

MEET SONNY DIGGS, A BALTIMORE ARABBER

by Gerald L. Davis

The streets of Baltimore city can be deathly chilling on a late February night. Bells draped from Joe's harnessing sound more like metallic walnut hulls than the gay, welcoming "tink- tingle, tink-tingle" of pony bells city people sometimes hear on warm days. The steel rims of the wagon wheels grate along macadam streets now frozen harsh in winter, soon to be softened in the coming spring. Joe's gait is rhythmic and easy, providing the only melodic line in an otherwise strangely hollow urban symphony. Huddled on the wagon seat is Paul Diggs, "Sonny" to just about everyone who knows him, a Baltimore arabber.

(According to "Sonny," White people used the term "huckster" when he was a boy, but Black people always referred to vendors and traders who worked from a horse or pony-drawn cart as an *arab* (pronounced ay-rab) or an *arabber*. The verb is to *arab*.)

Responding to the warmth of Joe's gaited meter, "Sonny" Diggs launches into an extemporaneous recitative that chronicles the feelings, the passing thoughts, the strong sense of personal worth this singular man experiences in a multitudinous urban environment.

"Didn't have no bad day
And I don't think I can get sad,
I'm living to bless my Jesus
For the little bit of good times
I've had . . .
Money's in my possession
And life is fame,
I'm glad to be arabbing,
I'm not ashamed.
Some people say that I'm crazy
And they call me a funny name
(I've had people call me goofball)
When I was living around them
(They was my friends)
But I wasn't ashamed.
They couldn't buy me.
Couldn't deny me . . ."

Rhymed verse is not unusual for "Sonny" Diggs; it comes as natural to him as breathing and eating. His is a culture, a community that places a premium on the ability to artistically and creatively use words and word sys-



tems. As fully developed art forms, the oral materials of urban Black men are as complex as any in the world and are infused with richly embroidered caricatures of people and world situations and tightly imbedded with the most strident observations on a society in which their participation is at best marginal. A verbal performance by a man on a corner is as rich an esthetic experience, enjoyed and judged by his peers, as it is a channel for information for members of his community.

"Sonny" Diggs is very much a man of his community. For arabbers as for musicians there is a "downtown" book, a patterned, structured form of behavior on which rests the success of a day's work and ultimately the feeding of a family and the meeting of the same responsibilities that all in the society must deal with; what seems romantic to the observer is oftentimes the realization of a barely modest living situation for the practicing arabber.

But there is something irresistibly magnetic about the arabber in his selling environment, something almost mystical about "Sonny" Diggs in

"Sonny" Diggs, Baltimore arabber, arranging produce for a day's work.

urban Baltimore. His hawking cry of "bananas, ripe tomatoes, good red apples" crashes off the walls of downtown Baltimore and soars above and neatly moves in and around the cacophonous noises of a busy city. His call is not an accident, the pitch and the intensity have been painfully developed over the years; inexperienced men grow hoarse within thirty minutes of being on the streets.

"Sonny's" customers are the wealthy and the poor, businessmen and students, urban Blacks and rural Whites.

There are the fortune tellers on Charles Street who patiently wait for "Sonny" to spend a few moments of the day haggling, good-naturedly, over the prices of bananas and apples. There is his favorite customer on the fourth floor of a building, a bit too infirm now to run up and down the stairs; the large, well-chested woman who



Many arabbers own their own ponies and wagons, and cooperatively stable their "teams." However, a large number of arabbers rent their teams on a daily or a percentage basis. Photo by Martin Koeing.

raucously yells down to "Sonny" who laughs and takes a sack up to her, probably at no charge. "Sonny" Diggs takes his work seriously and is scrupulously honest about his prices.

Paul Diggs has been around arabbing and ponies in Baltimore city for twenty-seven of his thirty-three years. From his own report and from testimonies of his friends, "Sonny" began his apprenticeship when he was six years old by watering and feeding the ponies used by older arabbers. By the time he was nine years old, "Sonny" was breaking ponies for riding and hauling and was already steeped in the ways of arabbers. In his early teens he was working a wagon by himself. A few years ago, Sonny left arabbing full-time and went to work for the Social

Security Administration. He still arabs on weekends from his truck and with his recently acquired team. His young son is now entering his long years of apprenticing the trade.

No one seems to know much about arabbing, about how and where vending from carts and wagons first began. It is known that Baltimore arabbing is part of a tradition of urban life that goes back some 3000 to 4000 years, to the ancient African kingdoms of Timbuctu and Meroe, and was widely practiced wherever there were people living in cities and towns and villages. For as long as anyone can remember there were produce and fish vendors in New Orleans, St. Augustine, Charleston, and a handful of major East Coast cities, though recently they have begun to disappear, more as a result of the shortsightedness of city councilmen than from lack of business. In 1969, Baltimore's city council tried to legislate arabbers from the streets, but the men have persisted and today, what was once thought to be a dying trade, employs from 350 to 1000 men, fully half of whom are in their late teens

and early twenties.

It's difficult knowing why young men want to go into arabbing. Mike, who's now a 19- or 20-year-old stevedore and who's been arabbing since he was 13, speaks first of his interest in horses. He then adds, almost as an afterthought, that it is possible to earn a living and to support a family by arabbing and that some young men can clear as much as \$75 to \$80 a day. But there seems to be something else as well. There are few opportunities in America's cities for men, for people, to find work that does not involve tremendous personal compromises, Arabbers have few masters.

The competitive rivalry that goes on between younger and older arabbers is always a learning situation in which the younger man pits his enthusiasm against the older man's experience and knowledge. They may be critical of one another, but there is always respect and caring. Finally, there is the sense that they are both locked in a survival enterprise and neither can afford to be without the other.

Few urban governments in America have had the imagination or the common sense to provide for the unfettered movement of living traditional and historic units of American culture within their jurisdiction. Baltimore arabbing employs perhaps as many as 1000 men, many of whom would swell the city's unemployment figures. The health of many Baltimore citizens depends on regular deliveries of fresh produce from arabbers. If the number of young Black and White men who become arabbers is an indication, the craft is at least as vibrantly alive as Chesapeake Bay fishing traditions. It is to the credit of the Baltimore city council and to the citizens of the city that arabbing continues to thrive and serve the Baltimore community.

"That's the life of an arabber . . .
If you got that Brother,
Close the book,
Let everybody in the world
Take a good look."

Paul "Sonny" Diggs