

Minimagazines Sprout Up, Dishing Virtue and Candor; A Poem Raps a Gangster

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DETROIT—Some people rate an obituary. And then some people rate an entire magazine.

Take Canary Williams Simmons.

The sociable, fun-loving Ms. Simmons died here unexpectedly of pneumonia on Jan. 8 at the age of 54. But she looms larger than life on the cover of a glossy, 10-page, full-color magazine produced by her family. She sits in a director's chair with a studio impresario's stare, her silvery pantsuit glittering. The backdrop: a painting of an emerald Rolls-Royce.

If you want a telling window into African-American culture these days, take a look at what blacks in Detroit are doing to the staid obituary. For generations denied obituaries in white-owned newspapers, African-Americans here and elsewhere took to crafting their own. Over the years, a form of sorts had emerged—typically, a single folded sheet, often with a poorly cropped black-and-white photo on the cover, a few homilies to the deceased and a recitation of the facts of their lives. Copies were passed out at the funeral; one was pressed into the family Bible.

Flash forward to Ms. Simmons's next of kin, who wanted to remember the popular hair-salon owner as the lively, colorful character she was. So they contracted with R&L Color Graphic Printing Inc., among a half dozen Detroit companies that specialize in producing these extravagant funeral booklets, and went all out to recall, in color photos and testimonial prose, the highlights of her life.

“This is how we wanted to remember her,” says Dorothy Williams, her sister.
“We didn't want black and white—we wanted something that reflected her. And she was

flashy."

What's afoot in Detroit is an odd intersection of technology and a drive by African-Americans to have a clearer say in their family histories. The elaborate, color obituary magazines (some running as many as 24 pages) that have become so ubiquitous here these days simply weren't affordable to most black families even five years ago. Now, companies like R&L, using digital printing and color-copying technology, have made it possible to quickly print 100 copies of simple color testimonials for as little as \$175.

While blacks are no longer denied obituary space in newspapers, they face the same issue as ordinary whites: Obits of more than 10 lines, with photos, in most publications are reserved for the prestigious or the preposterous. Hence the popularity of these mini-magazines.

"This says we are not looking for validation—for others to tell us who is worthy in death or whose life deserves recognition. We're not chasing after these newspapers and magazines," says Denise Stinson, owner of a literary agency here that represents a number of top-selling African-American and Christian authors.

Agrees Michael Eric Dyson, a noted author and African-American religious historian: The trend is about blacks "seizing interpretive authority over their lives" and "narrating their own story."

As a result, these are not your grandmother's obituaries. The magazines are often full of disarming candor—shots not just from birthdays and weddings but from raucous parties, trips to hip-hop concerts or, in Canary Simmons's case, a cover photo taken of her at a cabaret. Among the pages in Mrs. Simmons's book is an earthy written tribute from a niece: "You kept me in line, and even whipped my behind . . . that's my Aunt Canary, you always knew what to do."

Though Lizzie Alma Robinson was a devoutly religious woman and a longtime member of the Burnette Baptist Church, the picture on the cover of her obituary magazine is of her posing, hands impertinently on hips, in a fiery red dress and golden shoes and standing on the white, fairy-lit spiral staircase of a cruise ship. In the case of Clifford RaShawn Young, who died at the age of 23, his cover not only reveals his taste in clothes—he is shown snapping his fingers in a

yellow and red leather jacket, a yellow and white Versace shirt, white pants and sunglasses—but his nickname in life. It was Stanky Man.

In the 16-page tribute to Monique Latrice Robinson and Nakita Sherrice Robinson, two sisters who died in a gang drive-by shooting two years ago, the magazine deals with issues ordinary obituaries don't: the remorse and rage of their families over their senseless deaths. Interspersed among 40 photographs of the young women and their relatives and friends are poems and tributes. One, from their parents, reads:

You were really good girls/maybe not all the time

Is loving and being loved really a crime?

Lord let our babies know/how much we miss them so

Let them see/that their gunman will never be free.

Linda and Richard Jackson, a husband-and-wife team, were among the first to realize there was pent-up demand for these extended color tributes. In 1994, Linda, now 49 years old, had been laid off from her job as a graphic artist, where she created displays for the Yellow Pages. Though she was able to land a job working for a medical-billing company, primarily handling coding, pricing and billing for claims, she hated it.

Meanwhile, Richard, now 42, was a senior customer-service employee with Xerox Corp. The Jacksons began a tiny graphics business on the side, mostly churning out business cards and fliers. After coming across their first detailed obituary with a colored photo glued to the cover, they became intrigued and checked around with local printers. What they learned was that even simple color programs were going for about \$740 for 100 copies. And, not only were they expensive, but they were being cranked out using old-fashioned, labor-intensive offset-printing technology, which often required three days or more of lead time to produce.

The Jacksons realized that with PCs and color copiers they could offer cheaper prices, quicker turnaround and still make money. They put together a couple of mock samples, using photographs of their own deceased relatives, and took their results to several local black funeral homes. They were a hit, and funeral homes have become their chief point of sale. Now, their prices for simple color obituaries aren't that much higher than conventional printers charge for black and white ones; they also can produce extremely elaborate 24-page magazines—covers with double-exposures or montages from various stages of a person's life—that go for \$1,000 or more.

Mr. Jackson says, in fact, that he views his company as a small black publishing enterprise that "specializes in biographies."

Today, funeral-home programs represent about 94% of R&L Color Graphics' business, growing from about 17 a week in 1994 to an average of 27 a week this year. Sales have boomed; the couple expects revenue of more than \$300,000 this year, up from \$40,000 in 1994. The Jacksons are also hoping to take their business national by offering color funeral programs across the U.S. with a guaranteed 48-hour turnaround.

If you ask James Mays Jr., a competitor at Mays Printing Corp., these extended obituaries have simply grown out of an African-American hunger to leave a written legacy and living history for future generations—something that was denied to blacks during slavery and the decades thereafter when many blacks were effectively barred from adequate education.

He has noticed, for example, that many of his funeral tributes get circulated at family reunions long after the funerals for the deceased have taken place. "They become part of the family album," says Mr. Mays, whose company has operated in Detroit for 54 years. "Now you can actually show a picture and say, 'Not only is this grandmother, but she had a life and did this. She met this famous person.' From now on, you can see your great-greatgrandfather for future generations."

Now and then Mr. Mays prints the obituary equivalent of a bestseller; this February, he published 4,000 copies of an eight-page magazine eulogizing Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman (the Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr.), organizer of the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit.

Others see the rise of these funeral magazines as simply another step in the progression of African-American style. In the black community, funerals are considered “home-going” services. The kind of casket, the number of people attending, the stature of the minister delivering the eulogy—all these are important to families sending their relatives “home,” and often to the deceased themselves, who sometimes arrange their own funerals.

To Mr. Dyson, the writer who is also a professor of religious studies at DePaul University, Chicago, this symbolizes that many blacks believe that “the style with which one lives and the style with which one dies not be contradictory. . . . Style is a vehicle for substance, not a substitute as some folks think. It's like the hairstyles we have. It's like the clothes we wear. And now it's like the funerals and obituaries that celebrates us.”