

The Baseball Hall of Fame is incomplete until it inducts Chicago Cubs legend Ron Santo, union leader Marvin Miller and the late Buck O'Neil, who was the greatest modern day ambassador for the Negro Leagues. Buck was a complete gentleman.

This is an edited version of a visit in his home.....

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. ---John "Buck" O'Neil lives in the eastern part of the inner city here, about two miles from where he played for and managed the Kansas City Monarchs baseball team in the old Negro leagues.

Chicago artist Tony Fitzpatrick and I recently visited O'Neil, one of 150 surviving Negro leaguers. Fitzpatrick had been immersed in painting birch wood baseball cards, and I wanted him to meet Buck, an American legend, who had just turned 80.

It was a cold Saturday morning, but Buck was dressed as if it were the first day of spring. He wore a crisp new blue suit and a tie that was knotted with distinction. Ora O'Neil, his wife of 46 years, came down the stairs of their two-story house and announced she was going to meet some friends. Buck walked Ora to the front door and kissed her goodbye.

Buck was with the Monarchs between 1938 until the Negro leagues disbanded in 1955. In 1962, Buck joined the Chicago Cubs' experimental 11-man College of Coaches, becoming the first black coach in major league history. Buck signed Ernie Banks to the Monarchs in 1950 and three years later sent the future Hall of Famer to the Cubs.

Buck spoke of many subjects, but the modest tones of an impending dream had the greatest impact. "My wish," Buck said softly, "is that someday a youngster can pick up a history book and read about our lives in the Negro leagues. You know, there aren't many of us left."

A few weeks later, Fitzpatrick and wife Michelle had their first child, a boy named Max. On paper, this may look like a story about art and Tony Fitzpatrick. But through the spirit of baseball, it really is about Buck and Max.

"When I found out I was going to be a father, I did a show about my childhood," Fitzpatrick said earlier this month. "I remembered that somewhere between the time you graduate eighth grade and when you discover girls, you lose your baseball

cards. You also lose a part of your history. If I had to find one image to locate my childhood, it's in baseball cards."

That's why Fitzpatrick has painted a series of 30 baseball cards. Almost one-third of the subjects are from the Negro leagues, an organization formed out of necessity when black players were excluded from the major leagues because of racial discrimination.

Other cards in the Fitzpatrick collection depict White Sox Hall of Famer Luis Aparicio, Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente, Tony Conigliaro, Pete Rose and the White Sox scandal-tainted Chick Gandil as a pit bull. Fitzpatrick, a devoted White Sox fan, is proud to say he hasn't painted one Cub (although card subject Rico Carty, a lifetime .299 hitter in 15 major league seasons, hit .214 in 22 games for the 1973 Cubs).

These are the most effervescent works of Fitzpatrick's career. About the size of paperback books, the cards are drawn in bold strokes, rich with primary colors. Fitzpatrick, 33, made his name by drawing mass murderers, boxers, porno queens and just about anything else the underbelly could digest.

Earlier this month, Fitzpatrick unveiled 20 of the baseball cards at the Vrej Baghoomian Gallery in New York City. Fitzpatrick said Baghoomian "about freaked" when he heard he was painting baseball cards for the show, and refused to show them on opening night.

"It threw people for a huge loop," Fitzpatrick said. "In art, once you come near anything like sports, it becomes something most people perceive as the direct antithesis of the creative process. That's artistic conceit. It was odd seeing a bunch of people who have repudiated the gaming side of life actually swapping baseball stories. But over all, it played well. And the paintings sold very well."

Just as O'Neil related stories of hoboing across the country and hanging out with bandleader Lionel Hampton, those who are drawn into Fitzpatrick's paintings will connect with the soul of another generation.

"The game runs so parallel with American history," Fitzpatrick said. "Trying to locate a childhood is rarified history. But look at how the game parallels this country. The game started a few days after the Civil War ended. As went World War II, went baseball. As went civil rights, went baseball. Baseball is a game that constantly tests your memory. That was one of my missions."

The first leg of Fitzpatrick's baseball works includes what he calls "immigrants to the game." They are the Negro leaguers (O'Neil, Bell, Cuban pitching legend Martin Dihigo, Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, John Henry "Pop" Lloyd, Bullet Joe Rogan and Hilton Smith).

There are also characters, who Fitzpatrick said are "guys like Vic Power, who used to hit line drives to people's heads when they fooled with him, Juan Marichal (the Dominican Hall of Famer), who rearranged (Dodger catcher) Johnny Roseboro's haircut. I went for the guys who had to work harder to assimilate into the American game than anybody else."

That's why baseball lends itself so well to art and fiction. It is a sport of rugged individualism. The splendor of basketball is when team synergy has been attained. Football is corporate and faceless. Baseball is designed to be for the greater good, but the individual gesture is greatly rewarded.

But the Negro leagues that piqued Fitzpatrick's interest from a historical standpoint. "The Negro leagues were very important, because it is a blind spot," he said. "Everybody thinks there were noble efforts to break the color line. It was basically broken because there was money in it. People (Brooklyn Dodger general manager Branch Rickey, who signed Jackie Robinson in 1947 to integrate the game) saw the Kansas City Monarchs play before 30,000 people and they realized black people spent money, too. Until I met Buck O'Neil, I had all kinds of politically correct indignation about the Negro leagues. He opened my eyes."

O'Neil, indeed, put things in perspective. At 6-foot-1 and 195 pounds, he carries the same weight as when he joined the Monarchs as a first baseman out of the celery fields in Florida. At age 80, the eloquent O'Neil is still a scout for the Kansas City Royals. He is chairman of the board of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City and sits on the veterans committee of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

"Segregation was a terrible thing, but it did one good thing," O'Neil said. "We had to own a lot of things we don't own now. We had to own our own grocery stores, hotels and restaurants. That all changed. The big corporations took all that when we went to integration. There was no way a small, family-run hotel could compete with a corporate hotel. So they went out of business. The same thing happened with Negro baseball. The Kansas City Monarchs. The Chicago American Giants. The Birmingham Black Barons. They were making money."

Robinson broke the color line alone. The sport barely finds room for black managers, trainers or owners 45 years after Robinson first wore a major league uniform.

"Integration eliminated a lot of jobs for blacks," O'Neil said. "It took a lot of money away from the black neighborhoods. Why, we used to have people come in from Iowa, Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska just to see the Monarchs play!"

Fitzpatrick said, "Buck dispelled a lot of fashionable thinking I had. The Negro leagues were not a second-class league. It was a great league. So I didn't paint somber, righteously white guy-liberal-angry paintings. I wanted to make paintings that celebrated these guys and their lives."

Fitzpatrick, of course, is not the first artist to explore the emotional nooks and crannies of baseball. Chicagoan Ed Paschke once depicted Babe Ruth in a sadly masked face. Andy Warhol did a clean screen print of the perennially dirty Pete Rose. The Harvey Dinnerstein gothic painting of Joe DiMaggio's on-the-level swing has become an American classic.

"I don't know where my paintings would have wound up, had I not seen a great abstract work by R.J. Kitaj called 'On Not Ever Having Seen Koufax Pitch' (a non-figurative blue lament about Sandy Koufax's premature retirement)," Fitzpatrick said. "Baseball certainly has figured into art history. The secret in approaching baseball as an artist is don't glamorize it and don't condescend to it. Paint it the way you know it."