

# Remembering Ralph Ellison, Guy Ducornet, Bard College—and Me

By Phyllis Chesler

Dearest Readers, Friends, and Supporters:



Bard students with their professor

Like you, I am waiting for the next World War to get more fully underway. I hope and I pray that more people now understand that one cannot make deals with devils; that evil empires can never, ever be trusted to honor their promises. Muslim Evil Empires, like Iran, will agree to a peace deal but will treat it as a temporary measure until they can rearm. There are no exceptions that I know about. Do you?

I am still happily buried in my new book, *The Complete and*

*Utter Palestinianization of American Feminism*, but there is now an end in sight. As those who are far more virtuous than I say: "Baruch Hashem" or thank God. Which I also do.

Like so many of us, as I live longer, I am working against great odds: A recent fall, a broken rib, and the most extensive dental archeological excavation. Surgeries continue, but there is no end in sight. Once again, thank God I am living in this century and not in the tenth century or in the Bronze Age.

Otherwise: Here's a brief report from the NYC Front.

The trains are not working. Anyone, and everyone, who has come to see me or who works here has been held up at least two to even three times a week by a train stalled by a medical emergency, an unexplained "event," or by "congestion." Add to that all the occasions in which delusional, menacing, possibly violent men (and yes, it's mainly men although there are exceptions) terrify passengers, so that my visitors or employees get off as soon as they can and have to wait for another, often delayed train. Trips that should take 45 minutes in the evening back to Brooklyn or to Queens sometimes actually take two hours. I've been told that some passengers treat the public trains as if they are streets—or their own living rooms. They spit. They smoke. They leave refuse behind. John Q. Citizen they ain't.

What the Hell's going on? Who's in charge? Who's looking out for the public? What's Mayor Mamdani doing besides posing with former President Obama and current President Trump, vowing to "tax the rich" right out of NYC, hiring mainly socialists, as many Muslims as possible (I have no problem with this; I work with Muslims all the time, but what's *his* motive, *his* plan?). And yes, he's busy passing or promising to pass bills for expensive day-care centers, free city-run grocery stores, more homeless shelters, more mental health workers to replace the police—just on and on. These will cost the taxpayers a great

deal of money, may never come to pass, and may only service a very small percentage of the eligible population.

We all only have time. If we do not use it wisely, generously, it is soon gone as we, too, will soon be gone. Thus, I must apologize for not having made the time to read the books of many precious colleagues, including one college mate: Guy Ducornet, who came here from France and gave me his book *Annandale Blues: A Journey in Ralph Ellison's America*. Now that I've read it and loved it, I immediately reached out to get his email address or phone information only to be told that he is in an assisted living facility, no longer on email, and that he cannot take or make phone calls. Oh, what a right royal jerk am I.

Guy even inscribed it to me: "To Phyllis, with admiration and love, Guy Ducornet, Paris, 12.12.12.



Guy Ducornet (Photo Jeanne Lee) Bard 1959

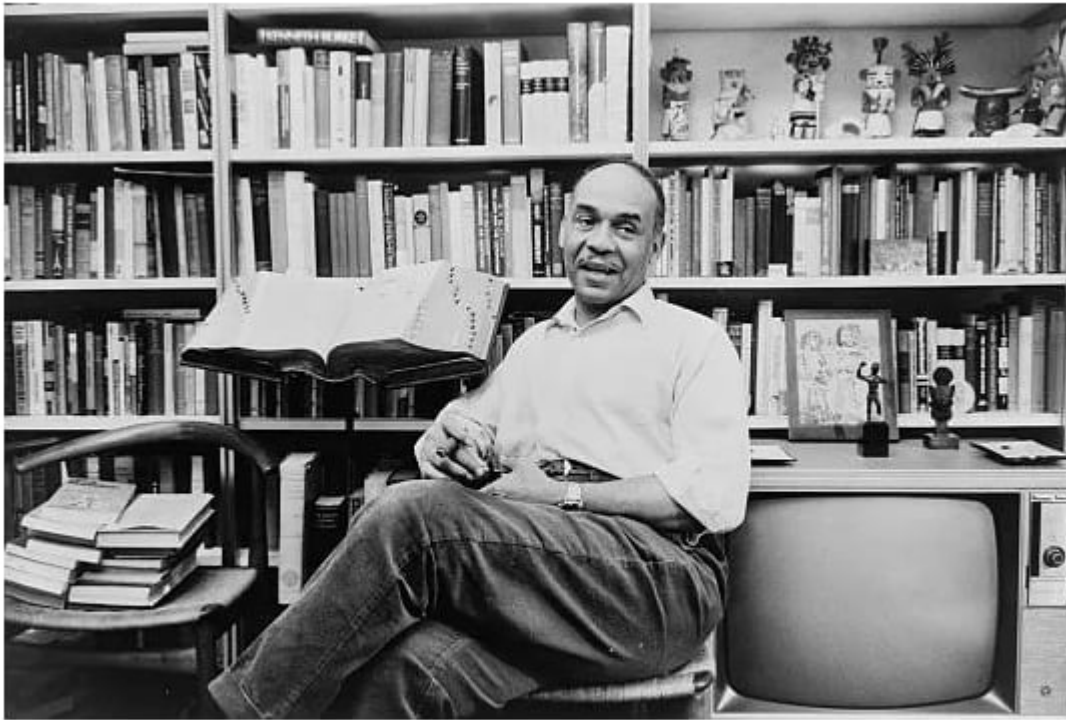
Ducornet was enamored of Jazz music

Guy had a love affair with Black Jazz and with Black American literature, and we were both blessed to have studied with the great Ralph Ellison. Guy played the saxophone and was very familiar with American Jazz, Swing, and the Blues. His descriptions of Bard College are poignant, perfect, and unexpectedly literary, and stirred my own long-dormant memories. He mentions that I received an "A" from Ellison for my paper titled "Racism in Melville's Moby Dick."

Can't say I wasn't insanely ambitious, and I cannot say that Ellison was anything other than very kind. Guy describes Ellison as follows:

"Standing up to face us and leaning slightly on one of the front desks, Professor Ellison opened his introduction to Mark Twain, Herman Melville and William Faulkner, the pivotal authors he had chosen for the semester... His voice was very clear and fluctuating, deeply vibrating one second and high-pitched the next...Ralph Ellison never referred to notes and all he held in his hand or had on the desk was the main author's book, about which he spontaneously improvised using a rhythmic punctuation which jumped from general considerations about the Southern past to allusions to the present."

I regret that as a young *woman*, I could not pursue a genuine friendship with Ellison—but Guy did; he most certainly did. I am glad for him; it meant so much to Guy.



Ralph Ellison, the writer and literary giant, was my professor at Bard

Guy also reminds me that he met and listened to two Jazz greats, both students at Bard, both of whom were there in my time. He listened to them as they practiced. I am talking about Ran Blake and Jeanne Lee, who went on to have deservedly international careers. (I don't think that Guy ever knew that [I'd been haunting Birdland](#) since I was about thirteen but that's a story for another time.)

Oh, we all had such promise, so much talent. Guy himself was a musician, a painter, a writer, and eventually a ceramicist. He married Rikki De Gre Ducornet, a petite, quirky, super-talented writer who became prominent soon enough. Rikki's parents, Professor Gerald and his wife, Muriel, lived on campus and were exceptionally kind to me.

Guy: Thank you for taking me back to our most treasured joint down the road, a place called Adolphs, where we ordered enormously greasy hamburgers smothered in onions. But Guy

mainly recalls “the enormous Wurlitzer jukebox was playing non-stop the latest hits by Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Ray Charles, Willie Nelson, Elvis Presley, ‘Blue Suede Shoes,’ or some stale lullabies by the local Kingston Trio. Except for Errol Garner’s ‘Misty’ (sung by Sarah Vaughan) and a few ballads by Ella Fitzgerald, jazz records were astonishingly few. Not a trace of Charlie Parker, Clifford Brown, The Jazz Messengers or even the Dave Brubeck Quartet, whose records were immensely popular among the students.”

What a time and what a place—when our own lives and futures were all before us and when anything was possible. Or so it seemed.

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