

Getting to the soul of *Soul of Reason*: A Case for Preservation

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Introduction:

As a part of my fall 2003 semester internship at the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library at New York University, I was assigned to review a segment of the moving image holdings in the University Archives. Among the archives diverse moving image holdings is a collection of 803 audiotapes acquired from New York University's Institute of Afro-American Affairs (hereafter to be referred to as IAAA). Upon my initial inspection of these tapes I came across a series of tapes that are labeled *Soul of Reason*, dating from 1971-1978. Additionally, I had received a box inventory of the IAAA's audiovisual materials from Mona Jimenez, Internship Supervisor and Moving Image Preservation Specialist, verifying that the collection includes 266 ¼" audiotapes entitled *Soul of Reason*. Attached to this inventory is an itemized breakdown of each tape's content. I observed that the *Soul of Reason* tapes listed names of highly distinguished Black public figures. This intrigued me and I was inspired to learn about the origins of these tapes and history of *Soul of Reason*.

Project Description and Research Methodology:

My final project is an examination of the *Soul of Reason* audiotapes from several perspectives: research into the historical context of *Soul of Reason* including its historical relevance to New York University; conduct a general condition assessment of the audiotapes to determine their current physical state, specifically checking for signs of deterioration of the materials; analyze the intellectual content of the tapes; research into the uniqueness of *Soul of Reason* and most importantly; establish an argument that conveys the value of these audiotapes and the necessity to preserve them.

The Origins of *Soul of Reason* and its Connection to IAAA:

At the peak of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, Black students and Black faculty at many colleges and universities in the United States demanded the implementation of academic departments that exclusively focused on a scholarly examination of the African-American experience in America. This historic movement was also taking place at New York University. The tragic assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 devastated and riled the Black community, further enhancing the cause to establish forums for Black scholarship.

In response to Dr. King's death and the growing sentiment to formulate a Black academic department at New York University, prominent members of the University's black community formed an organization committee. This committee included student, Winston Duckett, President of the Black Allied Student Association; faculty members Dr. Randolph M. Chase, Jr., Assistant Professor of Medicine; Professor Roscoe C. Brown, Jr., School of Education; and other distinguished members. Mr. Duckett composed a "Statement of Position," dated April 22, 1969, where he proposed the development of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute Organization Committee. Following this document, Dr. Randolph Chase, Jr. functioning as Chairman of the Organization Committee composed an "Organizational Proposal for an Afro-American Institute at New York University in honor of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." dated April 23, 1969. These documents were submitted to the University Senate for approval. The Afro-American Institute, as it was originally named, was officially changed to Institute of Afro-American Affairs on September 15, 1969. Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, Jr. was appointed as Director of IAAA

effective September 1, 1969 with confirmed support from current New York University President, Dr. James McNaughton Hester. Dr. Hester served as New York University President from 1962-1975.¹

The appointment of Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, Jr. in 1969 as Director of IAAA was more than an appropriate one because he was a man with a significant association to New York University. Dr. Brown, a former United States Army Air Forces Captain and Squadron Commander of the World War II 100th Fighter Squadron of the 332nd Fighter Group, more famously known as the “Tuskegee Airmen”, received his M.A. and Ph.D. in Education from New York University in 1949 and 1951 respectively. He was a University Research Assistant from 1949-1950 and became a faculty member of the School of Education beginning in 1950, culminating in his promotion as Professor of Education in 1960.²

The IAAA’s objective to develop comprehensive educational programs in Black as well as Latino Studies was not exclusive to formal classroom instruction. The Institute’s goal to share and expand the knowledge of Black and Latino intellectuals among diverse audiences seemed to be best achieved by finding a platform where this knowledge could be widely dispensed. In the papers collection of the Office of Radio & TV 1956-1980 at the New York University Archives are a number of files dated from 1971-1978 entitled *Soul of Reason*. It was among these files that I uncovered the undated document, “Prospectus for a Radio Series *The Soul of Reason* (working title)” (see Document 1). It recommends Dr. Brown to be the moderator of the series and outlines the premise for the creation of the radio series as a showcase for Black scholarship. Dr. Brown, yet again, was an exceptional choice to be moderator of the series. He came to the series with solid media experience. This included being the co-host of a 36-week television program on black literature entitled *Black Lettres*, with fellow New York University Professor Frank Miceli. *Black Lettres* aired on WCBS-TV from 1968-1971.

The goal of the series was to examine the foundations of African-American thought from a variety of disciplines including business, education, literature, medicine, music politics, sports, and others. The prospectus continues to state:

“One of the most effective ways to communicate these ideas and ideals is by radio. It is proposed that the WNBC Radio Community Affairs Department in association with the IAAA at New York University, produce a series of half-hour programs entitled *The Soul of Reason* to accurately and honestly equate principle to practice in a meaningful manner. The programs will aim at identifying and analyzing the contributions, problems and aspirations of Americans of African descent.”

Although the prospectus is undated, it is obvious that it dates prior to the launching of the series, and may have been composed in 1971 or possibly earlier. The prospectus also helped to clarify a question regarding the *Soul of Reason* audiotapes. All of the audiotapes are stored in ¼” reel-to-reel tape boxes and most of these boxes have attached to them production labels from 660 WNBC-AM Radio listing WNBC production dates, broadcast dates, and the name of the engineer that worked on that particular broadcast. Additionally, usually written in red pencil on the labels, were listed the 800

¹ Historical information on the IAAA and President Hester obtained from Afro-American Affairs, Office of Papers and Office of the President, James McNaughton Hester 1962-1975 Papers at New York University Archives.

² Biographical Sketch, Brown, Dr. Roscoe C. Jr. 1949 Ed. Biofiles, New York University Archives.

WNYU-AM (New York University's radio station) broadcast dates which always followed the WNBC broadcast by approximately a couple of weeks.³ The prospectus establishes that there was a relationship between WNBC and New York University in the development of *Soul of Reason*, but there were many more questions that needed answers. Who was first approached to create the radio series? When was the first broadcast of *Soul of Reason*? If *Soul of Reason* was broadcast from WNBC Studios, how did WNYU obtain access to air the program after the initial weekly WNBC airing?

I was unable to find any historical documents that could confirm the series premiere nor establish who conceived the idea of the series. However, there were 2 documents that I found that helped me to form an educated guess as to the possible premiere date of *Soul of Reason*. An August 15, 1972 document (see Document 2) lists *Soul of Reason* taping dates for the spring and summer 1971 seasons referencing the earliest taping date as April 27, 1971 with writer, John O. Killens as the guest, and the next taping date as May 4, 1971 with writer and anthologist, Orde Coombs as the guest. May 4, 1971 New York University News Bureau Press Release (see Document 3) references a Sunday, May 9, 1971 *Soul of Reason* broadcast with guest Orde Coombs, corroborating the information on the August 15, 1972 document. Unfortunately, the earliest audiotope in the *Soul of Reason* collection is dated October 26, 1971 with guest Gil Moses. The collection does not have a tape of the premiere broadcast or the series' first few months of programs.

Historical Investigation into *Soul of Reason* Continues:

Once I had obtained as much information as I could about *Soul of Reason* from the valuable collection at the University Archives, it was critical to pursue other sources that may shed light on the radio series. Considering the fact that the program was broadcast at WNBC, it was suggested by Mona Jimenez to contact the NBC News Archives to see if they have maintained records on the series. She referred me to NBC Archivist, Nancy Cole, and I contacted her. Ms. Cole informed me that the NBC Radio Collection, dating from the 1920s through the mid 1980s, is housed at the Library of Congress. She directed me to NBC News Archive website (<http://www.nbcnewsarchives.com>) where there is a link to the Library of Congress NBC Radio Collection web page. The site states that most of the NBC Radio recordings at the Library of Congress have been cataloged in the Recorded Sound Section's Sound Online Inventory and Catalog (SONIC). My online search of this catalog produced zero findings on *Soul of Reason*, but the search at the Library of Congress does not end here. A call to the Library's Recorded Sound Reference Center will be the next step in identifying whether any *Soul of Reason* materials exist in their collection.

The next research approach was to locate the primary participants in the production of *Soul of Reason* and see if they were available to be interviewed. The most crucial quest was to contact the series host, Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, Jr. I fortunately learned that Dr. Brown is currently Director of the Center for Urban Education Policy and University

³ It is important to note that in 1971 WNYU had an AM frequency located at 800 on the AM dial. In a May 23, 1973 article of *Variety*, it mentions that WNYU had acquired a FM frequency and was conducting test programming on that frequency located at 89.1 on the FM dial. This WNYU-FM frequency remains to this day. Additionally, a New York University News Bureau Press Release dated May 4, 1971 reports that *Soul of Reason* as being aired on Sunday mornings from 8:00-8:30 am on WNBC-FM (97.1 mhz). A November 16, 1971 NYU News Bureau Press Release announces the airing of *Soul of Reason* on both WNBC-FM at 12 noon and WNBC-AM (660 khz) at 12 midnight.

Professor at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. I contacted Dr. Brown via telephone and e-mail at his CUNY office informing him of my enrollment in the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program at New York University, which led to my discovery and interest in *Soul of Reason*. On Friday, December 5, 2003, I conducted a phone interview with Dr. Brown where we discussed *Soul of Reason* in-depth. This interview provides invaluable facts and insights about the series from a person that was involved with the series from its commencement to its finale, and offers background information that has not been found in the written record.

Dr. Brown stated that in 1971, NBC approached Ralph Rourke, the Assistant Manager for the News Bureau for New York University Office of Radio and Television, to create a black radio show. At the time, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) instituted a regulation where radio stations had to fulfill a public service requirement to produce a number of non-sponsored public service programs per year. WNBC was hoping that their idea for a black radio show would satisfy the FCC regulation.

Mr. Rourke and Dr. Brown had a long collaborative relationship at New York University dating back to 1957, and included projects such as the aforementioned *Black Lettres* television program. Dr. Brown said that for many years New York University's Office of Television and Radio was an exceptionally active department and Mr. Rourke's capacity in the department helped him to have strong connections to the New York media community. The department carries the distinction of creating in 1957 one of the first nationally televised college course programs, the historic *Sunrise Semester* series. The series aired on WCBS-TV of which Mr. Rourke was associated.

Dr. Brown and Mr. Rourke created the title *Soul of Reason* and decided that the series would be a talk show format that highlighted the accomplishments of Blacks and Latinos in various fields. Dr. Brown said that the program was broadcast at 10:00-10:30 pm on WNBC-FM (a broadcast time that conflicts with written documents on the program that list other airing times). However, he did confirm that the program rebroadcast at 12 midnight on WNBC-AM (660 khz) and that this frequency reached audiences from Maine to Florida.⁴ Dr. Brown mentioned that he received fan mail from as far away as Canada and Florida.

Dr. Brown said that he was responsible for the selection of guests that appeared on the series. Having a long-standing involvement in the arts and education communities, he knew and had relationships with many prominent black personalities in New York and beyond, and asked them to participate on the program. I asked Dr. Brown if he knew the exact date of the first *Soul of Reason* broadcast. He cannot definitely confirm the date of the first program, but believes that the first taping could have been as early as the end of 1970. He also mentioned that he believes his first guest was Mr. Earl G. Graves, Publisher of *Black Enterprise* magazine.

According to Dr. Brown, *Soul of Reason* programs were also rebroadcast on WNYU-FM. I inquired as to how that arrangement was established. Dr. Brown believes that Ralph

⁴ The November 16, 1971 NYU News Bureau Press Release references that the midnight *Soul of Reason* broadcast on WNBC-AM (660 khz) could be heard by audiences from Nova Scotia to Florida (see Document 4).

Rourke would acquire program tapes from WNBC and bring them to the WNYU studios for rebroadcast.

The most important revelation that Dr. Brown shared with me is the fact that the *Soul of Reason* series did not end in 1978. *Soul of Reason* was on the air for 15 years from 1971-1986. Startled by this important piece of information, I reiterated to him that the University Archives' *Soul of Reason* audiotape collection dates to 1978 and asked if he had any insights as to why the collection would end abruptly at that year. Dr. Brown explained that in 1977 he left New York University to become President of Bronx Community College. Between Mr. Rourke, who remained at New York University, and Dr. Brown's staff at Bronx Community College, it was decided that *Soul of Reason* should continue production because it was one of WNBC's more popular public service radio programs. *Soul of Reason* ended in 1986 when WNBC Radio changed its format to sports programming. Dr. Brown has a personal *Soul of Reason* audiotape collection including ¼" reel-to-reel tapes and cassette tapes representing the latter years of the series.

Upon leaving New York University and his post as Director of IAAA in 1977, the Institute experienced challenging times. The Institute struggled in identifying a new director and reestablishing stable leadership. Several interim directors and financial challenges forced the IAAA to cease many activities that they were once actively involved in during Dr. Brown's tenure. This included maintaining the audiotape archive of *Soul of Reason*. Although Dr. Brown remembers WNYU continuing to broadcast *Soul of Reason* beyond his departure from the University, the IAAA no longer kept record of the association. It is also uncertain how long WNYU continued to air *Soul of Reason*. That issue is still being explored. Dr. Brown took it upon himself to archive the series once the IAAA was no longer capable. Presently, Dr. Brown appears to be the sole proprietor of archival *Soul of Reason* programs beyond 1978.

Lastly, because Ralph Rourke was such a pivotal participant in the development and production of the series I asked Dr. Brown if he maintained a close relationship with Mr. Rourke beyond his years at New York University and if he may be available. Dr. Brown informed me that he continued to work with Mr. Rourke for many years after his departure from New York University. Dr. Brown went on to say that he brought Mr. Rourke to Bronx Community College where they continued their prolific collaboration. Unfortunately, Mr. Rourke passed away three months ago, but he was still actively working in the media up until his passing.

***Soul of Reason* Audiotape Collection – Physical Condition Assessment and Preservation Concerns:**

As mentioned previously, the *Soul of Reason* audiotape collection consists of 266 ¼" reel-to-reel tapes. Due to time constraints, I was unable to uniquely identify all 266 tapes. Therefore, the most practical task to undertake in the interest of priority was to inspect as many tapes as possible and formulate a general condition assessment of the tape collection. As an addendum to this task, I did have the opportunity to catalog 63 of the 266 tapes, which accounts for 23% of the collection. One of my internship assignments at the University Archives was collaborating on the creation of a prototype database aimed at identifying the Archives' moving image holdings. This Microsoft Access 2000 database entitled "Media Database" was used to record and uniquely identify these 63 audiotapes documenting their general physical descriptions at the item level.

The most noticeable physical defects of the tapes were uneven tape winds and pack slip (another example of a bad tape wind)⁵. The oldest known tape in the collection dates to 1971 with the most recent tapes dating to 1978. Therefore, the tapes range in age from 25-31 years. "Since the early 1960s, audiotapes have used an oriented polyester (also known as polyethylene terephthalate, PET, or DuPont Mylar®) film as a tape substrate material."⁶ Polyester tape has proven to be chemically stable and is more resistant to deterioration than other tape substrate materials, such as acetate. Because the earliest tape in the collection dates to 1971, it may be safe to say that all of the tapes are polyester based. However, a more conclusive examination should be performed to determine the accuracy of that statement.

Although polyester tape is fairly resilient, it is known to be susceptible to a particular form of deterioration. "The tape binder is responsible for holding the magnetic particles on the tape and facilitating tape transport. If the binder loses integrity – through softening, embrittlement, loss of cohesiveness, or loss of lubrication – the tape may become unplayable. As Dr. John W.C. Van Bogart, Principal Investigator at the National Media Lab explains:

"Sticky tape and "sticky shed" are commonly used terms to describe the phenomenon associated with deterioration of the magnetic tape binder. The binder polymers used in magnetic tape constructions are subject to a chemical process known as hydrolysis. In this process, long molecules are broken apart by a reaction with water to produce shorter molecules. --- Binder hydrolysis can lead to a sticky tape phenomenon characterized by a softer than normal binder coating, higher friction, and/or gummy tape surface residues."⁷

I saw no obvious evidence of "sticky shed" syndrome in the audiotape collection, but a more thorough examination of the tapes' physical condition needs to be conducted. Additionally, preventive measures need to be implemented at the University Archives to avoid the possible onset of this condition. Following, I will list recommendations for preserving and prolonging the life of audiotape collections.

According to SoliNET, the Southeastern Library Network, magnetic media have an approximate shelf life of 25 years and tape deterioration usually begins to appear to this time. Considering that the latest *Soul of Reason* tapes are 25 years old, it is critical that preservation activities be implemented on this collection. In accordance to preservation principles, good storage and environmental conditions along with other factors assist in retarding the deterioration process, which leads to recommendations for preservation of the *Soul of Reason* collection.⁸

Recommended Practices for the Preservation of Magnetic Tape:

Store tapes in accordance to environmental standards for magnetic media.

Audiotapes should be stored in a clean environment and should not be exposed to contaminants such as dust, dirt, fingerprints, and any airborne pollutants. Tapes should

⁵ p. 22, Van Bogart, Dr. John W.C. *Magnetic Tape Storage and Handling: A Guide for Libraries and Archives*. Publication 54. Washington, D.C. Council on Library and Information Resources, June 1995. <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub54/index.html>

⁶ Ibid, p. 10

⁷ Ibid, pgs. 7-8

⁸ Preservation Services Leaflet: *Preservation Recording, Copying, and Storage Guidelines for Audio Tape Collections*, http://www.solinet.net/preservation/leaflets/leaflets_temp.cfm?doc_id=789

not be exposed to excessive sunlight and must have no contact with water. Additionally, store tapes away from magnetic fields and sources of vibration.

Re-house audiotapes in acid free tape boxes and acid free storage boxes.

Presently, the *Soul of Reason* collection is stored in the original tape manufacturers' and are packed in heavy-duty "Paige Miracle Box" archival storage boxes stacked on the floor in a section of the University. The "Paige Miracle Box" archival storage boxes are acid-free based. The boxes are stored away from windows and are not exposed to sunlight. However, the original tape manufacturers' boxes are believed to be non-acid-free materials, and these tapes eventually require re-housing in order to prolong the life expectancy of the media. Additionally, audiotapes should not be stored lying flat, but stored on end. The *Soul of Reason* tapes are stored vertically.

Inspect tape pack winds. As I mentioned previously, a majority of the tapes in the *Soul of Reason* collection suffer from uneven tape winds and pack slip. To avoid external damage, tapes should be wound smoothly, have an even pack, and be supported by their hubs, meaning stored vertically (which is referenced above).

Institute proper temperature and relative humidity conditions in magnetic media storage environments. Strong fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity (RH) of storage environments can do considerable damage to audiotapes (such as expansion and shrinkage of tape, the development of biological contaminants, increased tape pack tightness, increased degradation of the tape binder, etc.) Many studies have been conducted to determine the ideal temperature and RH storage conditions. Based on an analysis by Dr. John W.C. Van Bogart, he suggests that maintaining a temperature of $59 \pm 5^\circ$ F and 40% maximum RH are safe storage conditions for audiotapes.⁹ SolINET recommends temperatures between $40^\circ - 65^\circ$ F (+ or - 2°) and RH of 30% (+ or - 3%).

Determine the quality of the tape stock and identify tape length. Although a more in-depth inventory of the *Soul of Reason* collection is required, a general assessment appears to indicate that a majority of the tapes are Scotch 3M tapes and the brand "audiotape." High quality name brand tapes are considered a reliable and more durable product. Additionally, I was unable to verify tape lengths in the collection, but this is important to identify. In an ideal situation, the tape length will be of a short record time (i.e., 30 or 60 minutes). The shorter the tape length, the thicker and more durable the tape is. If there are tape lengths with longer recording times, these tapes will be thinner and less durable.

Minimize tape handling and determine if tapes need to be transferred or copied. *Soul of Reason* is an extremely valuable and unique collection. Once the value of collection is confirmed, a decision will need to be made as to whether preservation masters and access copies will be generated. Because magnetic tape collections at repositories are usually very large, much thought needs to be applied to establish whether a portion or all of the collection is worthy for preservation. Audiotape preservation is an expensive endeavor. Once preservation goals and priorities have been approved, reformatting of the tape information onto a more stable format would be the next step. Preservation

⁹ pgs. 19-20, Van Bogart, Dr. John W.C. *Magnetic Tape Storage and Handling: A Guide for Libraries and Archives*. Publication 54. Washington, D.C. Council on Library and Information Resources, June 1995. <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub54/index.html>

masters on ¼” reel-to-reel should be a considered format with digitized reference copies formatted on CDs.

Soul of Reason: An Argument for Preservation:

In my conversation with Dr. Brown, we discussed the uniqueness of *Soul of Reason*. He stated that the series is rare and is a nonexistent format in media today. In his opinion, cable television has replaced radio as the setting for the classic interview structured program. Dr. Brown compared *Soul of Reason* to Charlie Rose’s television interview program on public television; a show that engages the host and guest in meaningful dialog that is educational and thought provoking. Dr. Brown stated that *Soul of Reason* “is probably one of the most outstanding troves of broadcast about African-Americans that exist and was the only such show in the country at the time.” The radio show featured solid interviews with prolific Black and Latino guests and was a groundbreaking program because these important public figures were given the opportunity to share and engage in rhetoric, in a format that was not widely available to them.

Soul of Reason featured an impressive line-up of renowned guests in its many years on the air. A few of these figures include:

- September 10, 1974 interview with the celebrated late Puerto Rican playwright, poet, and actor **Miguel Piñero**, co-founder of the famed Nuyorican Poets Café.
- February 2, 1978 interview with civil rights activist **Roy Innis**, National Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). He is currently the Chairman of CORE.
- February 28 1978 interview with the **Honorable David N. Dinkins**. At the time of this *Soul of Reason* interview, David Dinkins was the City Clerk of New York and the President of the New York City Board of Elections. In 1989, he would be elected the 1st African-American mayor of New York serving one term from 1990-1993.

Conclusion:

My final project aimed to establish the importance and inherent value of *Soul of Reason*. My goal was to identify this landmark radio series as a unique historical artifact. Its historical link to New York University and its significant contribution of chronicling the Black and Latino experience are powerful examples that justify the series’ value. Further research needs to be done on this fascinating radio series. An assessment of Dr. Brown’s personal *Soul of Reason* audiotape archive, which contains tapes of programs beyond the 1978 University Archives’ holdings, should result in an additional treasure-trove of programming that is presumably unparalleled. A follow-up inquiry at the Library of Congress may produce additional sources of information on the series. The tasks to conduct more thorough physical condition assessment of the tapes and the potential to pull representative tapes in the collection to playback, checking for playback capability and possible loss of content through deterioration, are vital to the longevity of the materials. It is hoped that this project has conveyed the importance of *Soul of Reason*. As a historical artifact, it is also hoped that *Soul of Reason* will eventually be accessible to the public. Scholars, researchers, students, and many others would benefit greatly

from this rich library of programs. *Soul of Reason* must be preserved and is a resource of information that is too valuable to lose.

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