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Professors' biography sheds light on Black television news pioneer Mal Goode

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By MARTY LEVINE

Mal Goode is one pioneering Black Pittsburgher whose name may not be familiar to most, but a new biography written by two Pitt history professors — with the urging and cooperation of Goode's family — aims to change all that.

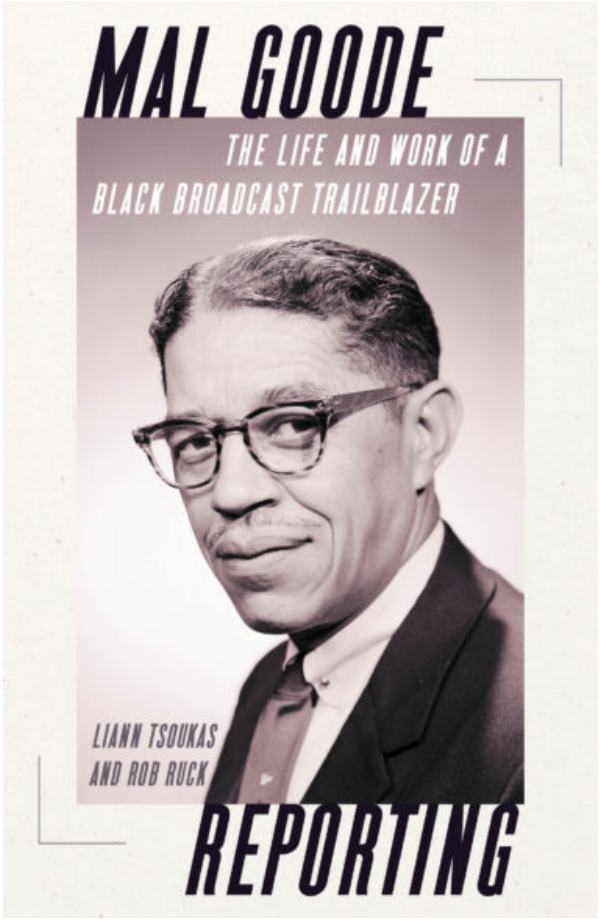
"Mal Goode Reporting: The Life and Work of a Black Broadcast Trailblazer" by Liann Tsoukas and Rob Ruck, published this month by the Pitt Press, is a biography of the first Black television news correspondent (for ABC News beginning in 1962) and his life of activism and journalism in Pittsburgh before that.

As the authors say about his television career (but which certainly applies to his entire adult life): "Goode's sense of mission was clear: to explain the racial currents of a nation in turmoil, inject an African-American perspective into the conversation, (and) serve his profession …"

The book traces Goode's life beginning with his enslaved Virginia grandparents and his early days in the Hilltop section of Homestead starting in 1916, into which his family moved as part of the Great Migration of Black people from South to North. He eventually worked nights in a steel mill alongside the Monongahela River and Homestead's poorer, crowded Ward while attending Pitt during the day.

"No matter how remarkable his classmates were, race twisted their futures," the authors note. Goode came to Pitt with the aim of emulating a Black Pitt law school graduate, then the Pittsburgh Courier's most famous editor and advocate for African-American rights, Robert L. Vann. But after graduating during the Depression, Goode found law school unreachable.

The University, under Chancellor John Bowman during Goode's years, was building the Cathedral of Learning. "But he clamped down on radical students and faculty," the authors said of Bowman, "and despite his rhetorical commitment that the university advance



humanity, Black students were marginalized at best and harassed at worst."

Goode had no Black professors and relatively few Black classmates, and had to fight against the arbitrary grading policy of at least one instructor who insisted a Black student earn no higher than a C in his class — lest the white students be upset.

Goode did thrive among his fellow members of Alpha Phi Alpha, the Black fraternity that shared Goode's two goals of high academic performance and advocacy for African Americans. "Those times were never easy," Tsoukas and Ruck quoted Goode. "Make no mistake about it nor for one minute forget it. Yet I enjoyed my classes and stayed happy most of the time."

"His response to Pitt was mixed," said Tsoukas, "but he recognized what an opportunity it was to go to Pitt. It was an association you carried your entire life."

Goode continued working at the mill after graduation, until he could marry and move to the Hill District. There he worked first as a juvenile probation officer, then as the boys work director at the segregated Centre Avenue YMCA and eventually as manager of Terrace Village and Bedford Dwellings, which were among the nation's biggest integrated public-housing projects at the time.

He faced and fought discrimination at every step along the way, eventually gaining a public voice as a writer with the Pittsburgh Courier, beginning in 1948, when this Black-owned and focused weekly was at the height of its circulation and influence as a publication, with offices and editions across the U.S. His work there included reporting on moves to desegregate the South, which paved the way for his coverage of the civil rights struggle throughout the U.S. later for ABC.

While still in Pittsburgh he started a radio show on KQV, "The Courier Speaks," as the only African-American on Pittsburgh's white-run radio stations. His brother Bill already had a pharmacy on Wylie Avenue in the Hill, and his sister Mary, known professionally as Mary Dee, was broadcasting music both traditional and new on WHOD (later WAMO). Goode joined her there by 1950, where they "drove conversations about the city, race and deindustrialization's early onslaught in the region," the authors note.

Goode's news reports reached a new Black and white audience to whom his activist take was evident, as, after calling out police brutality in Pittsburgh, he was arrested several times and once hid in a car trunk just to be able to get around the city to do his reporting.

Goode's talent was essentially hidden from ABC until he got aid from his friend, path-breaking baseball player Jackie Robinson, who pushed ABC to hire him — with the help of Howard Cosell, as Tsoukas and Ruck tell it. Goode was never a sports reporter, but the book recounts how the Goodes' Hill home hosted many Black ballplayers, from Hank Aaron and Willie Mays to Roberto Clemente. The book even details how Goode, a baseball fan, once did the Pirates' play-by-play on the radio in place of an absent Bob Prince, and then tried to do it again — but white management wasn't ready to hire a Black voice in Pittsburgh.

Goode first got on television during his decade at ABC News when he broke into regular programming with an update on the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, reporting from United Nations headquarters in New York. In ensuing years he had to urge network heads to include more Black correspondents and to cover more of Black life than the civil rights movement.

"He pushed to include the voices of the sharecroppers, steelworkers and middle-class professionals who were often invisible on national television and radio," the authors write. "He chafed when the networks ignored Martin Luther King Jr., caricatured Malcolm X, or paid attention to Black neighborhoods only when burning." Meanwhile, Goode gained special access to King and Malcolm as a trusted figure (after some struggle with the latter), and produced a documentary about Atlanta as an emerging desegregated Southern town while not shying from its many remaining issues.

The book follows his entire television and extensive public speaking career and beyond.

As the first Black network television correspondent, Goode was tremendously conscious of "how he was breaking through a barrier and how he was trying to report to both young professionals and the world the complete truth of life," Tsoukas said. In the newsroom, he pushed to be part of the biggest stories, and sometimes when passed over he would simply assign himself to a story, showing up, doing the work and making his reporting unique and indispensable to the network.

"He was in a Jackie Robinson situation" as the first Black person in his profession, Ruck said: "If he screws up," well, it might mean a setback for all future African-Americans on television news. "And he can't be seen as arrogant; he needs to play it cool." He ended up not only friends with many of the other journalists but was also seen as "a father figure, even though he hadn't come up in the industry."

Collaborating with the Goode family – and each other

Ruck, the author of several books on Pittsburgh sports, Black sports and their intersection, first met the Goode family in 1980 when speaking at a Heinz History Center panel on baseball's Negro Leagues. Mal Goode's son, Ronald, approached him afterward and said, as Ruck recalls: "If you want to know about the Negro Leagues, talk to my father." Ruck interviewed Mal Goode for a documentary on the city's Negro League teams and was subsequently approached to do the current book. He agreed as long as Tsoukas could be part of it, since she could bring her broader African-American history and U.S. history backgrounds to the project.

How do two people write a book?

"It's really hard," Tsoukas said, but with "collaboration there's a lot of fun," Ruck added. "Working as a scholar is an isolating experience." Working together, "it energizes you," he said.

"I think it made the book better and richer because we challenged each other in our assumptions," continued Tsoukas. "I had strong opinions on Mal's life, its impact, and we had to battle them out. We had discussions with each other that no historian could have alone."

And Tsoukas was able to bring out the role of Goode's wife, Mary Lavelle, "in a way I don't think I could," Ruck said.

Of course, the pair emphasized, they had the participation of the family, and Goode himself left a lot of writing, from an unfinished memoir to other personal writing full of his own opinions, which are reflected in the book.

In the end, the authors hope readers understand that Goode was a seminal 20th century figure — as Ruck put it, "part of the glue that builds the cohesion in the Black community to make it possible for the civil rights movement to be successful."

Goode's time and his work, said Tsoukas, represents "a major shift in African-American identity and visibility, and he fights those battles daily, about who is presenting the news and who is watching the news."

Also instructive for the book were the more than 1,000 public addresses Goode gave. "His talks … can be Baptist church (style), thumping the podium, but they are filled with data and analysis," Ruck said.

"He was always prepared to deliver a fully cooked analysis of anything with data and names," Tsoukas said.

Despite Goode's accomplishments, "We don't know why he was lost, but he never got the acclaim of what he achieved," she added. "We know that Black folks in the media all know who he was."

"Mal had a lot of gravitas," Ruck said, noting that network news anchors of the day "just had a great respect and affection for him. But he never gets propelled center stage."

"When you see him deliver the news, he is so good," Tsoukas observed. "He didn't need notes. He's got his presence … He personalizes these stories in a way that he is talking to you."

Marty Levine is a staff writer for the University Times. Reach him at martyl@pitt.edu or 412-758-4859.

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