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Michigan Opera Theatre, Detroit Tigers honor Negro leagues' Josh Gibson, other greats

Rochelle Riley, Detroit Free Press Columnist Published 10:46 p.m. ET June 30, 2017 | Updated 7:44 a.m. ET July 3, 2017



(Photo: AP)

Josh Gibson is finally going to get his due.

The Detroit Tigers and Detroit's Michigan Opera Theatre are partnering in a unique merger of the arts and sports for a yearlong examination and celebration of the role each has played in improving race relations.

The campaign, called "Take Me Out to the Opera," will culminate next spring with a production about Gibson, the Negro League baseball player whose legendary baseball prowess was diminished by racial discrimination, the hallmark of America's history for most of the 20th Century.

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Gibson, long considered one of the best power hitters and catchers ever in any league, had a stellar career that most people didn't see because he wasn't allowed to play in the major leagues with white players. In 1972, he was the second Negro League player inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, after Satchel Paige, the famed pitcher who did get to play in the majors. But Gibson died at 35, having never entered the "big league." Those who knew him say he died of a "broken heart."



In this photo made on Friday, March 17, 2017, the grave stone for baseball player Josh Gibson is shown at Allegheny Cemetery in Pittsburgh. Gibson, who played for two Negro League baseball teams in Pittsburgh and is considered one of the sport's greatest home run hitters, is featured in an opera about his life called "The Summer King." (Photo: Keith Srakocic, AP)

The Gibson opera, called "The Summer King," is generating the kind of excitement that Richard Danielpour's epic "Margaret Garner" did when it debuted 12 years ago in Detroit. That opera, composed by Danielpour with an English-language libretto by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, was based on the story of runaway slave Margaret Garner, who killed her children rather than relegate them to the brutal institution of slavery.

"We continue to have the same operas," said Betty Brooks, MOT board member and a patron of the arts in Detroit. "To have operas about very important people like Margaret Garner and Josh Gibson will help us really get to know people from history. Opera is slowly changing into tales we can identify with. This is so exciting. I really do think they're going to hit a home run."

Fox Sports Detroit analyst and '84 World Series champion Rod Allen called the opera and the campaign "incredible."

"When I started playing at the age of 17, I was fortunate to have a coach named Sam Harriston in the White Sox organization, the first African American to play for Chicago White Sox," Allen said. "He was invaluable to my career as a player because he had been through a lot. He grew up in Birmingham, Ala., and played in the Negro Leagues. He also played in the majors. The knowledge that he gave us as young players... allowed many of us to realize the dream that I've been able to realize ... for 41 years as a player, coach and now broadcaster.

"For someone like Josh Gibson to finally get the due he deserves..." Allen said. "Everybody I've talked to regarding the Negro Leagues... they say Josh Gibson by far was the best player in the Negro Leagues. But he didn't get a chance to play in the majors. They said he did die from complications from illnesses but also from a broken heart because he did not get a chance to play in the big leagues in '47 like Jackie Robinson did. It's invaluable to see his name mentioned and associated with opera... just to get the recognition that he's due and his family also deserves."

The partnership announcement was made Tuesday during Major League Baseball's annual celebration of the Negro Leagues. The Tigers are hosting their 22nd annual Negro Leagues Tribute Game, which honors the players whose greatness was denied, and women like Minnie Forbes, the owner of the Detroit Stars in 1956 and a player for the Kansas City Monarchs in 1958.

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The Tigers will play today wearing the uniforms of the Detroit Stars, a charter member of the Negro National League (NNL) whose stars included Hall of Fame centerfielder Turkey Stearnes, another player considered one of the great all-around players in the history of baseball, but who was forced to work winters in Detroit's auto plants to survive, according to news reports. He worked mostly for Walter Briggs, owner of the Detroit Tigers, for whom Stearnes could not play. Stearnes was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2000, 21 years after his death in Detroit. The Tigers will face the Cleveland Indians, who'll be wearing the uniforms of the Cleveland Buckeyes, who played from 1942 to 1950 in the Negro American League.

The campaign also comes as Detroit braces for a painful re-examination and commemoration of the summer rebellion that 50 years ago redefined race relations in the city and placed Detroit on the list of places that suffered riots borne of years of mistreatment.

The campaign has several other partners, including the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, the Detroit Historical Society, the Detroit Public Library, the Josh Gibson Foundation, the Rosedale Park Community House and Hamtramck Stadium, the last remaining Negro Leagues stadium in America and the place where the Detroit Stars played decades ago.

Each partner will offer programs that celebrate the history of music and sports and the African Americans in each whose lights were hidden under a hateful bushel. Among the campaign's plans were:

- Programs that will allow Detroit schoolchildren to write operas about the Negro Leagues, the Detroit Stars and the theme of inclusion;
- Lectures and performances at the Wright, the Community House and other locations.
- A new performance of "I, Too, Sing America," the MOT lecture-performance on the contributions of African Americans to classical music and sports.

MOT Founder David DiChiera helped pave the way for the campaign by deciding the company "would celebrate works of our time," Wayne Brown, current MOT president and CEO, said at Tuesday's announcement. "This continues a commitment to recognize signature moments in our history and our present, to unify our community through the art form of opera. Our organization will serve and provide a series of activities that explore the themes of diversity in the realms of arts and sports, framing them as side by side institutions that led the way to integration."



Ron Teasley, a 90-year-old former Negro Leagues player for the New York Cubans, speaks on a panel Tuesday, June 27, 2017, during the announcement of the campaign between The Detroit Tigers and Detroit's Michigan Opera Theatre, who are partnering in a unique merger of the arts and sports for a year-long examination and celebration of the role each has played in improving race relations. The campaign, called "Take Me Out to the Opera" will culminate next spring with a production about Josh Gibson, the Negro League baseball player whose legendary baseball prowess was diminished by racial discrimination, the hallmark of America's history for most of the 20th century. (Photo: Mitty Carter/Michigan Opera The)

But this campaign isn't just about sports or just about music. It is a unique opportunity to bring the city together to learn more about history, a history rich in detail that can be provided only by people like Ron Teasley, a 90-year-old former Negro Leagues player for the New York Cubans, who appeared on a panel at the announcement of the campaign.

The Detroit and World War II veteran left baseball for a career as an educator in the Detroit Public Schools. But his memories of the league should be required listening for a 21st century audience.

"I got started in baseball when I played with Negro League players when I was about 12 years old. I grew up in the vicinity of the Kronk recreation center," he recalled at Tuesday's announcement. "That was before it became well known for boxing.

"I would (go) across (Atkinson) field and see these older gentlemen playing baseball," he said. "This was a daily occurrence. I walked over, and they invited me into their circle, and I started practicing with them at the age of 12. These men really loved the game! I was just amazed to see them get off from work and come play. They loved the game!

"On weekends, they would take trips up to Traverse City, and they would take me along and if a player didn't show up, they'd put me in the game!"

Teasley signed with the Toledo Cubs and traveled the Midwest, but everywhere he went, he said, people talked about Josh Gibson.

"Every park that we'd go to, we'd find the oldest person and ask them: 'Who hit the longest home run in this particular park?' In each case, they would tell the same story. Do you see that pole way up yonder? Josh Gibson hit the ball over that fence, past that pole, into nowhere.

"He made Negro League baseball what it became," he said.

Teasley said his goal was to play in the Negro League, where he batted .500 many seasons and was eventually invited to try out for the Giants. He became one of the first to sign with the majors — in a session that he said was rushed and didn't give him a chance to call his father or coach for advice.

But he said that he, and many Negro League players, didn't see the major leagues as a better league, but just another league.

"I loved playing the Negro League because I had chance to play with some of the greats of baseball, some of the men who never had a chance to show their wares to the greater public. It was a great thrill to see Josh Gibson play. He reminded me a lot of Willie Horton and it's great to see this merger of baseball and opera."

I could have listened to him all day.

Our challenge in America is that we have forced ourselves to desegregate schools, forced ourselves to desegregate housing. But we have never desegregated our history. No story in America deserves a more complete telling than our sports history. This campaign will do that. And it is fitting that it begins with Gibson.

“This is a story I’ve carried with me pretty much my whole life,” Gibson opera composer Daniel Sonenberg said of the production he began working on more than 13 years ago. “It is a project that comes along once in an artist’s life. I was a baseball fan from the time I was a kid, grew up in New York. To me, not just the story of Josh Gibson, but the story of Negro Leagues baseball just spoke to me. It was immediately apparent to me that this was one of the most important aspects of baseball history.”

For the younger boys and girls, let me tell you about a time when baseball, America’s pastime, the sport called as American as apple pie, was segregated and its major league didn’t allow black players. Instead, players like Gibson, Satchel Paige, Turkey Stearnes, Cool Papa Bell, Buck Leonard — who all should have been household names in every house — were forced to play in a smaller, underfunded but proud league separate from the greats whose names you know like Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle and Sandy Koufax. Black players did eventually make it into the majors, Moses Fleetwood Walker, made his major-league debut with Toledo on May 1, 1884, in an American Association game, more than 60 years before Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in the majors in the modern era.



Negro League home run king, and Pittsburgh native Josh Gibson's statue is front and center in Legacy Square at PNC Park. Gibson's is one of eight displays honoring former Negro League stars who spent time playing for one of Pittsburgh's two teams, the Homestead Grays, and Pittsburgh Crawfords. (Photo: GENE J. PUSKAR, AP)

These were fantastic players denied the opportunity to show whether they were as good as, or in many cases, better than the familiar names on most baseball cards. Few were better than Josh Gibson, a Georgia native who began his career with the Pittsburgh Crawfords, the top black semiprofessional team in Pittsburgh. Gibson split his time between baseball and Gimbels, the department store, until he joined the Negro Leagues in 1930. His wife, Helen, died while giving birth to their twins that year. Her parents raised the children. He poured himself into the game, starring in regular games and being a hit while barnstorming to earn extra money. Records are scarce, but some placed Gibson’s batting average at .384, the best in Negro Leagues history.

We may never know the true statistical achievements of Negro League players. But by God, we should know their names.

And this collaboration between Major League Baseball and the opera will do that — for one of the greatest.

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