

Project -Negroes of New York
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Martin

The Barefoot Prophet

The turbulent religious life of New York's enormous Negro colony, Harlem was highly colored by the presence of a barefoot prophet. The barefoot prophet was called Prophet Martin. Prophet Martin found a great reception among the Harlem folk whose emotions never got too far below the service. In one way or another Harlemites from all walks of life acknowledged his presence. One couldn't just pass this big towering man in his homespun white robe, long mixed gray bushy hair and barefeet. Prophet Martin preached his sermons on street corners. He was able to reach people from all walks of life.

In the years gone by there, prophets have appeared in Harlem representing the whole list of Biblical oracles, all of them with "calls" and supernatural credentials. Martin was the first to be known simply as "The Prophet." He was probably Harlem's most picturesque figure. Watching him stroll along the avenue was a pleasant thing to behold. His luxuriant mane of gray hair and flowing beard made him look as if he had just stepped from the pages of the Bible. He was close seven feet in height. He had gigantic feet and walked with an elastic stride.

Prophet Martin was a beloved man and a one man institution. He carried the word daily to stranger places than street corners. Patrons were seldom surprised to see him in gin mills, cabarets, bars nor buffet flats. Usually he would quote a few passages of the Scripture, take up a small collection and then vanish. Small children followed

him through the streets, touching his robe for "good luck." Confused parents would stop him in the streets and seek advice about their wayward offsprings. Hustlers and number runners treated him with respect and unsmilingly accepted his benedictions.

Legends grow. It was rumored that he was rich, that he owned several apartment houses and that he traveled over the country in an expensive automobile. This, Prophet Martin denied emphatically. He pointed out that he never accepted a church. He had no income other than the small change that he received from his listeners. He preached on the street corners for fifty years in twenty-five different states. When he died, his family was on relief.

"The Prophet" was born Clayburn Martin in Henry County, Virginia in 1851. At an early age he had a vision. "Take off your shoes, for this is holy ground. Go preach My gospel," a voice told him. He obeyed. His first audience was a group of crap shooters on a street corner. He succeeded in influencing the crap shooters so well, that he continued his mission through twenty-five different states.

Mary, his wife was over twenty years his junior. He had four daughters and one son. The latter was born when he was sixty-one years of age. Once he grew weak and listened to Mary. She told him to cut his hair and wear shoes. Like Sampson, he cut his locks. Illness followed. He realized his error. He let his hair grow back and again tread his way in barefeet. His health was restored and he never cut his locks nor wore shoes again.

The vagabond preacher maintained a "sanctum sanctorum" at 217 West 134th Street. He received callers every evening from 6 to 8:30. "Brother Russell," himself a living witness to the healing power of Prophet Martin,

would assist him. Here, "The Prophet" would ask whether the trouble was of the soul or of the body. If it was of the soul, confession and prayer were enough. If God's Temple, that is what he called the body, was broken down, he would administer a few drops of the ointment, a preparation which he prepared himself, then console the ailing person with a few words of prayer. Once he was arrested in Newark, N.J. for practicing medicine without a license.

"I will make you ruler over the Nations. I will lift up my people and exalt myself through you," he would begin. Though he could not read nor write, God gave him his messages. "You are the temples. Every man is the dwelling place of the Almighty. He's not in the buildings we call churches." Thus he justified his non-belief in church buildings.

The title of Elder was bestowed by

"The Church of God, Pillar, Ground of Truth, House for all people, Holy and Sanctified."

Prophet Martin's short messages showed a great lyrical quality, somewhat in the style of James Weldon Johnson's "Creation." Following is one of Martin's typical sermons:

"Our world is like a fox, brethern, like a fox that catch his foot in the trap of the Devil. Fox knows, brethern, that if he strays long enough in the Devil's traps, the Devil will kill him with a long stick. So the fox gnaws off his foot, and leaves the foot for the Devil and goes home on three legs and praises God he's gittin' home at all."

"Now brethern, you see what I mean. We got sin and we got sinners, and better than that the sinners should lead us into the Devil's traps. We must cutt them off. Sin ain't no, part of God, my brethern, but we righteous are part of God, Himself. We got to save all we oan, and let the

rest go. But now, brethern, before
we let 'em go. Let's pray hard and long
for them with his omnipresence."

Prophet Martin died in July , 1937. He was eighty-six years old. Barefooted in death as he was in life, his bushy head resting on a royal purple cushion, the aged evangelist lay in state Hundreds heeded a last message pinned to a box resting on his chest. The appeal written in his own shaking hand as he lay dying in Harlem Hospital read:

"Help bury the prophet."

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Prophet Martin, the beloved, bewhiskered, barefooted giant who had preached the gospel for half a century on the street corners of America, was dead. And Harlem rallied around to heed his last appeal.

Barefooted in death as in life, his bushy head resting on a royal purple cushion, the eighty-six-year-old evangelist lay in state in the E. Florence Brown Funeral Parlor on West 132nd Street as thousands of Harlemites filed past his bier and heeded the message pinned to a box resting on his chest.

The appeal, printed in shaky block letters, read:

"Help bury the Prophet."

And from early morning until late at night, hundreds of persons to whom the evangelist was a familiar figure on the streets of Harlem visited the parlors and left a few pennies in answer to the appeal. The meager contributions continued even on the day of the funeral when 15,000 persons jammed the

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Metropolitan Baptist Church to hear three ministers and a bishop pay homage to the wandering preacher who never had a church of his own.

For Prophet Martin was more than a familiar figure on the streets of Harlem—he was an institution.

Habitually attired in a flowing, homespun shroud, his large brown feet unshod in snowy as well as hot weather, the tall gaunt preacher carried the Word daily to stranger places than Harlem street corners.

In gin mills, cabarets, bars and buffet flats, patrons were seldom surprised to see the Prophet enter, quote a few passages of Scripture, take up a small collection and vanish into the night.

Small children followed him on the streets, touching his robes for good luck. Worried parents stopped him on corners and sought his advice about their wayward offspring. Hustlers, pimps and numbers runners treated him with respect and unsmilingly accepted his benedictions.

An intoxicated white celebrant in a Harlem night club was once floored by a waiter when he attempted to tweak the flowing beard of the Prophet.

"The Old Man was regular." a flashily dressed young man recalled as he dropped a coin in the burial box, "He would split down with the boys when they were on their uppers, and he never cussed a man out no matter what he knew he was doing."

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Many Harlemites were surprised though that a collection was necessary to bury the evangelist. Since many gave freely to his daily appeals, the legend had grown that the Prophet was wealthy. It was rumored that he owned several apartment houses and that he traveled over the country in an expensive automobile.

His forty-year-old widow, Mrs. Mary J. Martin, dispelled those theories however.

"The Prophet never took up much money," she said, as her four grown daughters and nine-year-old son tried to console her in her grief. "And what he made he never kept for himself. We have been on relief for many months, and all we own is what you see in this poor walkup apartment.

"If the Prophet had ever accepted a church, we might have accumulated something. But he felt that his call was to preach on the street corners, and he did that for fifty years--in twenty-eight States of the Union."

Mrs. Martin married Clayton Martin when she was only fifteen. Their little son, Samuel, celebrated his ninth birthday on July 16, 1937--a few hours before the Prophet died in Harlem Hospital.

Early reports of his death had caused much indignation in Harlem. The story was passed from lip to lip that the evangelist had been stabbed by robbers who found only \$1 on his person. These reports were baseless however for the Prophet had been confined to his bed for six months before his death.

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Clayton Martin was born in Henry County, Va., in 1851. He became an evangelist in his early youth and adopted the unusual garb a half century ago. He did not wear shoes or any other footgear for forty-eight years.

And Harlem honored him in death as it had supported him in life— with a few kind words and a handful of hard-earned pennies.