

The New York Times

## *An Artist Takes His Pay in Coffee and Community*

By DAVID GONZALEZ APRIL 13, 2014



David Ellis is painting what could be his biggest commission ever — assuming he lives long enough, since he’s being paid in coffee and tobacco.

For the last few weeks, he and a rotating cast of assistants and friends have been painting a mural of green, orange and yellow waves wrapped around the walls of Ralph’s, an ancient bodega south of Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn. Though his other work — large outdoor paintings or sculptures of found objects that integrate music — can fetch tens of thousands of dollars, he is passionate about this corner bodega project.

He sees it as his way of giving back not just to the neighborhood, where he has crashed with friends on and off for the last 10 years, but to Ralph Jawad, the bodega’s owner who for years gave him juice and cigarettes, or lent him money with no paperwork save for a hastily scribbled note on a paper bag. The payback is in art and community.

“If I don’t have to pay for orange juice, coffee or anything else, this could be big,” Mr. Ellis, 43, said. “Even if it only amounts to \$20 a day for the rest of my life, that would be huge. And people will see it here. Man, I could get 50 grand for something like this for a museum, but nobody would see it. But here, at least 500 people pass through each day.”

Many passers-by were curious, since the store had been shuttered for a while. In late 2012, Mr. Jawad was arrested on drug and weapons charges, a turn of events that shocked his neighbors. He pleaded guilty to misdemeanor weapons and drug charges and served less than seven days.

“We’re good,” said a smiling Mr. Jawad, whose father had opened the store in the 1960s. “It’s O.K.”

He once had his own doubts about Mr. Ellis — “a nut” — whom he remembers coming by the store talking about his art and asking for free stuff. In an area that had been rapidly gentrifying, a lot of people called themselves artists.

“I always get guys who come in here telling me what they can do,” Mr. Jawad said. “But one day David comes here and shows me a newspaper story about a big drawing he did in Dumbo. I asked him, When are you going to paint my store?”

Mr. Ellis found the time a few weeks ago, between trips to New Orleans, where he is collaborating with the musician Dr. John, and to Taipei, Taiwan, where he is painting the atrium of a luxury hotel. Inside Ralph’s, he spends his time rooting through sketches, regaling visitors with grand plans for future projects, and playing a lot of blues and soul music. Though he seldom picked up a brush, he paid close attention to the painters who were executing his designs. In a way, it was a lot like music, which shaped him when he was a teenager at the North Carolina School of the Arts.

“Everybody was creative,” he said. “That planted the seed in my mind to work collaboratively. I’d get the best people together to do something. I mean, look at jazz, like Monk or Ellington. They brought people together.”

A bodega, too, is where people come together. Every day, he spends a chunk of it bantering with Evander “Buster” Mcrae, one of his assistants who is a stickler for detail. “There’s money to be made here,” Mr. Mcrae said. “A lot of money.” Mr. Ellis agrees, and he speaks seriously about showing more of his work at Ralph’s, even designing some household products for sale, like toilet paper. For him, it is about community.

“There are some neighborhoods in New York where you don’t even know who lives next door to you,” Mr. Ellis said. “This is open, and I treasure that.”

Ralph’s is a throwback to an era that is fading — some say being driven into extinction — as the brownstone-lined streets become ever more gentrified. The old-timers who hang out by the bodega admit as much, but said they liked seeing Ralph’s hanging on, even as it gets a makeover.

“Ralph was down, but he’s making a comeback,” Michael Gaynor, who calls himself Mr. Fort Greene, said. “When you fall you got to get back up. That’s for real. This looks for real. And David got a lot of people involved in this. Everybody got their little bit here and there.”

Some people who grew up in the area when it was predominantly African-American understood that the changes sweeping over the area have led to tensions. Recently, Spike Lee, Fort Greene’s most famous native son, warned against the newcomers pushing out old-timers. Mr. Jawad just chuckled.

“Spike can say what he wants about gentrification,” he said. “But he was one of the first to sell and move to Manhattan. I’m still here.”

13 Apr. 2014. Web. 15 Apr. 2014 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/14/nyregion/an-artist-takes-his-pay-in-tobacco-and-community.html>>