

“BLACK HISTORY MONTH:
JACKIE ROBINSON AND LARRY DOBY AS SPIRITUAL GUIDES”
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There wasn't much of him left to bury on that October day in 1972. The diabetes had taken his sight and circulation, his heart had grown weak and his spirit had been broken a year earlier, when his oldest son – the one who had only recently kicked a drug habit – was killed in a car crash. They laid him to rest in a Brooklyn cemetery, not far from the thoroughway that would later bear his name. They even gave him (posthumously) a Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of freedom.

Then there's the other, less famous fellow, the one whose cancer-riddled body had taken him as far as it could. But by the time they laid him to rest in Montclair, New Jersey, in June, 2003, he had lived to see African American baseball players following his path to the big leagues. He'd witnessed the introduction of black umpires, black managers and black general managers. And he'd thrown the ceremonial first pitch at the 1997 All-Star game, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the year that two black men broke the color barrier of the nation's pastime.

This is the second of a three-part sermon series honoring African American heroes. We began with the life of jazz singer, Billie Holiday, and we'll finish up by examining that of rock guitar god, Jimi Hendrix. In between are the journeys of Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, the first black men to walk into a big league ballpark to *play*, not pass out towels in the clubhouse, clean the urinals or sell beer in the stands.

Those of us who grew up accustomed to the sight of interracial dugouts can scarcely appreciate the fortitude of character and strength of spirit to do what Doby and Robinson did, Doby, in the American League, and Robinson, in the National; the overt institutional racism of 1947 reads to us like a centuries-old fable about good and evil, not flesh-and-blood persecution and bigotry. But persecution and bigotry were the order of the day when it came to mid-century major league baseball, witness the obvious exclusion of black players, but also the long history of the Negro Leagues – semi-professional networks of African American players that produced such outstanding athletes that even the white leagues could no longer ignore.

And so it is that we're talking about Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, the two men who were to baseball what Billie Holiday was to jazz, what Jesse Owens was to track and what African American soldiers and sailors were to the nation's armed forces.

JACKIE ROBINSON

Born on the last day of January, 1919, he was the youngest of four children born to Georgia sharecroppers. (Sharecroppers were farmers who usually worked for housing and a share of the crops.) Not long after Robinson's birth, his father abandoned the family, and so they moved to Pasadena, California to be with other family members.

Poverty and gangs were part of Jackie Robinson's youth, but a friend managed to persuade him to graduate from high school and enroll at a junior college, where he excelled in track, football, basketball, tennis and baseball. When he was accepted at the

University of California, Los Angeles, in 1939, he continued to earn distinctions in various sports.

But money was always tight for Robinson. He left UCLA in 1941, and briefly played football in Hawaii before being drafted into the U.S. Army. He served for two years, trained with what would become the first black tank unit and exited in 1944 as a second lieutenant.

His biographers cite the circumstances of his honorable discharge as a trial run for what he would later face in the baseball world. Stationed in Texas, a white bus driver told him to move to the rear of the bus. When he refused, MPs arrested him. Because his own commander would not sign-off on the court-martial charges, he was transferred to another, who filed them himself. An all-white military jury acquitted him and granted him an honorable discharge.

On the personal side, Robinson met and married Rachel Isum while the two were at UCLA. They would give birth to three children during the course of his baseball career.

After playing some semi-professional baseball with the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro League team, come spring, 1946, Robinson made the roster of the Montreal Royals, the Triple-A farm team of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was a rare combination of speed, power and average; he was a shortstop who was hitting .387. Still, he was banned from playing in some of the cities where the Royals played their road games.

Trailblazers sometimes have the support of someone, somewhere, with privilege. For Jackie Robinson, that support came from Dodgers owner, Branch Rickey. Rickey had long been searching for a black player who, in addition to being good, could handle the prejudice and pressure that would surely come of breaking the color barrier. That search ended when Jackie Robinson stood in the batter's box against the Boston Braves, on April 15, 1947. (He went 0 for 3.)

Robinson kept his pledge to the Dodgers owner: he did not retaliate when racially harassed by fans and players alike. Some of his teammates threatened to sit out, so deep was their hatred of their black first baseman. (Robinson was moved to first base when called up, but later returned to his natural position, second.) The Dodgers manager, the prolific Leo Durocher, addressed the team when he got wind of the brewing boycott: "I don't care if the guy is yellow or black, or if he has stripes like a @#%&! zebra! I'm the manager of this team, and I say he plays. What's more, I say he can make us all rich! And if any of you don't need the money, I'll see that you're all traded!"

The President of the National League, Ford Frick, threatened to suspend the entire St. Louis Cardinals team when they nearly went on strike rather than play against a team with a black man. The manager of the Philadelphia Phillies, Ben Chapman, refused to silence his players when they called Robinson a nigger, then told him to go back to the cotton fields. But Happy Chandler, Commissioner of Major League Baseball, rebuked the entire team and made Chapman pose for pictures with Robinson as they shook hands.

If you were of age and paying attention to Hank Aaron's quest to replace Babe Ruth as Baseball's all-time home run king, you know that Aaron played under death threats. So did Jackie Robinson.

The tide began to turn when his Dodger teammates got to know him, causing them to stand up for him where they once derided him. When Robinson was booed and harassed before a game in Cincinnati, Brooklyn shortstop, Pee Wee Reese, walked over and put his arm around his second baseman. Reese later said, "You can hate a man for many reasons; color is not one of them." And Hank Greenberg, one of the first Jewish players to make the major leagues, was quick to welcome Robinson the first time their teams played one another.

Major League Baseball in 1947 had decided to create a Rookie of the Year award for both leagues; little did the baseball scions anticipate that the man who would hit .297 and lead the National League in stolen bases would be black. And little did anyone suspect that just two years later that man would be the NL's Most Valuable Player.

Back to Henry Aaron and his long struggle to set arguably the most glamorous record in baseball, he did not apologize for being an African American. Neither did Jackie Robinson. He negotiated and got the biggest salary in the Dodgers' history to that point: \$35,000. He was being popularized by a hit song, "Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball?" And he broke his silence starting in July, 1949, when he testified on discrimination before the U.S. House of Representatives.

Time requires that we move on to Larry Doby, for Doby has received enough short shrift for his efforts, but let me list just a few more things about the remarkable career of Jackie Robinson:

- He turned the tide of the last game of the 1951 season, a game that the Dodgers had to win in order to force a one-game playoff – Robinson robbed the Phillies of a game-winning base hit, injured himself on the play and went on to hit a walk-off homer in the 14th inning
- He was part of just one World Series winner, the Dodgers' 1955 defeat of the much-despised cross-town Yankees
- Robinson was traded at the end of the 1956 season, but he elected to retire rather than leave the game as anything other than a Dodger

Jackie Robinson batted .311 for his ten-year career. He stole home 19 times, had more walks than strikeouts, played in six World Series and six All-Star games. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1962, the first African American to enter the Hall. His uniform number, 42, was retired ten years later. Jackie Robinson died on October 24, 1972. He was just 53 years old.

The home of the man who was once demeaned and hated has been registered as a National Historic Landmark. A major stadium was named in his honor. Several public schools bear his name. *Time Magazine* included him in its list to the 100 most influential Americans of the last century. Just last December, the Governor of California inducted Jackie Robinson into the California Museum for History, Women and the Arts. And, last April 15th, more than 200 major league players wore Number 42 in his honor.

They say, sometimes it's the children of the ones who first threw stones at the prophet that are the first to praise [him].

LARRY DOBY

Looking at Larry Doby's life and legacy is, tragically, like listening for the second-chair violin. Only toward the end of his life did he shine. It's an oversimplification to say that Larry Doby was to the American League what Jackie Robinson was to the National League, but it at least gives us a point of reference for Doby's importance for both baseball and the history of American racism.

Lawrence Eugene Doby was immersed in baseball for most of his life. Born in Camden, South Carolina, on December 13, 1923, he was the second African American to break Baseball's color barrier, as well as the second African American big-league manager.

Doby was born into slightly better financial circumstances than Robinson, but, he, too, lost his father when quite young, albeit due to death, not abandonment. His mother and siblings moved to New Jersey, where Doby would spend most of his youth and young adulthood.

But as one source puts it, Larry Doby came from good baseball stock; his father played semi-pro ball. By age 17 he was playing second base for the Negro Leagues' Newark Eagles and attending Long Island University, but was drafted by the U.S. Navy in the wake of Pearl Harbor.

When he returned from the Navy, Doby picked up where he had left off, batting .341, finishing one homer shy of the league leader and anchoring the Eagles as they took the Negro Leagues Championship in 1946. Doby's talent was not lost on Bill Veeck, the maverick owner of the Cleveland Indians. In August, 1947, Doby came to the "biggs".

But Larry Doby had come to the biggs younger and much less prepared for the double-barreled prejudice of fans and players. There was no Branch Rickey or Leo Durocher or Pee Wee Reese to support him through the worst of the taunts and threats. Owner, Bill Veeck, simply told him not to react to fans or umpires or anybody else. Just hit the baseball. Doby was in centerfield two days later.

A May 12, 2007 article on the Indians' blog sums up the rawness with which Larry Doby came to the American League:

When Branch Rickey signed Robinson in 1945, and brought him up to the big leagues in 1947, he had planned for the event for many years. Rickey had a plan in place to not only make it easier for Robinson to be successful, but easier for him to avoid certain racial issues that could have come before him. No, I'm not saying that the path was easy for Robinson. That's ridiculous. I am saying that Rickey was shrewd enough, and racially sensitive enough, to make sure that Robinson succeeded not only as a player, but as a person... Doby didn't have the benefit of that preparation...Doby was straight out of the Negro Leagues and five years younger than Jackie Robinson. On top of that, Lou Boudreau (Cleveland's player-manager) hated the idea of Doby playing for the Tribe...

For his part, Doby's abilities eventually muffled at least some of the abuse. In his eight years with the Indians, he led the American League in at least one of the following categories per year: runs-batted-in, runs scored, on-base percentage and slugging percentage.

He was with the Indians when they won the World Series in 1948 and 1954. He was traded to the White Sox in 1955, and played with two other clubs before retiring in 1959. Doby came out of retirement to play for a professional team in Japan, worked as a coach for Montreal, Cleveland and the Chicago White Sox. He managed the White Sox during the 1978 season.

Larry Doby was not a first-year inductee into the Hall of Fame. It would be 39 years before he made it. When the 1997 Major League All-Star game came to Cleveland, it was Larry Doby who threw the first pitch. He died on June 18, 2003. He was 79.

Doby will never get the recognition that has been given to Robinson. Doby wasn't that fiery, flashy or versatile. Yet he came to major leagues just 11 weeks after Robinson, suffered at least as many indignities, all in the media shadow that kept the country from appreciating either his abilities or the disgraceful way he was being treated. Even the sterile words that went from the White House to the media outlets were a reminder that Larry Doby is all too often relegated to the margins of Black History Month.

SUMMARY

The lives of Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby are at once public and personal, requiring us to enter both spheres if we are to grab hold of their lives and times. Baseball is a public institution, containing multiple personal experiences. Public, because these players' paths to national hero status are littered with barriers that undercut human lives for no better reason than skin pigment, ignorance and prejudice. And those barriers were, at their very essence, studies about what happens when prejudice and power combine, resulting in *institutional* racism. But Doby and Robinson also speak to the personal (and, therefore, the *spiritual*) with their stories of struggle and persecution and perseverance.

The public component asks us to examine the ways we interface with the world and its institutions, but the personal confronts us with some potentially embarrassing questions, too – questions about the raw responses in our brains when engaging people whose color, culture and language are unfamiliar.

The personal stuff that surfaces when considering the weight of two black athletes engages us with some of life's greatest questions: Does the magic – the spark of divine life – that animates me also animate the "other"? How can I respect both uniqueness of culture, race or language and still honor the clumsy, universal impulse to understand and be understood? In what ways might I contribute to the dismantling of racism? In what ways do I hinder the cause of racial justice? And, if God really is code for a love so mysterious as to confound our every attempt to dissect and reduce it, am I anything remotely resembling *godly* when it comes to color?

This is the gift and the curse of examining exemplary lives, be they those of Jesus or Billie Holiday – accept the inspiration, but also the haunting. Haunting to be better. To be kinder. To be wiser.

Nobody's fools, Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby. Their passion for playing a kid's game in a grownup's body – a *black* body – overcame the very worst of what we are in the service of reminding us who we may yet become.

God's rest to two men whose bats and gloves spoke truth to power with love. May they continue to comfort and afflict us until we, too, round third and head for home.