Corn rowing ... very Black

by Linda Williams
Staff writer

Bessie Macklin often watched her mother cornrow hair. She never cornrowed hair herself until recently, nor did she wear her own hair in the style. But now the sophomore from Rocky Mount is considered somewhat of an expert at the art. She did four heads for the African Cabaret, and has done as many as five in one day.

Cornrows are continuous braids over the head separated by half-inch parts, worn by more and more black women and men today. Several intricate designs are used.

Cornrows are more authentically African than the loose Afro. Variations of the style can be traced in African tribes centuries back, whereas the large loose bush is rarely seen in the Africa of the past, until the style became popular in the United States.

The cornrow style came to the United States with slavery, and was worn almost exclusively by young black girls until recently. As a child, I remember having my hair braided, as an unpleasant experience, often painful. Other black women also remember the unpleasantness of the process. Given this, I asked Bessie why the style is so popular with black women today?

"Because it is African and because cornrows are convenient," she answered. "They stay in place for days, the hair stays cleaner and it is easier to keep the scalp oiled. Also the hair grows faster and because it is braided you don't have the problem of split ends," she said.

Other qeustions came to mind. Are cornrows merely a fad? And if not, will the style replace the Afro?

"No I don't think they are a fad, and I think they are complimentary to the Afro," said Bessie.

Janice Mills, a junior from Reidsville and Pam Williamson, a sophomore also from Reidsville, don't think cornrows are a fad.

In relation to the Afro, Janice said, "the Afro doesn't mean anything anymore, it is now a fashion. Some girls wear the bush because it goes well with a particular dress . . . reasons like that."

But Janice and Pam both agreed that the important thing about cornrows is that they are unique to black women. "White people can wear bushes, white people wear dahshekis, say right on and all that, but they can't wear cornrows," Janice explained. (It takes thick wirey hair to hold cornrows in place.)

This is important, she continued. "I think as blacks move further away from white norms by doing little things different, they become more aware of their blackness, and establish a basis for a movement."

The symbolic implications are vast. Cornrows can be seen as a symbol of the uniqueness of a people, a symbol of black identity with Africa, or on a more personal level, that is cornrows allow the individual to be unique. The individual is the creator, whose choice of style, or design, is limited only by her imagination.

It is significant that older blacks accept cornrows more readily than the Afro. Perhaps because the Afro came with an atmosphere of revolution and militancy, whereas cornrows developed in a somewhat calmer evolutionary atmosphere. An evolutionary process that looked at Africa for more genuine cultural references. Or simply because they can identify with cornrows from their own childhood experiences.

Evil

Looks like what drives me crazy
Don't have no effect on you—
But I'm gonna keep on at it
Till it drives you crazy, too.

Life is so beautiful it hurts,
Life is so ugly it hurts,
And my feelings are so intense
They hurt.

Love is so beautiful it hurts,
Love is ugly it hurts,
And my feelings are so intense
They hurt.

May life and love get it together
and may my feelings
Be released
So we all will be on
An even keel.

—Val

Ex-con makes it

by Gwen P. Harvey
Feature Editor

She extended a long, brown arm to dump her cigarette ashes into the nearby ashtray, licked her full lips and then spoke with a child-like softness. "I'm going to make it this time. Too many people are backing me. I can't let them down."

The twenty-five year-old parolee sat quietly on the sofa of her newly-rented apartment and slowly recounted her personal journey through the correctional halls of North Carolina.

Joyce Bryant (not her own name) has been in and out of training schools and prison since the age of 13. She was the "unruly," boisterous young offender who graduated from petty larceny to the "big time" when in 1970 she was tried, sentenced and convicted for being an accessory to murder. Joyce witnessed her sister's slaying of a lover and afterwards aided in the disposal of the body.

She was sent to the Women's Correctional Center in Raleigh. In 1971 she was released on parole but violated that privilege by running off to New Jersey. It took the authorities 8 months to find the young runaway and speedily return her to the Center. There Joyce remained until January of 1972. By that time Joyce had achieved the status of "honor grade": the rank a prisoner achieves through good conduct and adjustment to prison life. Honor grade prisoners are offered the opportunity of work-release – employment outside the confines of the Center.

Joyce eagerly accepted participation in a newly organized program serving as an adjunct to the Center-based work-release program. She returned to her native city of Charlotte and became a resident in the half-way house there. "It was best for me to go to the house," Joyce said. "At that time I was not ready to accept outright parole. Work-release was best for helping me get adjusted."

The half-way house is th eprisoner's bridge back into normality. Ten work-release residents and two staff counselors inhabit a large, rambling country home located on the grounds of a YWCA in a quiet section of the city. These ex-prisoners share a life dramatically different from the one they left behind in Raleigh. "It is like one big happy family," Joyce said with a half-smile.

Each woman has a regular week-day job plus a share in the household chores and the preparation of meals. At the end of the work week the woman receives $10 cash for her own personal expenses with the remainder being forwarded to Raleigh. The state deducts $3.45 a day for room and board and puts the rest in a trust fund available to the woman when she is released.

The residents of the house have simple yet highly valued privileges. What a thrill it is for a woman who has been incarcerated for several years to find herself riding around the city in the staff-driven station wagon, going to movies downtown, shopping at the malls, and sometimes even catching a city bus alone. "It's so much more convenient living in the house," Joyce asserted. "In Raleigh you had to stay in your own cell block. At the house you could go upstairs to your room, downstairs and watch tv, or just in the bathroom and be alone."

Upon release to the house Joyce began work in a commercial spinning mill. She was transported to and from work by a staff member. Joyce was readily befriended by her co-workers but when queried about her residence she responded only that she lived at the "Y." "One day," Joyce said with a quiet laugh, "I wore one of my sweaters from the Center to work by mistake." Blaring blushing red across the collar was Joyce's stenciled prison number. A few nearby workers made note of it and Joyce quickly announced: "I am a prisoner from Raleigh on work-release here. That is that." All tension quickly dissolved.

Joyce had to remain in the house for 90 days before she was entitled to her first week-end home leave. "I couldn't understand at first being a hop, skip and jump from home and not being able to go," the young woman admitted.

Joyce's face broke into an infectious grin as the topic turned to the matter of her newly acquired "freedom." On Tuesday, April 4th of this year, she walked out of the shelter of the house to begin a new life as a parolee. In her hands she clutched a "list of 15 [illegible]es" and the trust fund check [illegible]n the state.

She set out determinedly to lead an independent and responsible life. To make it all on her own. "In Raleigh you had to accept things as they came to you. In the house you learned more about compromise. On parole, you can relax a little more but you still have a lot of obligations."

With the trust fund money Joyce rented a neat little apartment not far from the mill and began the gradual process of furnishing it. "People have been so good to me," she said bobbing her afro-coiffed head in enthusiasm. She pointed to the furry brown mats on the floor. "Those were given to me by a girl across the street. And I wouldn't have got this sofa we're sitting on if it hadn't been for Mrs. Royals" (one of the counselors at the house).

Joyce sank back onto the sofa and gazed about at her handiwork. Gaudy posters plastered on the beige walls. A small but sturdy coffee table ringed with circles left by wet glasses. Soul music tinkled from the transistor radio resting on the arm of a well-worn easy chair.

"I'm satisfied with the way things are going." A brief pause. "By God, I'm out of prison and I'm going to stay out." She sat up with a bolt and reached for another cigarette.

We must survive

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not part of the solution, you *are* the problem. We must survive, and struggle is the only way!

AFTERNOTE:

As Chairman of the Black Student Movement this past year, I have witnessed the things that I write about. There have been times when I have seen my brothers and sisters seemingly together, for instance, the James Cates Memorial, for which "beautiful" will suffice for description. At other times, total disgust dominated my emotions, for example, the Election processes, which can only be described as "unintelligible delirium."

As my term in office draws to a close, I would like to thank the Central Committee for their many dedicated efforts to make the BSM a working organization. Though this past year was one of great trial and error, massive scandal, great criticism, and very little praise, I feel somehow that the storm has been weathered and that the things we have done as a collective body will in the long run prove to be beneficial and rewarding.

Whatever the future holds in store for the BSM will hopefully provide likewise, for things must be as they may, and we must be liberated. I have no regrets about the past, nor will I resign myself to be skeptical of the future.

Not to say that I am content with the present situation—I would never resign myself to the lot of contentment either. I only hope that I may have served you, my brothers and sisters, to the best of my ability, and that we will continue to move forward TOGETHER. To the incoming officers of BSM, and to all Black people involved, Right On in the Struggle—We must survive.

Riot Rimes
No. 79

You got to be scared
Both ways
To know what I mean
And be where I've been—
Scared beating on the door
From the outside
And scared when they let you in.

Raymond Patterson

Riot Rimes
No. 49

After it was over, they came
And looked in, and said,
You poor people!
You are riot-torn!
There's hardly a roof
Over your head!
—Like it ain't been the same
Since the day I was born.

Raymond Patterson