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Ralph Ellison and Norman Mailer

Festival of Arts

April, 1965

Fairbanks, Alaska

Unidentified speaker talks about the meeting of cultures in the state of Alaska. Conflict of cultures is the theme for the arts festival. He introduces the Ed Skellings who introduces the speaker for the evening, Ralph Ellison.

Ralph Ellison talks about the life that he has known. He was born in Oklahoma and his parents were from South Carolina and Georgia. There were slaves on both sides of their families. There was not a lot of information about their backgrounds. His parents limited the information. Only recently did he learn the significance of attitudes of his family. His parents believed their children would be better off with a lack of burden. He knew his father had run away from home because of his grandfather's strictness. There were cultural and political differences between his father and his grandfather. His father joined the army and traveled all over the world. He then went to Oklahoma to work in construction. The cultural influences that helped shape his father were complex. There were important social realities that took the shape of racism. When he started making stories out of his own experiences, the whole problem of culture and cultural conflicts took on concrete meaning for him. He came to writing through music. He grew up in Oklahoma City. They were not integrated. He attended school with people that had slavery in their background. The people in his school were descendents of either slaves of the Indians or escaping slaves from the southern states. As a young boy he got into music through European folk dancing. Later he began to play music. In this country everything was given in the basic sense that we are a continuum of Europe. European culture was almost held in contempt. He believed there is a very American sense of the new-found possibility which always has some kind of fly in the ointment. Just as the country offered a redefinition of culture to be put into operation each movement toward the frontier has offered the opportunity to make a new culture. This leads to conflict with the diverse groups in the U.S. This was a grounds for a very creative coming together of cultures. Out of this a nation came into being. A very rich body of folklore began to evolve. He talked about the book the Negro cowboy. Americans have a controlled forgetfulness. The American past and the cultural conflicts are repressed. We substitute popular culture.