession of crack cocaine. He had begun to indulge in substance abuse, including alcohol in addition to cocaine. As the habits intensified, he started to show up late for work and sometimes failed to appear. In 1992 and 1993, he was arrested three more times—ultimately receiving a 70-day jail sentence in Georgia for driving under the influence. Consequently, he



was replaced by Carl Weathers as Tibbs on *Heat*.

After serving time, Rollins returned to New York and isolated himself in his apartment. He was never married and had no offspring. He had difficulty finding permanent employment.

In 1995, he appeared as a minister in an episode of *New York Undercover*. Some associates in the film industry thought Rollins was making rehabilitative improvements.

An aspect of Rollins' life must be shared to help make sense of the trajectory of his career and his early demise the following year. It was still a requirement to keep hidden to play romantic leads on film. Rollins was a homosexual.

Rollins frequented gay establishments and engaged in unprotected liaisons. As a result, he contracted A.I.D.S. After this diagnosis in the fall of 1996, Rollins died of lymphoma within six weeks, on December

8, at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital in New York. He was interred back in his hometown of Baltimore.

There was much hope for Rollins' acting career. The comparisons with Poitier were, perhaps, overdrawn. However, he held so much promise as a popular performer. His experience as a Black gay man most assuredly impacted his personal life and potential because of systemic racism and homophobia. These obstacles notwithstanding, Rollins has a statue in the Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore.

I am Reverend Dr. Michael D. Blackwell, Social Ethicist for The SoulTown Magazine. I want to thank Howard Ellsworth Rollins Jr. for having SOUL.



Rev. Michael D.
Blackwell Ph.D.

Born in Philadelphia and raised in CT during the classic Civil Rights era of the 1960s. He was profoundly affected by the life, thought, and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is published in African American religious thought, peacekeeping, the nonviolent direct action of Dr. King, community building, and social change. He worked for twenty years as Director for Multicultural Education at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in Cedar Falls as the Director for the Center for Multicultural Education and served as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Philosophy and World Religions. Currently, he is retired and is the founding President and Executive Director of the nonprofit, Project for the Beloved Community, Inc. mdbwell@gmail.com
TEL: 661.266.1000