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C o M M e n t a t o r**  
Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
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*Issue 163 – December 15, 2005*

*Ode to Richard Pryor  
by Dr. Edward Rhymes  
Guest Commentator*

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*"As long as the colored man look to white folks to put a crown on what he say.... as long as he looks to white people for approval... then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about" – August Wilson Jr.*

If Helen of Troy is "the face that launched a thousand ships," then Richard Pryor is the voice that launched a thousand comedians and artists of every hue. He not only made people laugh, but he inspired others to make people laugh. However, Rich's greatest contribution to society at large and the Black community in particular, was his courage to address societal ills with his unique brand of humor and insight, without apology or regret.

Click [here](#) for printer friendly version of Pryor cartoon in PDF format.

Even when his routine was generously sprinkled with "Nigger" and "bitch," he was laying down a vocabulary of empowerment. A lexicon that minimized the impact of white oppression and contextualized the struggle. Rich made it clear, he made it real and his humor made it bearable. Rich took the dialogue of the street corner, the barbershop, the Black church, the Black family and the Black community and aimed it at mainstream America with laser-like focus – revealing white America's true thoughts and intentions about race and racism without even trying to. That was the true social genius of Richard Pryor. He was the incidental activist, the disaffected philosopher. He concerned himself first and foremost with answering the question: Is it funny? All else, in regard to his craft, was secondary. However, the fact that his humor was steeped in social significance, tells us volumes about the man. Rich was also the first male comedian, Black, white or otherwise, who gave a real voice to women in his comedy. In Pryor's routines, women gave every bit as good as they got. For all the rants about his self-indulgences, addictions and misogynistic leanings, his humor was a shining example of equality in a society rife with inequities.

## The Black Commentator – Ode to Richard Pryor

Rich understood human nature and tendencies. He was one of America's foremost social critics (something he has never truly been given credit for). Rich's satirical insights kept the issues of race relations and racism front and center when the Civil Rights movement had begun to lose its steam. In the face of Nixon–repression and the conservative backlash, he was to the Black community what musicals were to Depression–era white America – he kept us singing, believing and hoping. He was the Harlem Renaissance resurrected, telling our own stories on our own terms.

In his tour de force, *Which Way Is Up*, Richard weaved together issues such as internalized oppression, institutional and systemic racism, worker's rights and feminism in one seamless, comedic (yet thought provoking) tapestry. At the end of the movie, homeless, jobless, without family or friends, the hero finds his dignity and himself – only Richard Pryor could give such an ending any semblance of poise. But then again, that was quintessential Pryor. Letting the chips fall where they might, showing every facet of the experience, warts and all. No other actor or comedian has surpassed or even equaled that performance. Richard Pryor, in many ways, was a prophet. He told the truth about white folks, black folks, men, women and most importantly...himself.

In my internet search of articles that referenced Richard Pryor and his work, I came across Answers.com (<http://www.answers.com/topic/richard-pryor>). In their very brief summary of the man and his work, they stated that he was best known as "the comedian who set himself on fire while freebasing cocaine." Such a slap in the face, such a total disregard for the profundity of an individual's work, would usually elicit some anger, but here's the punch line: Rich would have genuinely laughed at this. Did Answers.com think that somehow we would forget about Rich's indiscretions? There was never a chance of that happening because Rich himself wouldn't let us forget. He opened wide the front door (and the bedroom door as well), pulled back the curtains and raised the shade in the house where his demons, vices and transgressions lived. Rich, without fail, beat everyone to the punch and initiated the dialogue about his own shortcomings. He was enigmatic in the sense that he gave us as Black folk the confidence to be vulnerable – in other words, human. It was like he was saying: "They ain't no better than us, so don't be afraid to be flawed. Don't be afraid to be imperfect"

Rich's death caused me to reflect on what is missing from the current debates about supposed Black anti–intellectualism, the supposed lack of Black initiative and the denouncement of the Hip–Hop generation. In his comedic riffs and social commentary, the Black community did not escape his sometimes scathing insights and yet he was never condemned of "sellin' out" or "airing our collective dirty laundry". And one has to ask, Why not? Simply put, his declarations were free of the animus of the Cosby's and other Black elites who attack the Black poor and Black youth; his indictments were liberated from the arrogance of the McWhorters and Condoleezas who continually minimize the role that race and racism play in the affairs of Black folk. He told us the truth like a loyal friend and not as a venomous and jilted ex–lover with an axe to grind. Rich was humble, he never failed to see himself through the same lens he saw everything and everyone else. It was this quality that caused the Black community not to excuse his offenses, but to give our full understanding to them and him.

Historically, isn't that same understanding that we have accorded our geniuses? Did the madness of Mozart make people forget his mastery of music? Did the insanity of Van Gogh, make the brilliance of his art null and void? Was Hemingway's work silenced because of the manifestations of a tortured and troubled soul? So why should we be any less celebratory of a man who did so much to affirm and legitimize the Black American experience?

Richard Pryor's mortal frame has fallen, never to rise again, but what he has left behind will continue to endure as long as the Black community and America exists. Goodnight, goodbye and most importantly and sincerely, thank you Rich.

The Black Commentator – Ode to Richard Pryor

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