

Alongside a 'public intellectual'

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY hip-hop scholar Dr. Marc Lamont Hill and I are sitting side-by-side on a Friday-afternoon Acela to Washington where he will be on a too-large panel giving a report card to President Obama.

Hill is Philadelphia's best-known and most visible African-American academic specializing in hip-hop, youth culture and controversial opinions.

The panel, at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, draws about 225 interested citizens, more than 95 percent African-American. Most have grievances about America and no panelist hands Obama a straight A grade. Hill gives him a C.

I take a seat in the back of the fifth-floor hall, one row in front of a Beyonce-beautiful woman in a skin-tight, let's-go-clubbing dress and push-up bra.

Hill traveled to D.C. on his own dime, not even taking expense

money. As a much-in-demand speaker, he feels obliged to scatter some freebies among the 50-plus appearances he makes each year.

Like his mentor, former Penn prof Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, he describes himself as "public intellectual."

Dyson emerged from the academic cocoon more than a decade before Hill to gloss hip-hop with an intellectual veneer and "created a path for me," says Hill. Dyson is "a model of what an engaged 'public intellectual' looks like."

Dyson says his protege "got there much earlier than I did in terms of being a 'public intellectual.'" Dyson is 50, Hill is 30.

I went into this with the idea that a "public intellectual" is an academic with a press agent and a really cool Facebook page. What does it mean?

Dr. C. Kent McGuire, dean of Temple's College of Education where Hill is an assistant profes-

sor, says he didn't have a good definition, but sees "public intellectual" as "an opinion leader or contrarian" with opinions based on knowledge.

In 2007, Georgetown hired Dyson away from Penn. At the end of this semester, Hill leaves his alma mater for Columbia University.

Fox News Channel pays Hill around six figures a year to be on call. Amazingly, he gets less than that from Temple after four years on the faculty. He'll make more at Columbia, but regrets leaving his hometown.

"I always imagined myself making a contribution here," but says he has easier access to the Obama administration than to Mayor Nutter, "who has been cool to me."

Columbia, in addition to more money, offers added prestige and that jazzy NYC ZIP code.

Columbia, OK. But *Fox News*?

Before the leftist academic signed with the right-leaning network, he sought advice from friends and got this from Rev. Jesse Jackson: "I don't know no doctors that hang around with *well* people."

Hill says being on the top-rated "The O'Reilly Factor" gives him a chance to reach 5 million



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Marc Lamont Hill (left) greets a fan who recognized the academic and hip-hop culture authority as

TIFFANY YOON / Staff photographer

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Americans that not many "public intellectuals" get.

Thanks to Fox, Hill was recognized at 30th Street Station by a few travelers who greeted him and shook hands. Hill's genial vibe and brilliant smile are weapons he uses when verbally wrestling Bill O'Reilly. Hill keeps his powder dry, smiles and takes his shot no matter how often the Factor's star interrupts him.

O'Reilly likes Hill because "most of the time, you ask him a question and you get an answer and that's unusual for punditry," O'Reilly told me.

"He's a far-left guy," he says, but "I like him. I think he adds a lot of energy and insight to the program."

On the Acela, as Hill and I talk, we are interrupted by Tim, whose last name I'm withholding. Tim repeatedly, drunkenly breaks in to tell us he's the son of a world-famous heart surgeon, his wife is a radiologist making 175K, but has 300K in college-loan debt. Sitting on the Acela, wearing a gleaming white shirt and gold cufflinks, Tim wails about how tough he's got it.

Slyly, Hill says, "It's enough to drive a man to drink," and I knock knees with him under the table in agreement.

Tim makes an off-hand remark that white doctors are being driven out of business by huge malpractice awards handed out by black jurors, followed by his idea the government is controlled by lobbyists who are "all Jewish."

Hearing from bigots comes with being a "public intellectual."

Hill lived in Hunting Park until he was 11, when his family — two older brothers and parents who were educators — moved to Wynnefield. He went to magnet schools, graduating from George Washington Carver before enrolling in Temple, where he earned his baccalaureate. His Ph.D. came from Penn.

When he was nominated in 2007 as a "Sexy Single" — the *Daily News'* playful promotion — Hill didn't shrink from it. Other Ph.D.'s might have. "Public intellectuals" like Hill and Dyson are drawn like moths to the flame of fame and the cauldron of controversy. "I didn't become a Ph.D. to

talk to other Ph.D.s," Hill says.

Critics accuse them of being publicity hounds.

In the brief *Sexy Single* interview, Hill said he was disappointed in Philadelphia women. "A lot of women I meet don't have anything but kids."

Like the woman who presented him with an out-of-wedlock daughter, Anya, five years ago? How did that happen?

"The old-fashioned way," he smiles. "It took me by surprise."

That explains why he'll keep the five-bedroom house he owns in Germantown. He has his daughter on weekends and plans to make room for her in his crowded and hurried life.

Hip-hop has been around for decades and I've never found anyone who could define it in 25 words or less. Dr. Hill?

After a long pause, he replies: "A cultural movement indigenous to black and brown urban youth that consists of four basic elements: breakdancing, rapping, graffiti and DJing."

Twenty-two words. "It's a community," he says. "Scholars decided to frame a generation around hip-hop."

I tell him I wish I would have thought of getting rich and famous by framing a generation around "Frank Sinatra."

Hill laughs and nods. He is an intellectual, but he's not a stiff.

At the D.C. panel, when Hill gets his first turn at the mike, he gives a shout-out to Mumia Abu-Jamal. It's the cop-killer's birthday. About one-third of the audience cheers enthusiastically.

Hill and Mumia are friends, he tells me later. Not *physically* close, as Mumia's been in jail for killing Danny Faulkner for almost as long as Hill's been alive.

Hill believes Mumia didn't shoot Faulkner.

I ask Hill if he ever asked Mumia how he got shot in the chest by Faulkner's gun.

He said he has not.

I suggest he do that sometime.

Hill siding with Mumia does not surprise me. His opinion on waterboarding does.

"I'm not necessarily against waterboarding," he says, but wants "transparency."

Hill is smart, honest, canny, personable and keeps it real 90 percent of the time. The other 10 percent? As Dean McGuire says, Hill sometimes relishes the role

of contrarian.

I ask Hill the most unpopular opinion he's put out there?

For blacks, he says, any criticism of Obama is a third-rail, along with criticizing black homophobia. For whites, it's any criticism of the military.

On the whole, the biggest storm followed his body slam of Bill Cosby for "his very vitriolic attack on poor black people," Hill says.

The comic — who pummeled black parents for allowing kids to wear butt-exposing pants, use bad grammar and pop out illegitimate babies — is a Temple trustee and the word around campus is that Cosby let higher-ups know he wasn't pleased to be taken to the woodshed by some assistant prof.

Hill knows most black people agreed with Cos, but doesn't care. His role is not to cheerlead for what's popular. Some of his other provocative views: Obama is "an undercover war monger" whose talk of an urban agenda was "a PR stunt to appease the black left," far-left Democratic presidential contender Dennis Kucinich was Hill's "ideal candidate" and "America is a white supremacist nation."

A white "supremacist nation" elects a black president?

His answer was the kind you get from the Ivory Tower where anything is theoretically possible. It struck me as an intellectual exercise lacking the palpable passion I feel when Hill condemns poverty and social injustice. But my favorite Hillian line is this: "As an intellectual, it's my job to take ideas that pass as common sense and complicate them."

The Obama panel ends at 9:35 p.m. and we're 10 minutes from Union Station, where the last train to Philly leaves at 10 p.m. As he tries to dash for the door, many flock to Hill for a handshake, a hug, a business card. I volunteer to run ahead and snag a cab. Hill says he'll be right along. I get a cab and wait for Hill to emerge from the church. When he does, he's with the woman in the let's-go-clubbing dress. They exchange a few words and embrace.

It's all part of being a "public intellectual." ★

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A GOOD MAN AT ROPE'S END

WHEN YOU get to the end of the rope, what do you see?

I see Thomas Nager. Plump and pale at 55, he's an Upper Darby lifer, never married, worked hard at jobs that would not land him in a Main Line colonial.

Never wanted it, either. Upper Darby's home. He's happy there.



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Or, he would be, but for worrying about eviction. He's got a thin \$200 between himself and life on the street.

"I feel like a failure," he says. "I've

never asked anyone for help."

I don't think Tom's a failure; he's just among the working poor.

Tom was OK until 2007, when he got hit by a double whammy.

His aunt, Maria DiRenzo, died in September. For five years they had shared the bills and rent in a small, two-bedroom apartment in a past-its-prime brick building near 69th Street.

A few months earlier, due to osteoarthritis in his knees that put him on crutches, Tom took a leave of absence and lost his slot as a site supervisor for Allied Barton Security Services. He returned to a lower-paying desk job, working midnight to 8 a.m. and clearing \$1,060 a month. His rent is \$900 (including utilities), leaving \$160 a month for everything else.

The money crunch is aggravated by nine prescription medicines he must take daily. He had



Tom Nager in the apartment he risks losing, in Upper Darby.

ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff photographer

a heart valve implanted in 1990, he has a bad back, the arthritis and gout. If troubles were rain, Tom would be a reservoir.

He's current on insurance for the '97 Mercury Sable — it had been his aunt's car — which he needs to get to work. Tom prays that the car's health remains better than his.

His apartment's a bit messy, Tom admits sorrowfully. Things are dusty, probably because the windows are open because there's no air conditioning. One living-room wall is a display of Batman figurines, with other characters mixed in.

He used to be a collector, but no more.

"You can't collect when you need money to live," he says.

His collection lacks the value

to help him out of his hole. He has no credit cards, his savings are gone and he just sold his last gold jewelry for \$100.

Like many Americans, he's living paycheck to paycheck, but his bills stack higher than his checks. The quickest fix would be a cheaper apartment, maybe \$500 a month plus utilities. Because everything and everyone he knows is in Upper Darby, he wants to stay there.

He's looked online, without success. Now the vise is tightening. Short on this month's rent, the landlord agreed to wait until payday for the rest, but with a \$50 late fee. It's financially impossible for Tom to keep up.

The *Daily News* has good reach in Delaware County and I'm hoping someone might know

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of a good place for a good man — and his two cats, Buddy, 4, and Misha, 12. They are Tom's family.

As for government help, Tom's not old enough and he's not poor enough.

"Aid seems geared more to mothers and children than a single male who's in difficulty," he says without bitterness.

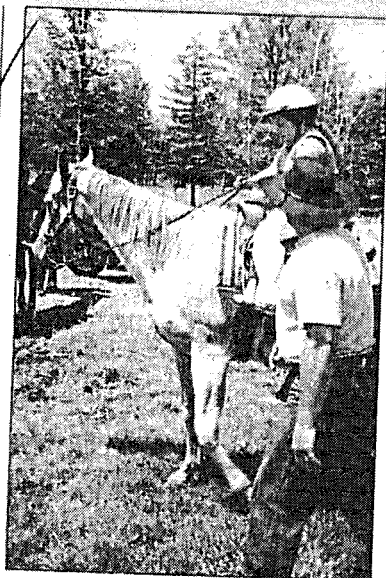
Given his physical problems, he should be on disability, but there's a Catch-22: You can't claim to be "disabled" if you work. But if Tom doesn't work, he'll be sunk.

And Tom doesn't want to stop working. He'd love a part-time, work-at-home job to supplement his full-time job, so that he could stay put. He's checked out a few home jobs on his computer, but they smelled like scams.

Tom wants to take care of himself, as he always has, but he's worried. "If any emergency happens, I don't know how I would handle it. I know I'm not in a unique situation."

Not unique, but still terrifying. Tom's dangling at the end of his rope. ★

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Sammi Jo Bykofsky

Fractured families hurt everyone

ACCIDENT, MD. — I am in Accident, on purpose, on my way to visit a sweet, blue-eyed blonde in West Virginia. My wife knows. She's with me. It was largely her idea.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. From just outside Accident I see a white church steeple. As I get closer, I notice the speed limit drops like a guillotine from 55 to 40 and to 25 — and a police car idling next to the church. It's probably set to pounce on out-of-towners who didn't brake down fast enough. When you're a town of 353, you do what you've got to do.

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Accident got its name in Colonial times from a surveying mistake, but I guess Mistake would be a town name not even the Chamber of Commerce could love.

The sweet, blue-eyed blonde is my granddaughter and my visit to see her coincided with a column I did earlier this month on Jeff Pergament, who is being denied access to his granddaughter.

My granddaughter's name is Samantha Jo-Ann, nicknamed Sammi Jo — which is too cute — and she nearly left my life following the estrangement between her mother and her father, who is my son. What happened between them is between them, but the fallout splattered on me.

Because of the estrangement, the distance and the occasional difficulty in reaching Sammi Jo's mother, I started thinking about calling it quits.

That's when Baby Cakes stepped in.

She grew up with only one set of grandparents, including one warm old grandmother who is still happily with us. Because she was denied the other set, Baby Cakes always felt shorted.

Grandparents can be important, influential in a child's life. Mine were. They augment parents in a loving, nonjudgmental way.

Baby Cakes didn't want Sammi Jo, who turns 8 this month, to miss that. I think she also wanted to save me from later regrets.

So, the effort was made and so was the visit. We're on the road for 316 miles, 5½ hours, with almost four hours on the Turnpike (sticker shock on the recently increased cost of tolls), and one hour in the pleasant Appalachian woods and rolling hills of western Maryland.

We make a rest stop in Accident, where I buy an Accident T-shirt for Baby Cakes and a coffee mug for me that says "Accident." When it spills, we'll know why.

In West Virginia, it's family time. I give Sammi Jo her first ride on a real horse, I step in manure at the petting zoo (the animals are on loan from local farms) and we lunch at the lodge at Blackwater Falls State Park. After lunch, we chase each other around for a while on the lawn overlooking the high, narrow falls nearly buried in the thick forest.

That evening, Sammi Jo invites me to a cakewalk.

Cakewalk? That's a Mummers' dance.

Here, it turns out, cakewalk is something else.

Basically, it's musical chairs without the chairs, but with a spinning wheel of fortune. You put a quarter on a number and if it comes up, you win a cake.

To get to the cakewalk, we traveled 18 miles over a snake of two-lane blacktop to a VFW hall in the next town. A neighbor was ailing and the cakewalk's purpose was to raise money. It was well-organized, with dinner (hot dogs and hamburgers) for sale, relatively sophisticated with both a regular and silent auction.

There were about 60 country people, who brought more than 30 cakes, in the barn of a VFW building. Sammi Jo sat between me and Baby Cakes and didn't win, while we did. We gave her our cakes, but getting isn't the same as winning. She kept betting quarters and has to learn to cut her losses when she's on a bad streak. Maybe that's my job.

Everything was donated by the neighbors. While it might have been easier to donate the money everyone spent on hot dogs, hamburgers, buns, soda, flour, butter, sugar, preserves, etc., that misses an important point. These mountain people don't cotton to cash handouts. Besides, the cakewalk became Saturday night's entertainment.

Despite Sammi Jo's bad luck, the visit was a winner. Back on the Turnpike for the long pull home, I think about how Jeff Pergament's daughter is keeping him from his granddaughter, and how much all three of them are losing.

I know Baby Cakes was right noddging me to stay linked with mine.

And that was no accident. ★

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