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When PBS Had 'Soul!'

Each week, host Ellis Haizlip turned public TV into a hip, all-black affair with *Soul!* A new documentary brings the iconic show back to life.

By: Ericka Blount Danois | Posted: September 23, 2011 at 12:30 AM

On Jan. 28, 1972, red-hot trumpeter Lee Morgan, finally drug-free after battling a debilitating heroin addiction, took to the stage of the groundbreaking PBS show *Soul!*, hosted by Washington, D.C., native Ellis B. Haizlip. Three weeks later, his common-law wife marched into an East Village club in New York City, called out Morgan's name as he stood onstage and shot the 33-year-old trumpeter directly in the heart.



Ellis B. Haizlip (left) with Amiri Baraka. (Courtesy of Melissa Haizlip)

Morgan's appearance on the show, one of his last documented performances, would be included on his album *We Remember You*, a compilation of live performances. It remains a seminal performance by a seminal musician.

Morgan was just one of many brilliant musicians featured on *Soul!*, the brainchild of Haizlip and producer Christopher Lukas. It filmed musicians like Morgan in ways that television hadn't dared to try before. Musicians were free to experiment live onstage, improvising, as if they were performing in nightclubs.

And they could express themselves freely and honestly with Haizlip, the weekly show's host -- a laid-back hipster, dressed in the colorful clothing of the musicians, artists and poets he invited to join him -- on an earthy set that could have doubled as his living room. (*Soul!* bore no relationship to the seminal Los Angeles-based black music publication of the same name.)

Haizlip died of lung cancer in 1991 at age 61. Now his niece, Melissa Haizlip, is hard at work preserving her uncle's legacy, producing and directing, along with director J. Kevin Swain, a documentary about the show. (There will be a [screening](#) of the work-in-progress documentary -- *Mr. Soul! Ellis Haizlip and the Birth of Black Power TV* -- on Sept. 24 at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, at a session during the Congressional Black Caucus Independent Film Series.)

Much of Melissa's challenge has involved a wild-goose chase to find existing episodes from the first season in 1968, many of which were taped over to save money and space for the station because, as

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she says, "In the beginning they didn't know what they had."

The Birth of Soul!

There were many firsts on the show -- such as the first time B.B. King and Roberta Flack ever appeared on television -- and there have been many discoveries by Melissa, including an episode with a then-16-year-old Arsenio Hall performing magic tricks. The show had many powerful moments, including a two-part episode in which guest host Nikki Giovanni interviewed James Baldwin in London. Their conversation was later transcribed into a book, *A Dialogue*.

The concept for the show was born five months after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, in the wake of uprisings and the findings from the [Kerner Commission](#), charged with investigating civil disorders that destroyed cities from 1964 to 1967. In the report, the media were criticized for sensationalizing the riots, not examining their causes and not reporting on them from an insider's view because of a lack of black representation. The report's findings: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal."

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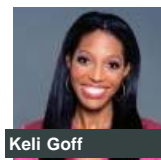
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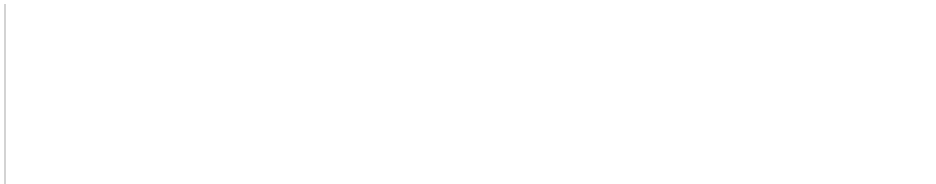
Editorial staff head out at the black women's magazine, followed by others.

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drvalpat

I loved this show as a young teenager and I truly believe that it helped to plant the spark of interest and inquiry that ultimately led to my love of reading and thinking and the "life of the mind". Ellis Haizlip was so cool and engaging, the format, guests, very impactful on a young girl embracing her militancy and blackness. I would love to see all of the episodes and look forward to the documentary...

Saturday, September 24, 2011, 7:37:15 AM from theroot · [Reply](#)



soulgriot

I remember the show well, and I wish that someone could make it commercially available. I'd gladly buy it!

Saturday, September 24, 2011, 7:21:46 AM from theroot · [Reply](#)



I just got a \$829.99 iPad2 for only \$103.37 and my mom got a \$1499.99 HDTV for only \$251.92, they are both coming with USPS tomorrow. I would be an idiot to ever pay full retail prices at places like Walmart or Bestbuy. I sold a 37" HDTV to my boss for \$600 that I only paid \$78.24 for. I use PennyOrder.com ONLY

Friday, September 23, 2011, 5:11:09 PM from theroot · [Reply](#)



Waldimore

Soul came at a time when there was more appreciation for intellectualism. The late 60's on into the 70's was a time of consciousness raising, personal enrichment and enlightenment. People actually read black history books for pleasure. I read all of Malcolm's writings, Before the Mayflower, Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, the Miseducation of the Negro, an array of African history books, and black literature. People don't read enough anymore. People listen to talk shows and form opinions based on the headlines and personal dogmatic attitudes. Blacks aren't interested in their own culture, fine art, our original music forms, dance and literature. Religion has take its place. But this is true of all America. America has been dumbed down so that politicians can beguile people and exploit their ignorance. I read a lot of condemnation here by whites on black leaders as race baiters. But how are they any different than the guys/gal at Repub debate? There is no such thing as elevated discussion in America anymore. How can there be when people don't take the time to be informed before having an opinion.

Friday, September 23, 2011, 2:40:19 PM from theroot · [Reply](#)



Its Me, Jessica

Truer words have not been spoken.

Tuesday, October 25, 2011, 3:29:08 PM from theroot · [Reply](#)



Daryl Huggins

Check out this series of clips showing Stevie Wonder along with his band, Wonderlove, performing on 'Soul!': <http://youtu.be/4gQ33Kmd76o>

Friday, September 23, 2011, 1:32:37 PM from theroot · [Reply](#)



rennie_davis

Although I don't remember watching this show, programming on PBS has always been hit-or-miss--especially for minorities. In the 70s, I remember watching the play "the First Breeze of Summer," on PBS; now all they broadcast are re-runs of the Antique Roadshow, or 10-year old concerts of Tina Turner.

Maybe if those 100,000 letters had been accompanied by a \$5 or \$10 check to PBS, Haizlip may have been able to keep his show on the air--at least for another year.

Friday, September 23, 2011, 1:04:49 PM from theroot · [Reply](#)



rennie_davis

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Maybe if those 100,000 letters had been accompanied by a \$5 or \$10 check to PBS, Haizlip may have been able to keep his show on the air--at least for another year.

Friday, September 23, 2011, 1:03:48 PM from theroot - Reply



Praisegirl11@verizon.net

Thank you, thank you for the pleasant memories of Soul. This was a great program in an eye opening area. I enjoyed Mr. Haizlip's laid back relaxed interviewing style. I look forward to seeing Melissa's project. She is so right about the need for young black people to know about their recent history as well as the ancient.. I wish her success.

Friday, September 23, 2011, 11:44:25 AM from theroot - Reply



shakah

I will watch!

Friday, September 23, 2011, 11:10:57 AM from theroot - Reply

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