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A Touch of Magic

'That Old Black Magic' features vintage footage of Jazz greats

By [Steven Rosen](#)

For those interested in seeing and hearing what 1950s/early 1960s-era African-American Jazz musicians and black vocal stylists were like in their day, Cincinnati World Cinema is offering an illuminating program. It is screening *That Old Black Magic* at 3 p.m. Feb. 22 and 7 p.m. Feb. 24-25 at The Redmoor club (the former Mt. Lookout Theater) in Mount Lookout Square.

That Old Black Music originally was a 2002 Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) one-hour television special, drawn from the archives of its own old programs. It subsequently became available as a DVD in Canada, but has never been officially released in the U.S. The program features footage of Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat "King" Cole, Sarah Vaughan, Sammy Davis Jr., Dinah Washington, Cab Calloway, Della Reese, Billy Eckstine and Marion Anderson.

It is significant for several reasons. Even into the 1960s, these artists had a tough time getting onto U.S. television networks, which were careful not to disturb the sensibilities of affiliates in the segregated South. And those shows that did feature them, such as Ed Sullivan's variety program, only offered a song or two at most. (The one great exception, NBC's 15-minute *The Nat "King" Cole Show*, constantly struggled to attract an audience and sponsors during its 1956-1957 run.)

Canada, however, had no such hang-ups. The national television network had a variety program, *The Jackie Ray Show*, which consistently gave performers like Ellington, Calloway and Vaughan a chance to perform live under optimum, respectful conditions. Some, like Davis, Cole and Anderson, had their own specials.

Because, for the most part, these shows were live, it's lucky there are preserved copies. But kinescopes were made at the time — film shot from the TV screen — for use in different time zones or as copies for the producer.

However, that doesn't mean they were easily found. According to the CBC Web site, a former employee knocked down a wall during home remodeling and found 18 cans of kinescopes from Jackie Ray behind the bricks. Called in to investigate, company preservationist Laurie Nemetz determined Norman Sedawie was the producer and decided to search for further footage under his name in the country's National Archives. *That Old Black Magic* eventually was culled from the results.

"I first heard about it in Seattle three years ago, when I was talking with a group from Vancouver," says Cincinnati World Cinema's Tim Swallow. "I was able to get a DVD and thought it'd be interesting for Cincinnati."

"First, it offers a world view of what segregation was like in our country. Second, the artists were in their prime. How many Americans have seen that?"

The important, groundbreaking modern instrumental jazz of the day is missing — no Monk, Miles or post-Bird bop. Nor does everything that is here present the artists at their best — the Cole clip, a staged set piece of him singing "Stay With Love" while wandering through a crowded party, is corny at best.

But, for the most part, the vocalists really excel in this environment. While singer/bandleader Cab Calloway was already in his fifties, maybe a good 10 years past his commercial peak, you'd never guess it by the energetic, exciting way he sings and moves his way through "Minnie the Moocher." Ellington, playing with a combo, is elegantly restrained at the piano as he performs a medley.

Singers Vaughan and Fitzgerald are not yet elder stateswomen, so their performances spark with lively energy. The dynamic Washington, who died in 1963 before she was 40, does a spirited version of Bessie Smith's "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair."

And a really young Della Reese steals the whole hour's worth of footage, surprising and delighting herself with the depth of her pleasure while belting out "Someday (You'll Want Me to Want You)." Wow!

Black Magic contains a sublime performance of "Ave Maria" by Anderson from 1959. Twenty years earlier, Eleanor Roosevelt had to intervene to have her sing it at the Lincoln Memorial, after the racist Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let her perform at its Constitution Hall in Washington.

Cincinnati saxophonist Bruce Menefield will lead discussion and play after each showing. The Feb. 22 matinee is a special event, with tickets \$20 in advance and \$25 at the door, featuring music by Menefield with vocalist Brenda Flowers and bassist Eddie Brookshire, plus hors d'oeuvres buffet. For Feb. 24-25, admission is \$10 in advance and \$12 at the door. A cash bar is open for all shows. Co-sponsoring the presentation is the local (Phi Psi Chapter) of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the service organization established by African-American college-trained women.

THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC screens 3 p.m. Feb 22 and 7 p.m. Feb. 24-25 at The Redmoor in Mount Lookout Square. Buy tickets, check out performance times and find nearby bars and restaurants here