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## **They Never Stopped Rockin': A Brief History of the Chitlin' Circuit, Mississippi, and Their Effects on America's Music**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

They Never Stopped Rockin': A Brief History of the Chitlin' Circuit, Mississippi, and  
Their Effects on America's Music

by

Warren Cooper Beebe

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
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## **Abstract**

This work focuses on the development of one of America's first musical tour routes: the Chitlin' Circuit. While its name may sound strange, the Chitlin' Circuit was responsible for the development of numerous distinct musical genres throughout the United States, such as blues and rock and roll in the twentieth century. Southern roadhouses, dive bars, and juke joints proudly showcased performers that gained initial fame touring with old medicine shows. As these artists gained recognition for their new musical stylings and elaborate showmanship, the owners of these local nightspots began to exchange contact information to better capitalize on these highly sought-after acts, forging business and travel links spanning throughout the South. Many well-known Southern cities were home to countless venues on the circuit, but there were also many rural towns that showcased these tough and gritty nightspots.

When recording technology improved, individual acts on the Chitlin' Circuit gained national attention with their popular record releases, spreading the music of the circuit to the rest of the country. These new forms of music served as early precursors to rock and roll, and some were even used for commercial advertising purposes. The recording stars and their record companies that were born out of necessity would go on to become industry giants. The success stories that emerged from the circuit would inspire future generations of musicians to come, as the Chitlin' Circuit was the home of America's music.

**Keywords:** Chitlin' Circuit, Blues, Mississippi, Hi-Hat Club, Hattiesburg, Rock and Roll

## **Dedication**

*To my Mother, Father, Amanda, and all of my friends and family -*

*Thank you all for supporting me in my endeavors.*



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Much can be said about the fabled Chitlin' Circuit. A simple definition of the Chitlin' Circuit is that it was the South's ultimate gift to American music and entertainment, honing in on the country's African American musical influences, specifically blues and jazz, that could be found down South. A more complex explanation can be found in the published description of music journalist Preston Lauterbach. He describes that, "For generations, 'chitlin' circuit' has meant second tier-brash performers in raucous nightspots far from the big-city limelight." Lauterbach's work mainly "focuses on how the chitlin' circuit for live music developed during the 1930s and nurtured rock' n' roll from the early 40s to the mid-1950s." These hot and rowdy night spots served "as the top moneymakers" during an era where "new sounds grew on the road and in night clubs, through the dance business rather than in the recording studio." The Circuit, Lauterbach writes, "intertwined stories of booking agents, show promoters, and nightclub owners, the moguls who controlled wealth throughout the black music business" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 12).

During this specific time in America, hardworking musicians toured from Southern town to town, performing to crowds for little-to-no compensation. The audience did not have cell phones to capture or stream the performance, and the artists performing did not acquire fame via social media. While many of these entertainers have now perished, their legacies and contributions to the nation's music will certainly never be forgotten. These brave men and women fled their rural homes and upbringings to establish a name for themselves on one of America's original musical tour routes: The Chitlin' Circuit. These rowdy nightclubs and shady venues littered throughout the southern region of the United States were where many early musical entertainers in America got their start. These

establishments and their artists played cutting-edge rhythm and blues and other similar musical styles, drawing direct inspiration from earlier genres like "race" and "old-time" records made by both black and white, male and female entertainers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The music and showmanship that was displayed by artists on the tour route would ultimately give way to the emergence of rock and roll, as this genre stems from the fusion of all of the musical arrangements and stylings that were played on the Chitlin' Circuit and eventually recorded. Though there is no one person entirely responsible for the development of the Chitlin' Circuit, its roots can be traced back to a small handful of street-savvy businesspeople and their intriguing endeavors that spearheaded the origins of the recording industry.

Without the Chitlin' Circuit, the popular musical genre of rock and roll would not have taken center stage and would certainly not have been such a runaway success. Rock and roll's popularity has certainly experienced its peak, as growing genres like rap and hip-hop now overshadow it, but all of these growing and expanding genres owe a large debt to those original blues and jazz artists that aided in establishing the Chitlin' Circuit. While my studies highlight the development points and crucial artists that helped forge the Circuit as it stands today, I also purposely chose to highlight several key nightspots located in and around my native state of Mississippi. These venues served as crucial stops on the Chitlin' Circuit running through the South.

The methods I applied to develop my thesis were numerous. I read several published scholarly works about the development of Southern music, its roots, and its identity to cultivate a sense of understanding behind some of the musical choices and stylings that were favored and played on the tour route. Some other sources I used were

published and shared online, while others (such as interviews from periodicals) were retrieved via email correspondence with Jim O'Neal, co-founder of the magazine Living Blues. However, to better trace the origins and development of the actual Chitlin' Circuit, my studies led me to rely heavily on one published text in particular, as there are limited sources of this caliber that pertain to the subject. Throughout my thesis, the reader will find that Preston Lauterbach's *Chitlin' Circuit and the Road to Rock' N' Roll* is cited on many occasions, as his important work traces and highlights the history and legitimacy of the touring route. My investigation of the Chitlin' Circuit also found me traveling throughout the state of Mississippi, as I utilized sources about the blues and historical recordings within or around the state at the University of Mississippi's Blues Archives at the J.D. Williams Library. As Mississippi is the birthplace and home of countless blues artists, there are various museums that are entirely devoted to the subject within the state. I visited the B.B. King Museum in Cleveland, where I was able to unearth more information with his involvement on the circuit, as he was one of the real, master authorities on the blues. By the end of my thesis, the reader will discover that American Music is undoubtedly more substantial than any racial connotations or barriers, as both black and white musicians collaborated alongside Jewish record producers to share and blend their distinctive styles to formulate rock music.

The first chapter highlights the origins of the Chitlin' Circuit by first examining popular musical stylings of the late nineteenth century. In order for one to fully understand and appreciate the rich, organic history of the Chitlin' Circuit, there first must be a background study and explanation behind America and the South's choice of music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This background provides a vivid, mental

picture that aids in understanding how this backroads touring situation was born. Traditional work songs that were used to regulate the pace of labor arrived in the United States from West African tribes during the era of the slave trade. Another popular genre that existed in the late nineteenth century was the ballad. Ballads or "hillbilly" songs emerged from White settlers located in the Ozark Mountains. These country-dwelling communities crafted intricate songs that told stories reflective of their folklore with stringed instruments like the guitar, banjo, mandolin, or fiddle.

It would be the combination of these two distinct genres that would ultimately give way to the development of the blues, as African American musicians fused basic, rhythmic elements from their native homelands with the Western instruments used by ballad singers to develop the new genre. The Blues allowed the working man to create simple songs that reflected on a variety of socio-economic class differences or negative relationship experiences, as these songs often express a particular form of discontent directed against an authority figure or an ex-lover. Laborers who wrote music and played instruments had a unique opportunity to escape the monotony of an agrarian lifestyle and create a sustainable career with traveling medicine shows. These shows displayed crucial cultural and musical interactions that were shared by both black and white performers and audiences alike, as these vital exchanges helped reduce the height of preexisting racial barriers that existed primarily in the South.

When the popularity of these medicine shows dwindled, the musicians continued to travel and tour throughout the South, promoting themselves to further their musical occupations. The reader will find that many early, traveling musicians relied on methods of compensation for their performances that were not always financial, as these payments

could be in the form of other necessities, such as food or transport. This chapter recalls stories from early blues artists as they describe their experiences with both black and white audiences at the different social functions and events that they performed at. The end of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of recorded media, and with it came the birth of the recording artist with the advent of the phonograph machine. These new recording artists were the same black and white men and women that toured with medicine shows or other syndicates. While these phonographs were initially released via one label, Okeh Records, by the year 1920, competing record labels scrambled to sign blues and ballad singing artists. The recording industry created a high demand for commercial blues and ballad tunes, and it would be these two genres of music that would solidify what would eventually become rock and roll in the years to come. However, the public response to these new genres was not always positive, as older members of society felt that this new music lacked proper morals. Nonetheless, these brave artists that traveled with a medicine show and on their own recorded the music that would spearhead the development of legitimate tour routes that would eventually morph into the Chitlin' Circuit.

The second chapter traces the actual development of the Chitlin' Circuit from its inception. Two notable brothers, Denver and Sea Ferguson, vacated their rural, southern home in Kentucky to establish key businesses in the northern state of Indianapolis. As a young man, Denver published a local newspaper with his printing press. After migrating up North after the First World War, Denver and his brother opened a printing firm. Denver's first clients ran a numbers game, and after gaining initial success with printing the illegal betting slips, he decided to start his own betting game to generate more revenue. In the early 1930s, Denver and Sea combined their business assets to purchase more real estate

and expand their sphere of influence in their African American community. Their combined business endeavors allowed them to open the Ferguson Building, which served as brokerage firm to aid with local business loans.

The brothers eventually found themselves in the entertainment business, as they opened a venue, known as the Cotton Club, that showcased modern performers that played the music that was desired by the community. This chapter also contains a short interview conducted by author Preston Lauterbach with an older gentleman named Sax Kari. Kari worked with Denver Ferguson during the 1940s when the Chitlin' Circuit was in full swing as a promoter for touring bands. He assisted in developing relationships with the rural, low-budget venues that were willing to showcase talented acts.

One of the first official Chitlin' Circuit acts was a Vicksburg native by the name of Walter Barnes. Barnes moved to Chicago and wrote for the popular newspaper, The Chicago Defender, contributing music critiques and promoting his band, the Royal Creolians. With the help from the infamous gangster Al Capone, Walter and his band became the first African American group to perform live over Chicago airwaves. During the Great Depression, Barnes was forced to downsize his backing band and rely on self-promotion. He continued to write for the Defender and became a regular performer at Denver's Cotton Club. Barnes continued to tour the United States, primarily in the South, where he gained the most notoriety. He and his band received high acclaim as they toured the Chitlin' Circuit until they met their untimely demise following a fatal fire at a performance in Natchez.

Another fatal blow hit the Circuit's forefathers as government officials cracked down on the illegal gambling racquets and practices that Denver and his competitors

engaged in after a deadly shooting occurred across from the Ferguson Building. This forced the brothers to establish a more legitimate business, so they formed the Ferguson Brothers Agency in 1941. This corporate entity booked, promoted, and sponsored musical touring acts on the Chitlin' Circuit. During this time, Denver became business associates with a Texas native named Don Robey. Robey and Denver shared similar business interests involving the promotion of touring acts on the Chitlin' Circuit, and together they further solidified its legacy.

Chapter three traces the career developments of more Chitlin' Circuit stars as they were forced to adapt to rationing laws and general price increases during the Second World War. Fuel rationing and inflation forced touring stars to reduce the size of their band to travel lighter than they did before. Performing acts were also booked to appear in pairs, as promoters believed that this would entice potential customers to spend the extra money to see two bands rather than just one. The popularity of records dwindled during the 1940s due to the country's demand for shellac. With this being said, the Ferguson Brothers and other promoters increased the size of their talent rosters to add variety to an expanding sphere of entertainment influence.

A popular Chitlin' Circuit attraction, himself, Louis Jordan pieced together a small band that he dubbed "The Tympany Five," and together they changed music history on the Circuit. Jordan was a charismatic performer dressed in slick suits who performed in front of his small band. Because of his vivacious stage personality and excellent singing delivery, Louis Jordan is strongly considered to be the first frontman in the group in the music business. His band also contributed to the changing of musical stylings and arrangements through the introduction of wailing saxophones. Other famous acts like Joe Turner and T-

Bone Walker made the electric guitar the star of the stage. A Houston native, T-Bone honed his craft alongside the blues musician Blind Lemon Jefferson.

T-Bone inspired one young man, in particular, Clarence Brown after he saw him perform in San Antonio. He admired his guitar playing so much that he committed himself to learn his songs almost note for note. There was even one night in which Clarence performed an impromptu opening for his idol after he failed to appear on stage at his designated time due to ulcers caused by alcohol abuse. When the time arrived for the show to begin, T-Bone's manager (and friend of Clarence) ushered him to the stage where he played his idol's very own guitar. After that fateful night, Clarence devoted the rest of his life to performing on the Chitlin' Circuit.

This chapter also traces the life of another Chitlin' Circuit star that shared the same last name as Clarence, named Roy Brown. Roy was a Louisiana native who originally worked as a boxer, but after he sang for a touring artist in Texas, was encouraged to jump to a less violent, but still entertaining, career. Roy started his stint on the Circuit performing in New Orleans. When he began his touring days, he chose a backing band from the City to accompany him. He and his band proved to be a force to be reckoned with, as the songs that he released were credited to be some of the first rock and roll cuts produced. Brown's captivating new music style also catalyzed Billboard's choosing to change "Race Records" to "Rhythm and Blues."

Roy was also considered to be the first "front man" of the band. Many rock and roll bands are known for their charismatic lead singer, commonly referred to as the front man. He and his band were so successful on the Chitlin' Circuit that he was able to purchase a fleet of vehicles for his band, ranging from tour buses to limousines. Brown and his outfit

are considered to be the world's first rock and roll band, as they inspired Elvis Presley and even allowed him to cover one of their songs. But Brown's legacy did not end with Elvis. Towards the end of the section, I feature an interview from the eighties in which Roy was compared to Michael Jackson.

In the fourth chapter, I shift my focus to the Chitlin' Circuit's involvement with Memphis, Tennessee. An African American street vendor named Sunbeam Mitchell was largely responsible for the City's musical growth. After World War II, Sunbeam and his wife, Ernestine purchased an old juke joint on Beale Street and converted it into a hotel. Sunbeam originally did not help his wife in running their boarding business, as he was a fan of the touring musicians that would travel to the City to play. This naturally upset Ernestine, so she decided to bring the music that he enjoyed to their location.

The duo converted the downstairs space of their hotel into an entertainment space called the Domino Lounge. The lounge concept turned out to be a runaway success for the couple. Sunbeam cooked and served chili every night, welcoming any group that desired to play. It was here where the blues artist B.B. King would get his start, but there were also countless other musicians that gained initial fame at these hallowed grounds. Mitchell became business partners with Don Robey out of Houston, and the two exchanged artist contacts to boost their notoriety. To generate more additional income, Sunbeam also served whiskey under the table and allowed prostitutes to frequent his hotel, as Ernestine allowed customers to rent certain rooms at an hourly rate.

Another famous musician that performed in Memphis and gained initial fame on the circuit was Ray Charles. Ray served as the pianist for a band led by a man named Lowell Fulson. Ray Charles was largely responsible for the group's rise in popularity and

ascent to fame. Though he had physical blindness, Ray was able to visualize musical notes, allowing him to pinpoint the band's mistakes during their rehearsal time better. Because of this, Ray was able to communicate with the group regarding the improvement of their playing. During his time with Fulson's band, he was known as "Blind Ray Charles."

B.B. King's first breakout recording was a Lowell Fulson tune entitled, "Three O'clock Blues," and it even features a young Ike Turner on piano. The two were lifelong friends, as King had plugged Ike's band's song, "Rocket 88" on his Memphis radio program. This song is strongly considered to be the first highly successful rock and roll song, as the record flew off shelves and was even played by a car company to advertise the vehicle that the song was written about.

The Memphis native Sunbeam also convinced Milton Barnes of Hattiesburg, Mississippi to get into the entertainment business. Barnes opened the Hi-Hat club outside of City limits in an area called Palmer's Crossing. As the establishment was located in a dry county, Mitchell supplied Milton with bootlegged whiskey to discreetly sell. The Hi-Hat showcased Chitlin' Circuit acts like B.B. King on multiple occasions, and the Club was not only trendy, but also extended the length of the Circuit. Barnes went on to open two more establishments on the Gulf Coast, and he also exchanged artist contracts and bookings with a club in New Orleans.

The final chapter of my thesis focuses on the development of rock and roll music alongside the record industry's transition out of the vernacular South. One man, in particular, a Jewish immigrant named Leonard Chess, recorded Mississippi musicians like Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley, exponentially boosting their careers as their record sales would soar. In the 1940s, the state of Mississippi lost about a fourth of its population as

many residents immigrated to Northern cities like Chicago bringing their culture and musical stylings with them. African American blues had intrigued Chess since he was a child. He empathized with the melancholy lyrics that reflected social isolation because he hailed from a Jewish background in a city that was not very accepting of his foreign heritage. He entered the workforce as an attendant at a liquor store. It was here where Leonard would socialize with his black companions after hours, listening to them play the guitar as they drank together. Chess knew that he could do more with his life and the community, so he quit his job at the liquor store and opened a nightspot in Chicago's Bronzeville called the Macomba Lounge.

The Lounge generated public appeal with the various acts that performed there. However, it also served as a location for the purchase of narcotics, creating the occasional hostile atmosphere when brawls ensued. Chess' nightclub investment would lead him to the record business when he began speaking to the talent scouts that frequented the lounge. Being the capitalist that he was, Chess brokered a contract with one of his usual entertainers to record with a local company known as Aristocrat. Its owners were another married couple, Charles and Evelyn Aron, and Chess allowed them to record Tibbs if they showed him how to record, an agreement they gladly made. With these new skills under his belt, Leonard left the nightclub venture to start his label, Chess Records.

My thesis ends with a short epilogue in which I discuss an event that I attended in November of 2017 where I was able to briefly talk with a genuine Chitlin' Circuit performer from its heyday. I also highlight an Preston Lauterbach's 2003 interview of a more modern Circuit star named Bobby Rush. Through both of these interviews, the reader will find that

the Chitlin' Circuit has drastically changed from what it once was. Many of the old establishments that showcased new acts have faded away into memories.

Tourists who seek out the Chitlin' Circuit and its music can still do so through attractions like the Mississippi Blues Trail, as it serves as a statewide memorial to many blues artists and the juke joints of days gone by. These locations are honored with special highway markers that signify their importance to the development of America's early forms of popular music. With this being said, some of the genre's authenticity has been lost to modernization. Most of the former Circuit locations that now serve as restaurants, bars, and hotels boast modern amenities such as indoor plumbing and air conditioning for the contemporary traveler.

## Chapter 2: Unassuming Origins

If one were to compare the methods that were used to promote, record, and distribute music during the early, middle, and even later eras of the twentieth century and relate them to any modern recording artist, it would be like comparing a horse to an automobile. They simply are not the same. I draw attention to this modest comparison, as the same sentiments could be shared with respect to the evolution of America's popular music. Genres consistently evolved with the alongside changing times and shifting racial barriers. Author Karl Miller indicates in *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music In the Age of Jim Crow* that cooperation in composition actively diminished racial barriers. Miller writes that:

"Common work experiences could foster this kind of interracial musical exchange. Levee and lumber camps, railroad projects, textile mills, mines, and large farms often found black and white workers in close proximity even when jobs and living spaces were segregated. White and black workers traded music to a significant extent considering the violent politics of race in the New South" (Miller, 2010, p. 82).

Many lower-class black and white laborers sang during work hours and played music afterwards to help occupy their time. These labor songs can be traced back to West African tribes, as they sang impromptu tunes to "coordinate collective labor in the fields and domiciles" (Barlow, 1989, p. 14). When these Africans were forced to leave their native lands and come to North America, they brought the cultural tradition of the work song with them. Miller indicates that the relevance of the music to the everyday work of those listening made for an effortless familiarity. Miller writes:

"In this paradigm, work songs were a component to the labor process. They were thus deeply connected to people's everyday lives and explicitly functional. Songs sung during work served a number of purposes, from regulating the pace of labor or communicating across the worksite, to

building collective identity among workers or lodging protests about work conditions" (Miller, 2010, p. 56).

These songs allowed laborers to voice "social concerns that arose in the daily lives of African Americans" (Barlow, 1989, p. 4). As time went on, these labor songs evolved into standard tunes that would deeply reflect and recall the common practices and beliefs of that specific group of people. These work songs also "became an important component of early rural blues" (Barlow, 1989, p.14). The melodies were then passed down orally to future generations in a fully conscious effort "to perpetuate traditions, to keep values from eroding, and to begin to create new expressive modes" (Barlow, 1989, p. xii).

Another popular genre of music in the South called folk ballads aided in the formation of the early blues culture. Ballads originally derived from Anglo-Americans in the Appalachians, as they concocted long stories of "epic proportions, about a momentous event, a tragic love relationship, or an ill-fated folk hero" (Barlow, 1989, pp. 18-19). African Americans who heard these ballads were inspired to create their own renditions of the genre, adding "the needs of their own people and culture" (Barlow, 1989, pp. 18-19). Like the work songs, ballads were passed down orally to proceeding generations of African Americans as a way to preserve their traditionally African alongside newly American culture. However, as the reader will understand by the end of my thesis, American music and the music industry were larger than any preexisting racial barriers or formalities, as both black and white musicians collaborated, shared, and even mixed their own distinctive styles together to give way to one of the most dynamic and tremendously successful genres of all time: rock and roll.

But even rock and roll, played live and adored by a sea of screaming fans in gargantuan venues, came from humble beginnings. Before the Chitlin' Circuit existed and

gave way to rock and roll, there were traveling medicine shows. Ironically, these so-called “medicine” shows were anything but. Men posing as doctors would bring their caravans from town to town, attracting and enticing local attention with white entertainers performing songs, skits, and dances in blackface. Medicine shows in the South reached their height between 1880 and 1906, when few food and drug regulations affected the industry. Regardless, these shows existed well into the twentieth century. After the entertainment portion of the show, the "doctor" would then proceed to pitch their new cure-all wellness elixir. Of course, the medicine aimed at the unassuming public was merely a potent concoction consisting of water and powerful narcotics like cocaine or heroin. On many occasions, "patent medicine 'doctors' were little more than traveling street performers themselves, setting up a box in a corner and employing one or two actors or musicians to help draw a crowd" (Miller, 2010, p. 68).

These travelling blackface shows were indeed archaic, but society's standards during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries permitted these offensive portrayals to be a part of the standard medicine show routine. Miller explains that:

“Blackface characters played a contradictory role in relation to the patent medicine 'doctor,' granting him prestige through both association and distance. On one hand, performing minstrel songs established the credibility of the medicine show by forging links to more 'legitimate' and popular forms of theater. Most audiences were intimately familiar with tropes and songs of the minstrel stage, having learned them from traveling shows, national media, and sheet music. Blackface performers supplied the comic and sentimental songs of the day” (p. 69).

However, it would be incorrect to assume that these white entertainers would be given more opportunities for success than any African-American musicians during that era, as few of these travelling performers net significant profit. Many entertainers played and performed for mere coins that were donated to them by individuals passing by.

Black musicians that toured throughout the South on these medicine shows did so for a myriad of reasons. After the Civil War, black sharecroppers throughout the South were emancipated and free to create obtainable futures for themselves. However, while slavery was now abolished, the new Jim Crow laws arrived just in time to undo all of the progress that was put forth in emancipating a whole race of people in the United States. Black sharecroppers in the South were fully aware of what the reality of the situation was, and it did not guarantee a bright and successful future like the Kentucky-born president promised. These sharecroppers turned to their hobbies, such as music, to earn a livable wage and the opportunity to escape from Jim Crow legislations. Miller states that entertainers, "...who had honed their skills performing on the street and freelancing parties could graduate to the semiregular employment of the medicine show. Medicine shows could offer musicians entry into the world of organized, paid performance" (Miller, 2010, p. 68).

But merely being able to perform and play live for folks was only half of the equation. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these musicians did not have managers to focus on developing a repertoire for the artist. Many simply acted on their own behalf, becoming their own representatives. Artists who wanted to increase their chance of success began creating relationships with numerous audiences. Miller observed of the relative inequity that, "Many southern, working class musicians did not have access to the most fruitful gigs in urban theaters, opera houses, and nationally touring shows. They nevertheless, created opportunities to get paid wherever they could" (Miller, 2010, p. 62). Occasionally, payment loosely translated into things rather than money, because travelling musicians had to eat like everyone else.

The roaming fiddle player, Bill Broonzy, utilized his talent for house parties, where he would receive food, or even clothing, as compensation. He was born in 1893 in a little town called Scott, Mississippi, where he experienced the harsh realities of segregation early on during his life. Like many young African Americans, Broonzy assisted his family and nearby local community in any way possible, in a desperate attempt "to escape the cyclical debt that was the common curse of black sharecroppers." At the tender young age of ten, Bill crafted a homemade fiddle in an effort to "use music to mitigate and circumvent Jim Crow" legislations that denied any solid, feasible future for blacks in the South. (Miller, 2010, p. 281)

After constructing his instrument, he swiftly gained a reputation for being an astute entertainer. He was so talented that he eventually saw his dream come to fruition when "local white residents soon noticed his skills, and they asked him to play for their dances and 'two-way' picnics attended by the area's white and black communities." Bill Broonzy had accomplished a rare achievement in those days, as "performing for white listeners had its advantages. 'We would be playing and sitting under screened porches while the other Negroes had to work in the hot sun,' Broonzy recalled." There was even an instance in which he was gifted a real violin at a white function. The 1920s would find Broonzy living in Chicago, helping establish the Blues up North. He would gain national notoriety, as "the promoter John Hammond included him in the famous 'Spirituals to Swing' concert at Carnegie Hall. During the Great Depression and the Second World War, Bill (and many other popular musicians) were cast aside during these decades of national and international crisis. However, "by the 1950s, Broonzy was a popular performer on the folk revival

circuit, playing not only country blues that he recorded while in Chicago but a wide variety of American popular and folk songs." (Miller, 2010, p. 281)

McKinley Morganfield, another notable bluesman from Mississippi who would later migrate to the Windy City earned his living in a fashion similar to Bill Broonzy. Born in the small Delta town of Rolling Fork on the Cottonwood Plantation, Morganfield received little formal education and worked long and strenuous hours outside tending to agrarian needs on the plantation. (O'Neal & Singel, 1985, pp. 155, 158). After a hard week of laboring, Muddy Waters would perform at "suppers" that he called "Saturday Night Fish Fries" with a secondhand Stella guitar (O'Neal & Singel, 1985, p. 159). On some occasions throughout the year, Morganfield would play at private events for white audiences at Stovall Planation in Clarksdale. He stated that he and his backing band would "always get a white dance, somethin', three or four times a year, you know. My boss [Howard Stovall] really liked that kinda carrying on. He'd give a party, and he'd get me, you know, to come do his things for him." These parties could potentially last all night and carry on into Sunday until late in the evening (O'Neal & Singel, 1985, p. 168). These grueling hours forced early blues musicians like Muddy Waters to expand their knowledge of desired musical tastes, as well as their ability to endure long hours of performing during the weekends, only to return to planation work during the week.

According to Miller, the blues musician (and cousin to the legendary blues artist, B.B. King) Bukka White also made his living performing "at similar African American functions around his native Huston, Mississippi, when he was a young child." White would play at houses, plantations, or communal buildings at events called "frolics" or "suppers," depending on how much food was for sale. White explained, "'they had square dancin'-

what they call it now. But now you see at the suppers then they would dance, and . . . at the end of the set everybody would carry their partner to the table and treat 'em'. That's the way they made their money. Which sardine was a nickel, you know, and two apples for a nickel and they were payin' me fifteen cents a night and two apples and a box of sardines'" (Miller, 2010, p. 65). Another popular method of compensation for performances aided musicians in their travelling needs. Miller also stated that two other notable blues musicians named Huddie Ledbetter and Blind Lemon Jefferson "similarly played music in exchange for free train travel around the Dallas area in the years after 1910. Ledbetter recalled in conversation recorded in Miller's work that, 'We didn't have to pay no money in them times. We get on the train; the driver takes us anywhere we want to go. Well, we just get on and the conductor say 'Boys, sit down. You going to play music?' We tell him, 'Yes'." These drifting musicians bartered their musical abilities in order to bypass any formal, financial transactions in exchange for a meal or travel arrangements (Miller, 2010, p. 62).

While all of the previously mentioned roaming musicians and entertainers were African American, they were still fortunate enough to score performances at white functions like Bill Broonzy and Muddy Waters so famously did. Miller said that black and white entertainers knew that, " A diverse repertoire enabled musicians to appeal to a broad selection of different audiences across the South. Musicians who could overcome differences in race, class, or region stood in the best position to get paid." With this being said, African Americans playing at white functions would more than likely receive have a higher rate of compensation, as "the economic disparity between black and white southerners deeply affected the terrain upon which such interracial musical interaction took place." (Miller, 2010, pp. 71-72)

Miller includes the recollections of performer Sam Chatman in order to present that:

“...[M]usicians would usually receive about two dollars for playing at a black house party. Out of this income they would have to buy their own food and drink. White parties, on the other hand, could bring in an average of five dollars per musician as well as a plate of food. In addition, the white parties Chatman remembered usually wound down before midnight, while black functions could go well into the morning hours. For struggling musicians like Chatman and his brothers, the early end of a party could mean a few extra hours of sleep before having to wake up for their day jobs the next morning.” (Miller, 2010, p. 65)

According to Miller, early traveling musical artists "...prided themselves on their ability to perform for both black and white audiences. They, and other artists, built local and national careers by appealing to multiple audiences, constantly shaping and shifting their presentation and image in order to touch listeners from a variety of subject positions" that more than likely involved musical stylings and lyrics that would have a positive appeal towards the select audience that would be listening at that particular point in time (Miller, 2010, p. 78).

Early African American performers like Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, Bukka White, and Sam Chatman chose careers that did not guarantee monetary success in the South, as many African Americans opted to earn their living in agricultural pursuits throughout the region. But even in the best circumstances, sharecropping and farming provided minimal sustenance and profit to those who toiled away in the fields. Music Historian William Barlow indicates in *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* that, "A high percentage of these first-generation blues musicians came from poor farming families, and their choice of vocation figured in a larger rebellion against the established white social order" (Barlow, 1989, p. 5). These artists opted for a mobile lifestyle that would find them on the road, hopping from venue to venue, eventually landing touring and recording contracts that would inspire others after them to do the same.

When the 1920s rolled around, Miller stated that "black and white dance practices were becoming more distinct than they had been a few decades earlier" (Miller, 2010, p. 76). Blues music allowed African Americans during the early twentieth century the ability to preserve "the historical legacy of a people still confined to the lowest echelon of the social order" by voicing their personal opinions on current political and social occurrences that affected them and their surrounding communities (Barlow, 1989, p. 4).

The Blues earned its legendary title from an old colloquial term dating back to the English language of 1500s. Individuals who were nervous or in a "troubled state of mind" were thought of as "looking blue." By the 1600s, this phrase was associated with "blue devils," simply referring "to evil spirits that brought depression or despair" to people. Barlow traces that the use of the term "blues" to describe African American musical stylings emerged in the "early 1800s, at which time it seems to have been used interchangeably with the phrase 'blue devils' to describe a mood of low spirits and emotional stress." African American blues songs generally spoke of negative "current social contexts" that they were forced to endure during and after the Reconstruction Era. These lyrics were accompanied by a simple guitar arrangement that lasted for eight, twelve, or sixteen bars until it repeated again. The music stylings utilized in blues "established the groundbeat and chord progression and also responded to each vocal line," prompting the lyrics and the music to work alongside one another to help drive the overall tone and message home. (Barlow, 1989, pp. 8-9)

The Blues genre became popular after the black composer W.C. Handy allowed a trio of local musicians to play a few numbers for a white audience requesting some down-home notes at a dance in Cleveland, Mississippi in 1903. At the time, Handy and his brass

band were only well-versed in Broadway tunes and Tin Pan Alley standards, so when the audience requested Blues music, they simply could not deliver. When the black trio took the stage, the white audience responded with tremendous positivity. "The audience showered coins on the stage. Handy was astounded. "There before the boys lay more money than my nine musicians were being paid for the entire engagement" (Miller, 2010, p. 76).

After that fateful night, W. C. Handy committed the rest of his life to learning the Blues, performing them, and publishing Blues standards. He "framed the music as a commercial genre, both in its local Southern habitat and in the Nation at large" (Miller, 2010, p. 254). Some of his most famous works include "Memphis Blues" (1912), "St. Louis Blues" (1914), "Yellow Dog Blues" (1914), "Jogo Blues" (1915), "Joe Turner Blues" (1916), and "Beale Street Blues" (1917). These songs sold successfully in the South, gaining notoriety throughout the United States. "Their subsequent popularity soon put the Blues in a new cultural context." Handy proved that the blues was a force to be reckoned with, as his records flew off shelves across the country. Not only did Handy establish himself as a writer of blues standards, but he also established "his reputation as an authority on the history and meaning of the genre" in his published articles during the early twentieth century (Miller, 2010, p. 148). For his contributions to the art, Handy is forever endowed with the prestigious, honorary title, "The Father of the Blues."

The new arrival of the Blues as a popular and sought after musical genre produced a revolution comparable to the advent of rock and roll, as it challenged various musical forms, as well as social and moral convictions at the time. The Blues affected the traditional square dance formats that were immensely popular before the guitar took the center stage, and African Americans living in the Mississippi Delta collectively agreed that it was time

to retire square dancing in order to make room for a newer shade. Miller said the Mississippi-born violinist Tom Dumas found this out the hard way, when he moved to the Delta only to discover that "African American residents complained that he played 'white folks' music.' He soon stopped playing altogether." (Miller, 2010, p. 77) It is interesting to notice that African American populations living in the Delta favored the guitar over the violin, as they associated the violin with a style of music that was not favored by this specific community.

However, the emergence of the blues as a desired genre was criticized as well. A Mississippi native named Luscious Smith dismissed the blues as a genre lacking in decent morals. He stated that:

“[T]he blues done ruined the country. It just make 'em go off like random, I'd say frolicking, random, you see. Now such as 'Walking in the Parlor' and all them older pieces, that's dancing on a set . . . calling figures, promenade, swing your right partner, all that, you know . . . But the 'Memphis Blues' and all that, it done brought about a whole lots of it, you know, I'd say trouble.” (Miller, 2010, p. 77)

The advent of the blues as a desired genre challenged the traditional conventions of preexisting musical genres. Smith "associated the new sound of the blues with the drinking, cacophony, and chaotic movements of young revelers" (Miller, 2010, p. 77).

Luscious was technically not wrong in describing the blues as a musical variety containing troubling content, as the lyrics were often suggestive or explicit. "Blues musicians and audiences collectively participated in a cultural ritual that was often cathartic," by the accounts of Barlow. Social events that showcased Blues music encouraged audience members to shout, stomp, clap their hands, and dance. This loose and rowdy atmosphere allowed participants to "release pent-up emotions and act out their feelings" in an act of rebellion (Barlow, 1989, pp. 4-5).

Lyrics that may have contained sexual phrases or slurs were first originally strictly reserved for black performances, as these could be potentially risky for African Americans to share with white spectators. With this being said, Miller stated that white audiences who sought this genre probably enjoyed listening, noting that, "Laughing at blues innuendo allowed them to collude vicariously with the black performer whose 'I' momentarily became the white audiences 'we'". But the white audience's thirst for the blues was not solely based on sexual desires. White listeners appreciated these "songs for their authenticity and sought them out in order to feel the thrill of peaking behind the veil of the color line, sharing in a critique of segregation" (Miller, 2010, p. 79).

White musicians were inspired by blues musicians; they intently "listened and learned from black musicians and then used the blues to express their own feelings of longing or loss, joy, or desire." The Meridian, Mississippi-born Jimmie Rodgers developed his distinct "blue yodel" style of singing by listening to "old-time blues recordings" and "through musical contact with his fellow black railroad workers." (Miller, 2010, p. 234)

After his death, Rodgers would be lauded as the "Father of Country Music," but his legacy was rooted within blues. Because of the runaway success with early recording stars like Jimmie Rodgers and W.C. Handy, the blues would soon find its way out of the Delta, enticing black and white audiences alike. In the 1920s, white audiences requested blues music from both black and white performers. Miller said, "when African American artists began making blues records in the 1920s, white southerners bought them in large numbers. Store ledgers from rural white neighborhoods reveal that blues records by the likes of Blind Lemon Jefferson sold just as well as those by white fiddlers and hillbilly singers." This era

of time marked a "new sound of black authenticity in the American music industry."  
(Miller, 2010, p. 147)

But the Blues was not just strictly a boy's club, as popular singers of the genre, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith (also known as the "Blues Queen") recorded, and performed at sold-out theaters and dance halls to both black and white audiences. Rainey was born in 1886, making her older than many of her other Blues contemporaries. In fact, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were some of the first individuals to incorporate distinct elements of the Blues into their music, while also composing "Blues years ahead of their male colleagues" (McGinley, 2014, p. 23). Another pioneering blues woman and veteran vaudeville performer from Ohio named Mamie Smith (unrelated to Bessie) is worth mentioning too, as she was responsible for cutting a standard entitled, "Crazy Blues" in 1920 with the first African American recording label, Okeh Records. Early record companies like Victor and Columbia did not take the African American market seriously, as they thought recording African Americans and their songs would not yield a substantial amount of revenue.

In 1918, a German man by the name of Otto Heinemann founded the record label Okeh in an effort to record African Americans and their music, which he was particularly fond. Kenney said his label "followed its founder's conviction that a vast and swiftly growing potential market for popular music records awaited development in America" (Kenney, 1999, pp. 114, 116). Okeh was bound to be different record company than most from its inception. The manner in which they produced their records allowed playback "with minor adjustments, on any brand of Phonograph," giving Okeh a slight technological advantage over its competitors (Kenney, 1999, p. 115). But Okeh also broke away from

other record companies, as Otto had the zeal to record and distribute entirely new recordings from African American musicians for listeners to enjoy. Together, Heinemann, Smith, and her early manager and close friend, Perry Bradford made recording history when Mamie sang "Crazy Blues." The trio also were responsible for employing a marketing method that other phonograph companies would attempt to replicate, as her hit song was labelled as the first "race record," meaning "discs by African American performers" (Miller, 2010, pp. 187, 190). This specific category of records grabbed the Southern market by storm simply due to Bradford's business pitch.

Bradford had been struggling to book Mamie Smith for recordings, as many record producers in that day did not imagine that the South (or the rest of country) desired this new music sung by an African American, especially when it was delivered by a woman. But Perry predicted a high sales rate when he negotiated Smith's recording contract with Okeh. Miller stated that he informed the label's musical director, a Mr. Fred Hager that, "There's fourteen million Negroes in our great country, and most lived in the South. The southern whites will buy them like nobody's business. They understand blues and jazz songs, for they've heard them blind-men on street-corners in the South playing guitars and singing 'em for a for nickels and dimes ever since their childhood days'." As Perry continued to explain the untapped market potential, Fred was sold, and history was in the making. Bradford recalled, "what really got the butter and sold Mr. Hager was the big surprise of learning about that big Southern market that no one up North had ever thought of" (Miller, 2010, p. 192).

Soon after, race records like "Crazy Blues" "grew into a significant segment of the market" as they contained "show tunes, urban religious services, and Smith's vaudeville-

inspired Blues to an assortment of sounds associated with the South: jubilee choirs, country blues, the occasional black string band, and many others" (Miller, 2010, p. 200). Smith's tune would sell over half a million records just a year after it was cut. More importantly, the new tune made the duo famous throughout the country. Even the executives at Okeh were pleasantly surprised to see their new recording artist had generated such an impressive amount of revenue. Hagar's assistant, Ralph Peer admitted:

"We didn't know it. We don't know where these records were going.' He only later discovered that African Americans quickly developed their own word-of-mouth campaigns and distribution networks. 'The porters on the Pullman trains would make a fortune just by carrying the records out.' Peer recalled. 'They'd pay a dollar a piece for them. Sell them for two dollars, because Negroes in the South had money.'" (Miller, 2010, p. 192).

With this being said, it was Peer who coined the term "race records" when he was helping with the "Crazy Blues" recording sessions. The title would remain "the designation for Black music, by black artists indented for a black audience until 1949 (Garofalo, 2006, p. 395).

With the runaway hit under Okeh's belt, other competitors attempted to release better arrangements of the sensational song. Miller said, "almost every recording company produced its own version of 'Crazy Blues' within months of the Okeh release. Labels like the previously mentioned Victor and Columbia scurried to add at least one African American singer to their rosters. Indeed, Mamie Smith was a force to be reckoned with, as she personally altered the racial barriers that once encroached and trapped previous African American composers and recorders. "Smith hadn't opened a door, she had knocked it down. Overnight, being black did not mean being barred from the record business. Black recording artists rushed to support the African American composers who had pioneered black participation in the national music industry and eased the way for race records"

(Miller, 2010, p. 193). Smith was now lauded as the "Empress of the Blues," after she charged through the racial divide that existed in the recording industry in the 1920s (Garofalo, 2006, p. 393). Even the black, Chicago-based publication *The Chicago Defender* praised Smith and her timely success. They described Mamie's "capable vocal recording notable because it cracked the industry color line, not because it necessarily signaled a significant shift in the sound or meaning of Blues recordings" (Miller, 2010, p. 192).

But it should be noted that there were indeed white, female Blues singers as well, like the vaudeville-trained actress and singer Marion Harris. Marion was a Kentucky native, but she packed her bags and headed up North to Chicago, where she dreamed of becoming an actress. Fate would find her moving again to New York, when she decided to try her hand at recording. Marion "began making phonographs for Victor in 1916." She sang some Southern standards like "There's a Lump of Sugar Down in Dixie" and "I Always Think I'm Up in Heaven (When I'm Down in Dixieland)." But she also "recorded a significant amount of Blues-related material. Some of her early songs represented black music as an emotional and physical release from the confines of white respectability." These blues songs included "Paradise Blues" and "When I Hear That Jazz Band Play." Harris even covered W.C. Handy's famous "St. Louis Blues" with Columbia Records. "Her recording reveals a relatively nuanced and controlled interpretation that displayed some familiarity with African American blues performances. She tended to push her relatively weak but clear voice to capacity, achieving a light growl when attacking notes and sliding smoothly between pitches." (Miller, 2010, pp. 152-153)

Marion credited her gutsy, soulful voice to her upbringing in the South, where she listened to African Americans sing and chant their Blues songs. In fact, she replicated the black singing voice so accurately that W.C. Handy himself said, "She sang the Blues so well that people sometimes thought that the singer was colored." Another noteworthy quote reminiscent of Harris' capacity to belt out the blues can be seen in the introduction to Handy's 1926 book, *Blues: An Anthology*, as the author Abbe Niles wrote in the introduction, "Marion Harris has the manner so at her command that thousands of Negroes make a point of buying her records, under the impression that she is one of them." (qtd. in Miller, 2010, p. 154)

Harris and other white women such as Gilda Grey deeply contributed to the transformation of the Blues genre on the national music scene as "they got the music of a new group of black composers onto phonograph records." This prompted African Americans to acquire these specific "...Blues records by white artists when they were the only ones available" (Miller, 2010, p. 154).

Essayist Hale writes in Brundage's (Ed.) 2011, *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* that by the late 1920s, Blues music served as "the most important music within the broad commercial category of 'race records,' which identified the race of the performer and not a clear musical style." From this time period onward, the blues "referred both to songs with a variety of structures that somehow conveyed a Blues tone or sensibility and to a specific song structure." Regardless of the style of Blues, it was ultimately up to the performer to properly convey the message that they desired to communicate (Hale, 2011, p. 247).

Another emerging genre that phonograph companies created for marketing music to the American public were recordings of "'old familiar tunes,' 'old-time,' or 'hillbilly' music" that "captured white fiddlers, guitarists, and banjo pickers" who had performed in medicine shows and towns around the South (Miller, 2010, p. 187). Crichton notes in a 2014 essay, "Thar's Gold in Them Hillbillies," that when the Okeh recording star Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" was overshadowed by the arrival of Bessie Smith with Columbia, "Okeh was under the necessity of digging up a new sensation." Ralph Peer and some assistants ventured to Atlanta to scout for talent. While they did not find any African American musicians that suited their needs, they did record a white violinist named Fiddler John Carson. Carson played with a traveling circus and he "had a repertory of hillbilly songs that never ended." Peer was not necessarily impressed with what he heard, but he and his team set up some recording equipment outside to capture Fiddler John sing and play after he struck a deal with a local record vendor that promised to sell the recordings. Carson performed two songs during this session: "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackles and The Roster's Goin' ta Crow." (Crichton, 2014, p. 27)

When they were finished, Peer and his associates returned back to Okeh in New York, initially sending the vender 1,000 copies of the record on a Thursday afternoon. Peer and Okeh did not expect the record to sell, so they did not even give it a proper serial number. But the record company received a call the same night from the vendor, requesting that they send more copies of the now sold-out hit. Okeh wasted no time sending more records, as they sent 5,000 records via express mail and 10,000 more by railroad. "When the national sale got to 500,000," Okeh decided to invite Fiddler John Carson up to New York to professionally re-record his songs. They then gave these new records a legitimate

serial number and they dubbed him "Fiddlin'" John Carson. Peer had coined the term "race records" when it came to African American releases, but he also named the category of early country music "hillbilly records," as he was a Kansas City native who was "well acquainted with the Ozarks" and their rural culture. Ralph was also responsible for starting Jimmie Rodgers' recording career when he found him playing in Bristol, Tennessee. Naturally, other record companies desired to enter this new market, as Victor signed an artist named Vernon Dalhart who would record "The Prisoner's Song," that sold an 2,500,000 copies, making it the most successful "hillbilly" record of its time. (Crichton, 2014, p. 27)

Miller notes that it would ultimately be the combination of this white, "old-time," "hillbilly" music and black Blues that would give birth to rock and roll. As one of Columbia's record scouts, Frank Walker, contended that "the color line was permeable" in the South and that "black and white musicians often influenced each other. 'They would pass each other every day. And a little of the spiritualistic singing of the colored people worked over into the white hillbilly and a little of the white hillbilly worked over into what the colored people did, so you got a little combination of the two things there.'" (Miller, 2010, p. 217).

During the 1920s, "...[r]ace and old records launched a new way of organizing American popular music, and by extension, the American public. By the end of the decade, legions of black and white southern artists had recorded commercial discs" (Miller, 2010, p. 188). While the phonograph business emerged into a viable commercial industry, the audio playback quality was poor, and live music was certainly a rarity that was still highly sought after. The development of the Chitlin' Circuit as a legitimate tour route for aspiring

entertainers allowed audiences that were seeking music played live to attend concerts with lively shows and entertainers.

### **Chapter 3: The Birth of the Circuit**

The Chitlin' Circuit and its rich heritage would indeed not exist today if it was not for the two notable men responsible for its inception: Denver Ferguson and his younger brother, Sea. The two brothers were born at the turn of the twentieth century in Brownsville, Kentucky, a small, country town located on the Green River of Edmonson County. As its name suggests, Brownsville was a majority black community. Residents in this rural Kentucky town mainly labored in the tobacco fields for little to no money, as sharecropping served as a popular alternative method to paying the African-American workers for their demanding tasks. But most importantly, Brownsville was where the brothers Ferguson learned from their father just how difficult and intolerant the world can be towards African Americans, as the margins for a successful and profitable life in the impoverished community were slim. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 17)

In his late teenage years, Denver had a linotype machine that allowed him to print "a weekly broadside called the Edmonson County Star," which served as the only news distribution channel in his community. When the First World War broke out, Denver saw this as a golden opportunity to leave his home, so he enlisted in the military. After the war, "Denver joined the hundreds of thousands of African-Americans who left the south." He migrated north to the city of Indianapolis "with enough money to open the Ferguson Printing Company." As a strapping young man, Denver Ferguson probably never expected his life to travel in the direction that it would. However, when opportunity knocks, one should always be willing to stick their neck out for success, and this is precisely what Denver Darius Ferguson did. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 18)

Lauterbach noted that the first businessmen to work alongside Denver "ran a street lottery in New York known as the numbers game." These racketeering games were usually run underground, as anti-gambling laws that were passed in the early years of the nineteenth century cracked down on these betting practices. Denver knew that a black man's options for success in a racially segregated world were minimal, but this new and exciting business prospect provided him with a way out. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 21-22).

As time went on, Mr. Ferguson decided to invent his own numbers game, cleverly disguised as baseball scorecards and tickets. He knew that local authorities were closely monitoring his community; however, if they stopped a gentleman with a chunk of change in his pockets only to find a baseball ticket and a scorecard, they would not have enough evidence to lock him up, or worse. "Numbers runners spread out to collect tickets and bets and to distribute winnings, while hangouts like billiard halls and the ubiquitous barber and beauty shops housed policy stations for walk-up business and the latest results. Participation among the poor citizenry was nearly universal." With over two hundred employees on the payroll, Denver ran a pretty impressive numbers racket "in an area no larger than twenty city blocks." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 23-24)

But success breeds competition in a healthy, capitalist marketplace, and 1923 two Jewish-Russian immigrants named Joe and Isaac Mitchell opened a dive bar directly across from Denver's printing company. This would lead to a life-long rivalry between the two racketeering parties. The two organizations would feud with one another from time to time, but what the Ferguson brothers did not know is that it would ultimately be Jewish record producers (Leonard and Marshall Chess, to be exact) who would go on to produce

and promote the same African-American Blues artists that grew notable and famous touring on Denver's Chitlin' Circuit. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 25)

Two years later, Denver's financial success with his numbers running business outgrew his capacities, so he recruited his younger brother to run the legitimate side of his business. Lauterbach noted that Denver veered away from the limelight, but Sea "cultivated a reputation for generosity and good cheer among the Avenue citizenry. Sea opened a real estate brokerage, and he and Denver became community developers." Together they "extended loans and credit for their constituents to rent or buy property and launch legitimate concerns. They gave generously to charitable causes, functioning as a de facto community foundation." The brothers' philanthropic endeavors eased the crushing financial burdens that plagued many African-Americans who inhabited Indianapolis Avenue. Denver and Sea "were applauded as race men, whose wealth, power, and openhandedness lifted all Negroes." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 26-27)

In 1931, the Fergusons acquired enough wealth from their lottery game to purchase the old headquarters of a former social club that no longer existed. The brothers renamed it the Ferguson Building, and at three stories tall, it stood "at the corner of Senate and Vermont, diagonal Indiana Avenue shot right past it, and therefore it was considered of the Avenue." Sea capitalized on his newly acquired space, housing his brokerage business on the bottom floor. Combining legitimate business earnings with revenue from the lottery game, the men were able to either buy out or create more conglomerates on the strip. "Already awake with music, laughter, fights, the Avenue got dressed up as the Fergusons transformed black Indianapolis into Bronzeville." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 37) The

new community that Denver and Sea cultivated with their businesses and charitable donations improved the African American resident's quality of life.

However, the Avenue still lacked a certain something. In his work Lauterbach wrote that Denver received "many requests for a clean, decent, respectable place to spend leisure time." So, he pulled his resources together with Sea to open the Cotton Club, a "...round-the-clock joy spot" that occupied most of the lower level of the Ferguson Building. The club boasted a "courteous and immaculately uniformed staff, professional entertainment, and tasty cuisine," ultimately setting the tone for other future nightspots to come. Little did they know that it would be this black dance business that would lead them to solidify the formation of the Chitlin' Circuit (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 37-38).

In the opening of *The Chitlin Circuit and the Road to Rock'n'Roll*, author Preston Lauterbach recalls the occasion in which he paid a visit to an older gentleman by the name of Sax Kari at his trailer located in Seffner, Florida, back in 2004. Lauterbach was informed by a colleague, Jim O'Neal (co-founder of the publication *Living Blues*) that Mr. Kari worked with Denver Ferguson back in the Circuit's heyday, and he decided to use an interview with him as the catalyst for his research. During Preston's visit, Sax informed him of his experiences with the father of the Chitlin' Circuit:

"I met Denver D. Ferguson out of Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1941. I had run away from home, and I got a gig working there for a funeral parlor. There was an affair at this big nightclub, dance hall, the Sunset Terrace. Taylor Seaths--he ran the Sunset Terrace for Denver--told me that Ferguson also had a booking agency. The Lady who ran the [agency] office was Twyla Mayfield. Aside from all of [Ferguson's] gabbing, she was the one who handled all the booking. She introduced me to the old man." (p. 9)

Denver was a tough man who made deals on his own with promoters as he made his way from town to town. After contacting these promoters, he would encourage them to

reach out to others, cleverly labeling these individuals as "shadow promoters." They would take up money at the door. Every band that came in had a road manager who worked for Ferguson and sat by the promoter at the door and counted the money. Sax Kari continued to discuss his experiences with Mr. Ferguson, as he stated:

“In the '40s, there were about twenty-two black promoters on Denver Ferguson's list. The top man was Tom Wince, who was in Vicksburg Mississippi. The next top man, Ralph Weinberg, was in Bluefield, West Virginia. Don Robey was in Houston. Howard Lewis in Dallas. Before you go out onto the road, your whole tour was booked. Black promoters only worked with black acts, and Ferguson was the only black booking agent at the time.” (pp. 9-10)

These early promoters did not necessarily work together, but they all worked hard to get their fair shares of the profit as Kari said, "The promoters respected one another's territory. Tom Wince would do about twenty to twenty-five dates a year. Weinberg would do about twenty, and Lewis would do whatever he could get'." Indeed, some gentlemen were more fortunate with their promotional business endeavors, but it was a tough business to get into.

Sax continued to say that "this became--for the people that worked for him (Denver)--the Chitlin' Circuit." Over time, Denver was fortunate enough to build up the Chitlin' Circuit by establishing life-long contacts with these black promoters (especially Don Robey), and together they changed the face of popular music. However, the Chitlin' Circuit did not simply guarantee success to any aspiring artist. As the circuit itself was centered around the Southern region of the United States, the popular hotspots for bands and artists to perform at were dive-bars, roadhouses, and juke joints located in the poorer, segregated African American side of town. In his description of the early years of the Circuit, Kari told Preston:

“Back when you had big bands, anywhere from ten-to twenty-piece bands that had to squeeze themselves into a corner if there was no bandstand. There were no inside toilets at many of the places; you had to use toilets. Now, when you got to a place that had running water inside, why you were fortunate. They sold ice water. They didn't have air conditioners; they had these big garage fans: two on the bandstand and one back at the door. These were wooden buildings outside of town; there were very few concrete buildings or places in town. It was seldom you'd find anyplace for blacks that would hold more than six hundred. The people'd be damn near on top of you.” (p. 10)

The mere fact that big bands playing in these cramped environments managed to fit all of their players on stage should stand as a testimony to these hard-working musicians. Not only did these bands sacrifice much-desired elbow room, as they stayed squeezed and crammed together to play for about two and a half hours, take a thirty-minute break, and then play again for another hour and a half.

But keep in mind, these band functions served as necessary forms of entertainment. "In the south, there was nothing but farming, tobacco fields, rice fields, sugar cane, cotton fields. [African Americans] worked all week, and Saturday night was their night to howl, get drunk, and fornicate. They just wanted to know when the next dance was gonna be'." Kari concluded his interview with Lauterbach stating that Denver was like a father to him:

“He taught me everything I know today, and kept me from getting screwed in so many ways, I worked in the office, out of the office, anything he wanted to be done, 'Sax do it.' He was grooming me to take his place, but I never wanted an office job. I doubled as a bandleader, road manager, whatever it took to make money out of the agency. Denver never kept any records. The first thing he taught me was, 'Don't ever write anything down. Avoid big municipal auditoriums--that's where the IRS man is going to be there with you on the door counting tickets. Go to nondescript places.” (p. 11)

While Denver's business methods were shady, to say the least, he was a small fish in a big pond looking to establish a reputation for himself and those entertainers that he represented. One of the first artists to work with Ferguson on the Circuit was Walter

Barnes. Denver had "answered a Chicago Defender columnist's summons to promoters and clubs interested in first-class dance attractions, and showcased Walter Barnes and his Royal Creolians" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 38).

Lauterbach said that Walter Barnes was "born on July 8, 1905, in Vicksburg, Mississippi, one of fifteen children. He grew up and got music in Mississippi, then landed in Chicago in 1924." Like Denver Ferguson, Walter Barnes was a shorter African-American man that only took directions from himself. His vertical challenges would act in his favor, eventually gaining him the nickname "midget maestro." Barnes also wrote weekly in the Chicago Defender, discussing orchestras and their leaders, occasionally taking time to stroke his ego. By 1927, Barnes assembled his swing band, The Royal Creolians, a "fourteen-piece orchestra" that would play live shows for white audiences (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 31-32).

A year later, Barnes and his Royal Creolians would record for Brunswick Records, allowing his name and his band to reach new heights in the big city of Chicago. A local gangster by the name of Al Capone caught wind of Walter Barnes' sound, and he invited him to be the band leader for his local venue, the Cotton Club. Lauterbach writes of this uncanny pair:

"Capone was truthfully a regular guy, though, Barnes said. Capone called Barnes 'Brother,' the maestro's family nickname, and flexed his ballyhooed reputation to Barnes's advantage once, with important consequences. The midget maestro went to a radio station to see about arranging a live broadcast from the Cotton Club. The station manager dismissed Barnes summarily: 'We don't air colored.' Back at the club, Capone asked, 'What'd they tell you brother?' Barnes explained, and Capone went with him to follow up. 'But we don't air colored,' the station manager repeated. 'You do now,' Capone said." (p. 32)

While many would consider the Chicago Kingpin gangster Al Capone to be a dastardly criminal, he kindly contributed to Walter Barnes's development as a groundbreaking musical force. In a way, one could ultimately consider Capone a founder of the Chitlin' Circuit, as he enabled Walter and his band to perform live over the air in Chicago. However, as the Great Depression reared its ugly head, many of these prominent band performers that had gained solid ground found themselves seeking new opportunities for employment elsewhere. By 1930, they were no longer able to support themselves by performing in large club venues. Walter's gangster friend was unable to assist him, as he was preoccupied with legal matters and jail sentencing.

Lauterbach stated that "Brother Barnes, till then a strictly local, exclusively for-white band leader accustomed to extended residencies, needed to get creative. While Capone went to trial to face federal contempt-of-court charges in February 1931, Walter Barnes and his Royal Creolians left Chicago on tour." His personal relationship with Capone would come to a screeching halt after Capone "plead guilty to charges of tax evasion and Prohibition violations," casting him away to a federal prison in the same year. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 35)

Barnes knew that the times were changing. He continued to write in the Chicago Defender, stating that big bands now found themselves traveling on the road. Lauterbach recalls that, "in one published article, [Barnes] wrote that 'There's more money on the road and in barnstorming, even in one-night jumps...'" Barnes was fortunate enough to sign a management contract with "the white-run Chicago talent agency Music Corporation of America (MCA), which had booked jazz combos throughout Capone's speakeasies before assuming a more prominent status in the jazz business." With this new exclusive contract,

Walter was now touring during the fall and summer months, gigging in Northwestern states like Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. Barnes's tour also marked one of the first times that African-American performers played for white audiences. But like Al Capone, Walter Barnes would fall on hard times. In 1932, the MCA nixed the deal that they had signed with Barnes and his band. "Without heavy agency booking or his white underworldly consorts, ofay dances were over. He still had the Defender on his side, though, and with its readership, his reach could extend across black America." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 35-36)

He reached out to his readers, merely saying that he "would like to communicate with all promoters and clubs who are interested in first-class dance attractions" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 36). Upon seeing his advertisement, Denver Ferguson cordially invited Barnes and his Royal Creolians to perform at his club in the Ferguson building, the Trianon, on March 29, 1932 (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 38). After his Indianapolis show, he migrated back to the South, as the Great Depression continued to strain the United States. Black musicians and performers stayed in the South, only touring "...as far as their reputations and broadcasts carried" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 40).

Lauterbach notes that musical acts traveled leaner due to the Depression, writing that, "Their size and flexibility allowed them to move on fast from a dead town. Around these acts grew the basic infrastructure of the Southern black dance business: dusty dance halls, hustling dance promoters, and hucksterish advance men, who went around drumming up gigs and publicity" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 40).

Many of these new era acts reached out to Barnes in the Chicago Defender, informing him and his readers when and where they would be playing in the South. "Barnes

rapidly became the central dirt dispatcher for traveling black jazz bands. Though Barnes didn't mind helping, he sensed possibilities for himself in the territory-band movement. If they could pull the audiences down South, why couldn't he outperform them?" Using a business tactic that his old buddy Al would have approved of, he only agreed to write and publish black southern touring acts' information "in exchange for road intelligence: dance hall locations, promoter contracts, colored friendly lodgings and eateries." With this new information in stow, Barnes was able to better promote his "band into the territory-band network and focused these previously separate entities into a more cohesive whole." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 40-41)

In his published articles, Barnes negotiated favors with businesses and individuals with funding who could potentially assist him. After all of this, Walter was still not satisfied with his publicity campaign, so he cast aside his other black contemporaries (such as Duke Ellington) to label himself as "the brightest star in the South" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 41). With this being said, however, both Duke Ellington and Walter Barnes served as important and crucial figures during the jazz age. Preston wrote that he:

“[I]ncorporated the Walter Barnes Co. Music Corp. in the spring of 1932-- Duke Ellington's career belonged to the most powerful forces in the entertainment business, the big money bloc of talent management firms-- including Barnes's former rep, MCA--the musician's union, and the mob, known as 'the syndicate.' Out of necessity, Barnes worked a lower stratum of the black swing world. While he performed at the Barn on Beale Street in Memphis, Ellington delighted the London Palladium and sipped gimlets with the Prince of Wales.” (p. 42)

One could argue that Walter would have switched places with the Duke in a heartbeat, however without his contributions to the original Chitlin' Circuit, the blues (and eventually rock and roll) may have sounded a lot different.

The next few years touring on the road would be anything but easy for Barnes and his band. They traveled from town to town crammed into his Cadillac, catching up on much-needed sleep as Walter drove them through the wee hours of the night. While coming home from a gig in Ohio late one evening, Walter fell asleep at the wheel. He, along with six other musicians, awoke to the Cadillac upside down. Luckily, no one was seriously harmed. Barnes knew that, in order to generate feasible income, they would have to keep traveling, so sleep was not an option while out on the road. Black entertainers like Walter and his group bravely confronted financial disadvantages. "Well known popular bands have been receiving guarantees from \$350 and up, and get one-third or one-half up front," Barnes recalls in an interview with Lauterbach. But a key distinction to note is that these comparatively popular acts were managed and backed by white agencies. Lauterbach explains that "Bands that lacked organizational muscle, such as the Royal Creolians, were typically asked to work for the first money in the door, leaving them broke and hungry in the event of a poor turnout. But Barnes's crew earned well enough to keep the caravan rolling through Bristol, Knoxville, Atlanta, Vicksburg, and Memphis." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 43)

Being the smart businessman that he was, Walter realized that he had gained a solid and devoted following in the South Lauterbach said he "established winter headquarters in Jacksonville, Florida, from where he could conduct his now annual late-fall-to-spring Southern tours." Barnes toured the region extensively, meeting lifelong friends and avid supporters of his music, creating the contacts and routes that would soon become the Chitlin' Circuit. "In Barnes's own words, dirt-road hustlers became financiers or capitalists, and their burlap-curtain, sawdust-floor joints were ballrooms. Big-city folks

might have disparaged Barnes's tour route as the Chitlin' Circuit, but you'd never hear such terminology from him." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 48-49)

He even stayed "committed to modernity," updating and upgrading his band members and their respective instruments. Swing jazz had overturned Dixieland as the preferred musical style during the 1930s, so Barnes replaced the banjo with upright bass, added a guitarist, and beefed up the rhythm section with a few more trumpet, trombone, and saxophone players. What was once Walter's Royal Creolians now evolved into the Kings of Swing. This update, of course, added more band members to his ever-traveling group, but "the Barnes caravan grossed thousands of dollars--at eighteen dollars a show for five-to-seven nights a week, the musicians earned well above the union-mandated sixty dollars a week." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 49)

The year 1936 would prove to be a successful year for Barnes and his new Kings of Swing. "Barnes had patched and webbed his network of territory-band promoters and dance halls across the entire South." He continued to write and advertise himself in the Defender, informing his readers where he and his band would be touring throughout the coming months. They traveled through various big and small cities in Southern states such as Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi. In the state of Mississippi, Walter made appearances in towns like Greenville, Yazoo City, McComb, Vicksburg (his hometown), the capital city, Jackson, and Hattiesburg. He and his orchestra stayed on the road for three months, charging fifty cents for nightly admission to their shows. After these shows were concluded, they would migrate back home for a three-month recuperation period before packing up and hitting the road again. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 50)

Life on the road was far from glamorous. As Walter and his band were African-American men in the South during a time of extreme racial prejudice, they could not afford to create controversy. Lauterbach wrote, "Barnes was no activist anyway. He preferred to change the reality of black Southerners in a fantastic if fleeting way in print and on stage." Walter began to notice that many cities and towns that held a "sizeable black population grew a darktown," referring to any portion of a city that was predominantly African American. Walter cleverly nicknamed the main street in these little sections "the stroll." These streets and avenues showcased black businesses and performance attractions that proudly showcased artists like Barnes and others who arrived in town. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 51-52)

During his 1936 and 1937 tours with his Kings of Swing, Barnes "dashed off dispatches from every stroll he hit, leaving behind a neon and mud portrait of black Main Street in the South--the unfolding filaments of the Chitlin' Circuit." While others who were not African-American may have considered these "strolls" as lower-income, undesirable areas, they truly were a site of the American dream. One example of a "stroll" could be found in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in an area known by the locals as "Greenwood." This territory boasted hardworking musicians, dance promoters, and dance venues, but it also was the home of "dentists, barbers, pharmacies, cafés, cab companies, and lodgings, always stressing the up-to-date." Performers were treated kindly when they required lodging. They stayed in rooms that boasted modern amenities like hot water and indoor plumbing, which were certainly appreciated by those weary travelers who played hard throughout the night (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 51-52)

Lauterbach wrote that Walter found himself touring Mississippi in 1936, "with shows in a different town every night. First to Greenville, then on to 'Vicksburg, birthplace and stomping ground of yours truly,' Barnes wrote." In Vicksburg, he received endless praise from loyal fans and neighbors, as "members of the Cavalier Club sponsored the Barnes dance at the black-run Continental Ballroom there, corner of Washington at Jackson Street." His uncle Alan was a dance promoter in Vicksburg, and this ultimately allowed Barnes to easily book gigs throughout the state, performing in Jackson, McComb, Pascagoula, and Hattiesburg. Walter gained fame throughout the state of Mississippi as a top-tier performer, and he inspired countless other musicians who longed to play in front of an admiring crowd. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 53-54)

Meanwhile, Denver Ferguson opened another nightspot called the Sunset Terrace in Indianapolis in 1938. This nightclub was considered by Bronzeville journalists and fans alike to be "the swankiest nitery to hit the Avenue." The same year, "black newspapers across the country hosted mayor-of-Bronzeville races to bestow honorary titles on their most popular citizens." While black "attorneys, doctors, and church elders" received honor and recognition, Sea Ferguson was also revered at the ceremony, as he "had money, connections to elite black culture--and judging by the 'real' mayor's presence at his inaugural ball--downtown's attention." Sea was a more public business figure than his older brother. Denver was a present and powerful force in their Indianapolis Bronzeville, however, as he was a timid and shy individual, he allowed Sea to serve as the public face of their shared last name. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 60, 63-64)

Needless to say, the Fergusons continued to be successful in their individual and combined business ventures. The brothers knew that Barnes was a highly sought after

entertainer, and the two were able to coerce the "Midget Maestro" to drop by Denver's new club for a visit. "'Yours truly,' Walter Barnes wrote in the fall of 1939, 'stopped over in Indianapolis and found this town to be really jumping. Impressed with the strip's transformation since his gig at the Ferguson Building in 1932, Barnes and company made the stroll.'" Both Barnes and Denver realized that in order to achieve success, one must keep up with the change in demand. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 65-66)

The same year, Walter and his band were invited to play a "Baby Doll Dance" that was at the Rhythm Club located in Natchez, Mississippi. The Rhythm Club was like many other venues that Barnes had played down South, having a "wooden building frame" that had "sheets of tin nailed to either side" of the wood. Clubs and venues like these were also frequently heated by potbelly stoves, causing the room to heat up quickly due to the open flames. The venue was decorated for the occasion by adorning "dried Spanish moss through the Rhythm Club's rafters." The moss flowed down the wooden support beams, and it was "spritzed with a little kerosene to protect dancers from a less romantic feature of the bayou night: mosquitoes." The attendees "would enter the Rhythm Club and escape to a magical place, as if the white-tuxedoed maestro and his boys in their black bow ties were serenading them, backlit by the moon, on the edge of Pearl Bayou" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 67-68).

In order to better protect the privacy of the event, Lauterbach stated that promoters "boarded the club's windows and barricaded every door save for the front entrance on St. Catherine Street." It would be perfectly logical to obstruct the view of a performer from a window in the venue, as promoters did not want pedestrians passing by to get a free show. Promoters also purposefully limited access to the building so that patrons

could not attempt to sneak unpaying customers into the show. This technique was labeled by performing musicians as the "'toilet' setup," simply meaning "one way in, one way out." Little did everyone know that this "toilet setup," combined with the potbellied stove and the moss-coated kerosene, would ultimately lead to the untimely demise of Walter Barnes, his Kings of Swing, along with countless other patrons at the dance. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 67)

At around 11:30 in the evening, "Barnes called 'Clarinet Lullaby'," when one of the bartenders "heard scuffling near the lone door as the tune began, but thought nothing amiss; he had wondered what took the obligatory fight so long to break out." Scuffles at dances like this were extremely common, as partygoers would consume copious amounts of cheap beer or hard liquor and bumping into someone else, causing accusations and punches to fly. In the middle of "Clarinet Lullaby," the drummer "broke rhythm and tailed off. Barnes, incensed, glared at his band and saw their eyes widen. They lowered the horns from their lips as Barnes turned around and watched fire dance up the wall around the door." However, Barnes was not too worried, he "had played a thousand woodsheds and seen plenty of flames, spilling from kicked-over potbelly stoves or flashing from a tossed match. Fire was a constant worry to people who lived in tinderboxes with open heat, and they learned quickly and coolly, to snuff it or step it out." People at rowdy functions like this were so accustomed to stomping out flames, that accomplished and seasoned dancers on the floor could "douse flames with their setups without missing the beat" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 68).

But as this certain "Baby Doll Dance" had kerosene soaked Spanish moss, the flames spread more rapidly and violently, setting the entire wooden building ablaze.

Unfortunately, Walter knew that "he and the band were last in line to reach the door and had no choice." Barnes knew how to "play through chaos" from his previous stints "at Capone's Cotton Club--music soothed the savage beast. His breath quickened. He faced his band and directed them to start 'Marie,' a lilting Irving Berlin tune." Amidst the flames and screams, Barnes and his Kings of Swing played their last swan song. The drummer, still desiring to live and perform another day, "stood from behind his kit, picked his hammer up, walked toward a boarded window and smashed his way out. The other musicians played as flames scampered across the ceiling, tickling up the volume of the crowd's scream." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 68-69)

Patrons pushed, shoved, and trampled each other to get to the front of the Rhythm Club, where the only real exit was. Some folks near the back of the club took cues from the drummer and tore down the wooden barricades. Lauterbach wrote, "A brawny man elbow-punched through a boarded window and hurled his date through the shards onto St. Catherine Street." One woman even "tore off her clothing and hid in a refrigerator," in a desperate attempt to escape the smoke and rapidly spreading fire. Across the street, there stood a Catholic church, where an "assistant pastor, awoke to cries but rolled over and tried to back to sleep." He would later say that "negro women having a good time in the club frequently screamed like that." Walter and his well-seasoned band kept trudging through the increasingly hazy and oxygen-deprived building, fully aware that they would not make it out in time. Barnes and most of his band accepted their fate, quite literally going out in a blaze of glory. "With the final breath of his life, trumpeter Paul Scott blasted a note, just as the inferno gulped the remaining oxygen, collapsing the tin roof and walls, crushing every still-heaving lung. The building's support beams snapped, and the flaming ceiling slumped

over the stage, like a fiery curtain descending on Walter Barnes and his Kings of Swing." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 69)

Walter's brother and tour bus driver, Alan, saw the entire horrid event unfold from across the street:

“Firefighters and police smashed into the smoldering remains of the Rhythm Club and found young bodies 'stacked like cord wood' against the walls where death captured them- young ladies in clad in bobby socks, pedal pushers, baby doll dresses, pastel skirts, and pink scarves; men in boleros red bowties, and white bucks. As the police and coroners counted the bodies, Alan identified the man in white tails. Someone had already plucked the maestro's gold watch and about five hundred dollars, the night's gate, from the body. Walter Barnes was thirty-four.” (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 70).

Alan would find himself driving his brother's vacant tour bus to Chicago, while his band members' caskets traveled in every direction by train. At Walter's funeral in Chicago on April 30, Lauterbach stated that "Reverend Junious Austin compared Barnes's band to the heroic musicians who went down with the Titanic, still playing." The Chicago Defender memorialized their fallen columnist and musician writing that he was, "one of the first top-notch band leaders to exploit the Deep South. Coming from a section of the country (Vicksburg, Mississippi) where few of the big bands of the northern cities appeared, he struck upon the idea of making an annual tour of the South. Jacksonville, Florida, was his winter headquarters, and working out from where he covered every city and town of any size in the South. He soon became the idol of this section" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 70-71).

While Walter Barnes may have passed on way before his time, he and his touring bands inspired numerous acts to get out and hit the Chitlin' Circuit. He also made history with Al Capone, as he was the first black man to be broadcast live in Chicago, thus opening even more doors of boundless opportunities for aspiring African-American acts. His relationship with Denver and Sea Ferguson, along with the Chicago Defender, made him a

powerful Bronzeville idol that ultimately allowed him to become a force within the ever-changing musical entertainment industry during the 20s and 30s. Within weeks after his death, tribute songs poured out from artists that either knew Barnes or were inspired by him. He would even make a comeback in "in the 1950s and 60s," when "...Blues greats Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker waxed their accounts of the event. The fire has endured as the greatest catastrophe theme in the Blues." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 72)

In 1940, another heavy blow would hit the black entertainment business and the Chitlin' Circuit, when a young man named Robert Chambers was murdered at the Indianapolis nightspot, the Mitchellyne. This particular club was owned by Joe and Tuffy Mitchell, the previously mentioned competitors of the Ferguson brothers. Chambers was gambling with one of his friends on the second-floor, winning a large amount of money on the craps tables. When a friend of Chambers "accused the house banker of shorting his winnings," a fatal fight ensued. Some eyewitnesses say that Robert drew a switchblade on the banker, but some disagree with this testimony. Whether it truly happened or not, the twenty-five-year-old was shot by the club bouncer, a man by the name of Justus McReynolds. Lauterbach wrote that neither Tuffy nor Joe Mitchell could be located at the scene, and when the police arrived, "they arrested Justus McReynolds and charged him with murder. They arrested Joe Mitchell and charged him with vagrancy. Meanwhile, detectives interrogated their briber Tuffy Mitchell and his secretary Henry Vance, both of whom had been in the Mitchellyne's ground-floor cabaret and missed all the fun." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 75.

In those days, it was not uncommon for Avenue authorities to be "bribed to their badges." However, after this July incident, respectable Indianapolis citizens and politicians

became more aware of the seedy underworld that was the Avenue. Lauterbach stated that the local paper wrote, "...[N]ever in the long and varied history of Indiana Avenue has there been such contempt for human life and safety...Since there are undoubtedly more joints, taverns, and smokers in colored sections than in any previous period, the matter of sufficient policing becomes of paramount importance, for person gambling and drinking under the same roof invariably are encouraged to violence'." In response to the public outcry, "Mayor Reginald Sullivan, a sixty-four-year-old Episcopalian Democrat, promised a stronger police presence in Bronzeville, including an influx of new (unbought) officers to the area." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 75-76)

While political campaigns always promised to clean up the streets like Indiana Avenue, the murder sparked a new era of racially-biased legislation known as Jim Crow laws. The Fergusons had their liquor licenses revoked from both of their nightclub businesses, The Cotton Club and the Sunset Terrace. Harry "Goosie" Lee, another African American who owned and operated a nightspot called the Oriental Cafe on the Avenue, also experienced troubles with the Alcoholic Beverage Commission. Lauterbach notes that only the "three black-owned nightclubs" on the Avenue had their liquor licenses seized, forcing Denver to alter his business practices. "With fierce competition gnashing at the local racketeering business, and white authorities' sudden interest in black nightclubs," Lauterbach writes, "the Indiana Avenue capitalist assembled his most ambitious and far-flung venture yet" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 76).

In 1941, Denver and Sea filed with the Indiana state secretary's office to officially create the Ferguson Brothers Agency, Inc. This new agency's listed purpose was "to engage in the business of booking agent, promoter, sponsor and artists' representative for bands.

orchestras, shows, revues, sporting, theatrical, and athletic acts, concerts, games, contests, dances, shows and all other kinds of amusement enterprises." They placed their office headquarters conveniently across from Denver's print shop so that they could easily collaborate together. The same year, Lauterbach wrote that Denver also entered business with Chicago's Bluebird Records stating that, "By now all the syndicate agencies had mutually exploitative record-company affiliations--bookers needed records to promote their bands, and record companies needed personal appearance tours to promote records" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 79).

However, Lauterbach said Bluebird Records produced genres of music like "hard Blues," which certainly did not appeal to white audiences. Denver knew that "popular Blues artists who sold a lot of records still could not snag big agency contracts. As the owner of a nightclub that syndicate bands played, he understood the syndicate-record company synergy. He proposed a similar scheme, pushing Bluebird's nationally known blues artists through Deep South blues country." About a half a year before Denver and Sea opened their booking agency, Denver had booked a band lead by a man named Jay McShann, who played blues music at his club. In having McShann's contact information, Denver was able to reach out to other touring syndicate bands to represent.

He divided his prospects into three categories, the first being "low-priority syndicate bands that believed themselves worthy of greater attention," acts like Tiny Bradshaw and Claude Trenier and the Bama State Collegians. Other groups, like the Carolina Cotton Pickers, King Kolax, Snookum Russell, Milton Larkin, Clarence Love, Gene Pope, and the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, "were territory bands of renown that Denver promised wider geographic exposure." Finally, the last group consisted of

"nationally known recording artists that who'd found hard blues acts were unwelcome within the syndicate's respectable circles." Performers under this category were "Doctor Clayton and the combo of Roosevelt Sykes and St. Louis Jimmy." Together, these groups and artists would forever change the face of musical history by touring on the Chitlin' Circuit. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 80)

King Kolax had a drummer named Earl Palmer "who would contribute rock 'n' roll's distinctive backbeat rhythm." John Coltrane also performed with King Kolax "during its time with Ferguson Bros. Annie Laurie, a big league beauty and Paul Gayten's duet partner on a few New Orleans rhythm and blues in the late 1940s, got her start beside Snookum on the Chitlin' Circuit." While not as famous as the others on this list, Lauterbach included the International Sweethearts of Rhythm that were founded in the "late 1930s as a moneymaker for the all-black Piney Woods Country Life School near Jackson, Mississippi. Piney woods founder Laurence Jones assembled the group and bestowed the 'international' tag to emphasize the Chinese sax player, Hawaiian Trumpeter, and Mexican clarinetist in addition to the fourteen African-American girls in the group." This particular group joined the Ferguson Brothers as one of their "first major acts." While this group did not stand the test of time, they inspired a young Southern boy by the name of Ike Turner when he saw them play live. "It was like 20 of them! But they could play, and they were doing big stuff like Count Bassie and Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, they were doing that kind of stuff. Yeah, they could play, it's a black college down there in Piney Wood, Mississippi, and we used to go hear them play man, and they was b-a-d man." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 81-82)

The brother's booking agency also booked a few "middle-shelf swing bands," like Roosevelt "The Honeydripper" Sykes. He and his fifteen-piece orchestra played under the Ferguson Bros. contract, meaning they played "a pair of two-hour sets" that ultimately forced them to learn "old standards" to accompany their more bluesy style. Another notable swing performer, Doctor Clayton was already a "Bluebird recording star." He "wore his hat a size small, a shrunken suit, and lenseless white glasses, looking as though he'd been kicked off a minstrel show in 1919." One could consider him the first "shock value" artist, as he performed a 1942 concert in Houston "too trashed to sing." Lauterbach wrote that the drunken singer made his way to the stage:

“...[W]ith his hair standing on his head and suit wrinkled as if he had been sleeping in it for a week,' the Houston Informer reported. 'Then when instead of singing, he began to holler and clown, the patrons wouldn't stand anymore. Bottles, paper cups, and everything else were hurled at him. Words of indignation were shouted to such an extent that the massive City Auditorium became a turmoil of confusion. Policemen were forced to rush him off stage to prevent his seriously being injured.' His orchestra stepped from the stage onto their bus with the drunken Doc, and left.” (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 84-85).

By 1942, Denver Ferguson had assembled a booking agency that had fruitful contacts, along with an exclusive record deal with Bluebird to record these artists. However, he still needed to market the groups that were not famous. For this issue, he turned to a colleague named J. St. Clair Gibson. "Known on the Avenue as 'The Saint,' Gibson cranked the Ferguson publicity machine from his office at the Indianapolis Recorder." But the artist and repertoire work that Gibson did for the Ferguson Brother's Agency, Inc. was not honest for the most part, as he "concocted stories about Ferguson clients and placed them on the Associated Negro Press wire, a news service for the country's black papers." In doing this, "The Saint" was able to promote to black audiences

across America in papers like the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburg Courier. "Gibson urged dance promoters to contact him about 'the best bands in the country'." To entice readers even further, he often published "...news briefs to convey the life of a Chitlin' Circuit star. It was Walter Barnes publicity program, magnified." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 85-86)

Denver knew that there was money to be made down South. Lauterbach summarizes Denver's thoughts in noting that, "The syndicate controlled black bands in big Northern cities. Unlike the syndicate, Denver put the black audience first, a simple variation at the core of his innovation." As he was a Southern man, he knew the region was racially segregated, meaning that in every town there would surely be an all-black district that would have its own "stroll concept" that Walter Barnes so described. But he also realized that "the negro individual lacked financial resources, but the stroll possessed collective wealth in nickel and dime increments. Add those nickels and dimes, multiply by numerous bands playing different joints simultaneously with a percentage of proceeds from each flowing back to Ferguson, repeat nightly, and you come to see, as Denver correctly surmised, that there was serious cash down there." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 87)

While Ferguson had already been plugging his roster of artists through print media, he also "laced together a vast network, mostly down South, of agents embedded in black communities." Denver was a keen businessman found of raking in big money from his touring acts on the Chitlin' Circuit, so if the shadow promoter failed to deliver on their end of the deal, he would just cut ties with them and "drop them from the circuit. He wanted his freelancers, either on the street or on the circuit, to recognize the long-term value of their arrangement. He wanted them to see that they could make thousands of more dollars

with him over time than a few hundred they'd make off with by disappearing with the proceeds of a single dance." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 88)

Arguably the most famous and important promoter Denver worked with was a biracial man from Houston, Texas named Don Robey. Born in 1903, "he would come to believe his biracial background had endowed him leadership characteristics from both cultures." Robey was indeed a powerful leader in Houston, hailing from a respected family, and owning his own nightclub called the Harlem Grill. What Denver mostly liked about his future partner is that he was also involved in running a numbers game, meaning they both shared similar schools of thought pertaining to financial matters. Like Denver, Robey also worked tirelessly to "give his people what they wanted. Determined to bring the best bands he could from outside Houston, raising Houston's showbiz profile." On March 1, 1936, Robey and his business partner, Morris Merritt opened the Harlem Grill. The local newspaper, the Houston Informer bragged that it was "'Houston's and the entire south's finest, most colorful and modern amusement spot.'" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 93, 95-96)

That same year, the Midget Maestro himself performed at the grill on Thanksgiving weekend. Lauterbach stated that a week after this performance, "Robey brought in Don Albert, "a New Orleans Creole, who had established a territory band working out of San Antonio, Texas." They toured extensively throughout their Texas state, but they also performed in neighboring states such as Louisiana and Mississippi. By 1941, "the Robey ring was set. Don Robey had much to offer Denver Ferguson: Houston avenues of all sizes, a sizzling band, and the ring of Gulf dance halls. Denver realized he didn't have to make Robey as a promoter, so much as to enlist him. In fact, Denver owed his early success to Robey." A year after Walter Barnes' death, "Denver ventured to resuscitate the

Chitlin' Circuit." The first booked band to tour on the circuit was a group called Lil Green's Quartet, and they traveled across Robey's established route. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 98-100)

The promoters and agents that promoted Denver's acts had to accommodate their travel needs as well. "Working on the circuit required playing places too small to support black hotels." Instead, musicians stayed in the homes of the townspeople, who were always more than willing to help out. Whether it was cooking meals, providing lodging, or simply giving directions and advice on how to stay out of trouble in deep Southern states like Alabama and Mississippi, these down-home, Bronzeville folks acted as hospitable ambassadors to Denver's performers. Denver knew that proper performance venues were lacking in the South, so he "taught his homegrown promoters to press a tobacco barn, warehouse, or fraternal lodge into duty in the absence of a regular dance hall." He financially protected his touring acts, ensuring "that the act, and agent, got paid before anyone else regardless of attendance." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 90-91)

Gone were the days of unrepresented bands playing for change at the door like Walter Barnes. Had he still been around during this time, he probably would have not only worked with Ferguson Bros. but also would have thanked Denver for allowing him to receive rightful and fair compensation for his lively performances. However, Lauterbach did state that while "the Chitlin' Circuit touring model-one night stands, revolving through promoters' respective hubs and spokes-was built to sustain itself, Ferguson's big bands operated with little room for error." Everything from bus fuel, food, wardrobe, instruments, and salaries all required a steady flow of revenue. "A single cancellation--and there were always cancellations--stranded bands. Invariably, they wired back to headquarters for help." Denver still made big money from his baseball ticket gambling racket, so he

transferred those profits to the group that needed it. "Every sucker who crumbled a losing baseball ticket into the Avenue gutter did his part to help the future inventor of the backbeat, and the messengers of bop survive another day in the music business."  
(Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 91-92)

## Chapter 4: Major Players

When the United States entered the Second World War in 1942, businesses across the country were forced to comply with new government wartime regulations, therefore Denver and his performing acts that he supported adapted accordingly. Fuel rationing meant that there were no longer as many tour buses in use to transport backing bands and their extensive collection of musical gear. Lauterbach recalls one Circuit musician in particular, an Arkansas native named Louis Jordan, as he “developed the best little band in the country.’ When Jordan, the former big-band alto saxophonist, went solo, he couldn’t afford to maintain a full orchestra, so he organized a compact combo he called the Tympany Five.” Just a month before Pearl Harbor, Jordan and his new group “recorded ‘Knock Me a Kiss’ and ‘(I’m Gonna Move to the) Outskirts of Town.’ This new band format, its unique sounds, and ballsy originality would revolutionize music.” (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 101-102)

Louis Jordan’s performances were laced with “minstrel-show moves” that reflected the shows he saw as a youth in the South. But Jordan was also a modern gentleman, as “his dazzling wordplay and lavender suit let everyone know it was okay to grow into something else.” Similar to Duke Ellington, Louis would go on to inspire numerous African-American artists who would emerge in the years to come. Musicians with diverse repertoires and extensive song catalogs like “Charles Brown, Fats Domino, B.B. King, and James Brown, for starters, all acknowledged their debt to him.” (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 103)

While his studio recordings grossed average sales, Jordan’s career and fame grew on the Chitlin’ Circuit. With help from his manager, Berle Adams, both men scheduled a tour in the South in 1942. Both men knew that “Jordan would need to accumulate impressive ticket sales, which called for gigs in large nightclubs and auditoriums.” Enter

Denver Ferguson's partner Don Robey, the man who "had just the combination of cash, constitution, and contacts Jordan and Adams's scenario called for." Robey scheduled some tour dates for Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five on circuit venues throughout Texas and Louisiana, but since Jordan's band was smaller than the average group, he figured that patrons would not desire to pay full price on an admission ticket for less of a musical experience. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 103-104)

Lauterbach said that in order to combat this issue, "Denver Ferguson set Robey up with Claude Trenier and his Bama State Collegians, thereby getting his cut of one of the most important stars in Chitlin' Circuit history." Jordan and the Tympany Five's Southern tour "success had begun to transform black pop music." But not only did he drastically affect black music, his hit song "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby" shot to "the no. 1 spot on the country and western chart, meaning white people bought it." With a high-grossing hit under his belt, Jordan toured the Chitlin' Circuit to perform his songs for both black and white crowds alike, making him one of the first African American recording artists to achieve this accomplishment. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 114)

Indeed, he was a major star on the circuit. Robey's promotions of Jordan boasted - "They swing, they sing, and they clown. Louie is not only a topflight saxophonist and also became popular as a singer, dancer, leader, and composer." Being the early rock star that he was, Louis' shows were rowdy and rapacious. One show that he played at in Houston forced the manager of the auditorium to close the dance floor due to "a pile-up of broken beer bottles" that threatened the general safety of attendees. At another show, "Jordan played to a righteous mob one thousand strong at the Rhythm Club in New Orleans. Louisiana Weekly reported, 'several persons who went to the dance emphatically called the

affair a wild, drunken orgy.'" Fights, and even one stabbing eventually ensued, causing the police to arrive on the now scattered scene, only to find one bartender and the owners of the nightclub, "the Mancuso brothers, longtime entrepreneurs of the New Orleans night," who simply stated "that all in attendance enjoyed a 'lovely time.' Even the three policemen local authorities "on duty in the hall" claimed to "had seen nothing at all amiss." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 104-105)

While the rest of working America was forced to accommodate for a war that surrounded them, the conflict only boosted the Ferguson Bros. Agency's success even further. The record business was in the tank by 1943, and the prices for show tickets increased "from the 50- to 75-cent range in 1942 to the 75- to 99-cent range the next year" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 106). The Ferguson Bros. Agency knew that to stay afloat in an already extremely tough business, they needed to improve their roster. "Denver scrambled to develop new talent, or if not talent, new bands." He found his protégé, Sax Kari, this way. Ferguson ventured across the street of Indiana Avenue to Willis Mortuary, where he intently listened to a young Sax play piano, accompanied by a young and shy guitarist named Wes Montgomery. As the legend goes, Sax got the gig with Ferguson Bros., while Montgomery would stay behind and find fame elsewhere. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 107)

This particular era also found Denver a new business partner that would help solidify the importance and legitimacy of the Chitlin' Circuit. Lauterbach said the previously mentioned Carolina Cotton Pickers that were employed under Ferguson "commanded the highest fees, played the most dates, and earned Denver more cash than any other big, raggedy road band." A black Chicago native named Joe Glaser was instantly attracted to the Cotton Pickers the minute he heard them play. Glaser was the owner of a

local nightspot, the Sunset Cafe, and he knew what a hot band sounded like, as he worked alongside performers like Louis Armstrong during the 1920s. In 1943, Joe reached out to Denver in order to combine their exquisite performance rosters together. The pair worked together flawlessly, as they were about the same age and shared similar business and personal characteristics. "They shared a worldview, plenty of acquaintances, and tastes. Denver admired Glaser. He had named his Sunset Terrace after Glaser's renowned Chicago joint." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 108, 110).

Joe had also recently acquired "the troubled genius," Billie Holiday. And as a representative of popular syndicate acts like Holiday, he promised Denver that he would place the Carolina Cotton Pickers on the fast track to fame. In exchange, Denver was to book syndicate acts like Billie Holiday to perform down South on the Chiltin' Circuit, "en route through the entertainment capitals of the East, Midwest, and West Coast. Denver initially declined Glaser's proposition, purportedly telling the syndicate boss, 'You can keep New York, I have the entire South.'" But by the springtime of 1944, the Chicago Defender published a story featuring a "Glaser-Ferguson tie-up, noting that Glaser had booked the Carolina Cotton Pickers into Detroit's Paradise Theatre." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 110-111)

In 1946, Louis Jordan and his band had grown into the perfect storm. Lauterbach said, "His personal appearance fee had skyrocketed from \$350 to between \$1750 to \$2000 per night. His blend of down-home diction and uptown tempo had yielded six no. 1 records on the race charts." The same year, Jordan and the Tympany Five released twelve songs that never peaked below the third spot on the national charts. He and his group even paved the way for music videos in the entertainment industry, as they "garbed up as dandy cowboys, singing to a stable of livestock for 'Don't Worry 'bout That Mule'--that were

distributed throughout the country's movie theaters." Jordan was a popular music trailblazer, as he drastically changed the way musical acts travel, perform, and promote their content. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 114-115)

Because of his influence, touring bands were smaller, and all the attention was shifted to the singer, or rather the front man. Later charismatic front men like Elvis Presley, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Freddie Mercury, Ozzy Osbourne, Bon Scott, and Robert Plant definitely all owe a debt of gratitude to Louis Jordan. While Louis Jordan created the famed front man position, his small band setup also paved the way for similar acts to record and receive recognition for their contribution to the new era of music: rock 'n' roll. "The term rock, deployed in a musical rather than sexual context--it was black slang for coitus going back to at least the 1920s--gained popularity right around the time Louis Jordan and his small band blew up in the summer of 1942." Jordan's music also helped contribute some of the distinct sounds that would be forever associated with rock and roll, as he instructed his band to throw "a little grit over the smooth swing horn sound, paving the way for the staccato, honking and screaming style of saxophonists in the next era." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 117)

While record companies are traditionally thought to have control over the artist, in those days it was the booking agents that pulled the proverbial strings. As stated earlier, Jordan's backing band was significantly smaller than the standard swing bands of the era. Lauterbach said that this smaller band setup "simply required less cash flow to tour than did big bands--fewer members meant fewer uniforms to buy and clean, fewer instruments to buy and maintain, fewer vehicles to fuel and rooms to rent, which translated neatly into lower performance fees, with the savings passed down the line to cash-strapped partiers."

These industry improvements also gave way to promoters at local venues to hype-up the new rock 'n' roll trend. And "after decades of big-band music, audiences were ripe for novelty. The few surviving Chitlin' Circuit big bands adapted to the new style." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 116)

Performers now "stormed onto the national black music scene with electric guitars and wailing saxophones." This new and improved musical model also allowed for individuals to gain fame traveling without backing bands. Early rock and roll pioneers like Joe Turner, Wynonie Harris, T-Bone Walker, Cecil Gant, and Ivory Joe Hunter all became popular powerhouses on their own without backing bands. Lauterbach stated, "dives could afford to book cheaply traveling single attractions. Consequently, the top names--not just fringe players like King Kolax, Christine Chatman, and Snookum Russell--appeared in rural joints and small-town nightclubs on the Chitlin' Circuit." After they gained a steady following touring on the circuit, these small acts could then tour bigger venues, ultimately allowing them to record, catapulting them into the national spotlight (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 116)

These rocking performers' "new sound spread quickly along a specific geography, and occurred hyperactively in Houston, New Orleans, and in between, where all the right people mixed with just the proper friction." Houston served as an early "major hub for rock 'n' rolls early businesspeople and artists. By 1946, Don Robey had caught the nightclub fever. He opened the Bronze Peacock in Houston in February (Lauterbach, 2011 p. 112). Being the business-savvy man that he was, Robey "cycled hot small bands like Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers, and Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers, through the Houston City Auditorium, and every musician in town gathered at the Bronze Peacock for the

afterparty." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 126) The opening weekend, Denver Ferguson slated a performer named Joe Turner, "an illiterate barkeep," who played rock 'n' roll "fifteen years before [it] appeared as a pop-music marketing term. As his musical stylings were obviously ahead of their time, his audience paid no attention to his attempted interactions with them. As he played at the Bronze Peacock he "hollered 'My Gal's a Jockey,' his current version of the motif that would become 'Shake, Rattle, and Roll.'" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 120)

However, this is not Joe Turner's only claim to early rock history. As a singer in a bar in Kansas City during Prohibition, Turner had a powerhouse of a voice that could cut through the noise and din of a speakeasy. In 1938 when he played a gig at Carnegie Hall, he "sang that night as he did in the barroom, without a microphone. His song predicted Arthur Crudup's 1946 'That's Alright Mama,' a tune we wouldn't be talking about if not for the rendition Elvis Presley recorded in Memphis in 1954, the greaser's debut on commercial wax." But "That's Alright Mama" shares even more history with the state of Mississippi. When the late Walter Barnes toured in Mississippi during the developing stages of the Chitlin' Circuit, he would stay in Jackson at a local brothel that was owned by Montgomery's girlfriend. In October of 1936, "Little Brother recorded 'Something Keeps A-Worryin' Me,' which includes what became nearly verbatim, the opening stanza of Crudup's, and later Presley's version of 'That's Alright Mama'." However, it is more than possible that Little Brother Montgomery was simply repeating or recreating lyrics that he had heard from another performer, but "that answer was embedded in long-decayed slots of Vicksburg cathouse and turpentine camp commissaries from Natchez to Hattiesburg." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 119)

Lauterbach wrote about another previously mentioned single-touring act that gained enormous popularity at Don Robey's Bronze Peacock was T-Bone Walker. T-Bone, or Aaron Thibeaux Walker, hailed "from up the road in Conroe, Texas, north of Houston." Born in late May of 1910, T-Bone was inspired by another notable Texas bluesman and close family acquaintance, Blind Lemon Jefferson. The two spent a lot of time together, "as the name suggests, Jefferson needed help getting around, and Walker guided him to the bustling street corners where a handicapped musician might pick up a little change." Walker was a devout Pentecostal, and during church services, he would listen to the hymnals and everyone clapping to the rhythm. "He learned to tap dance and lit out with traveling medicine shows and vaudeville troupes. Walker's corrupted middle name became his moniker: T-Bone. Back in Dallas in the early 1930s, he won a talent show at the Majestic Theater, and with it a week-long stint in Cab Calloway's group." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 123)

It was during this crucial time that Walker's showmanship evolved into what it would be during his later touring years. Calloway's bandleader "let the teenager perform a banjo routine that T-Bone completed in the splits. No one wanted to follow that finale, especially after T-Bone had matured into a sharply attired leading man, and dropped the banjo for a solid-body Gibson electric guitar." By the early 1940s, Walker found himself playing in Los Angeles, where he "separated woman from their undergarments using only his guitar." Later on, he was even fortunate enough to perform at the heavyweight boxer, Joe Louis' Rhumboogie Club. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 123)

By 1946, "T-Bone was at his acrobatic best" when he arrived at the Bronze Peacock to perform. The following year, he played again to a larger crowd. "T-Bone, wearing his

smooth process and pearly white tails, had fans reaching for the smelling salts, the local press reported. 'His blues singing and 'geetar' playing 'send my very soul' as one lady elegantly put it." If Louis Jordan was the Jim Morrison of his generation, then T-Bone was surely to be reincarnated as not only Robert Plant, but also Jimmy Page as well:

“As his show reached its climax, T-Bone pushed his guitar above his head, still playing, extending his arms, building to the song's crescendo. As he inched the guitar down behind his head, he spread his feet and slid his slender legs farther apart, still playing, the room's ecstasy building. Now the guitar ran parallel to T- Bone's shoulder blades, he popped a last pyrotechnic note, and as he landed the splits, the floor around him was covered with cash and feminine undergarments.” (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 131)

His bandleader, Johnny Otis (and probably a handful of curious men) watched how the star-struck women in the crowd tossed their unmentionables. "The chicks didn't snatch their drawers off and throw them,' Johnny Otis noted, a little disappointed maybe. 'They brought extras in their purses. I know because I was watching like a hawk" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 131).

Lauterbach also wrote about two other notable musicians that emerged during the late forties from Louisiana shared the same last name but were not related to one another. A fresh, young man who was named Clarence Brown "idolized T-Bone, whose effect on an audience bewildered and inspired him." This entertainer was driving young women crazy years before the Fab Four or the Rolling Stones would. Brown said,"[he] had the people just screaming and hollering, women falling out, knocking down walls, tearing down chandeliers' and I said, 'God Almighty, what is this guy doing to these people?' " Like any young man that saw Walker work his magic onstage, he was instantly attracted to the life of a new rock star. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 132)

Originally, Clarence played a variety of Cajun-style instruments like the mandolin, banjo, bass, and the guitar. He traveled with his "father's string band. Playing swamp-side house parties for five years with his father. Gatemouth amassed the courage to pick up Cajun music's first instrument, the fiddle." However, while the fiddle may have been his favorite instrument, he "eventually realized there was more money to be made on guitar." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 133-134) To beef-up his performance chops, Brown "followed T-Bone, asking for pointers and begging to sit in." His time to shine would come in 1947 when he landed an impromptu gig before T-Bone's show. However, to best accurately convey this story, there requires a background explanation first.

In San Antonio, Clarence was working for a liaison to Don Robey at the Keyhole Club. He and a buddy from New Orleans were playing in the house band when Don dropped in to check out the spread. "Robey gave the young man a business card, embossed with the Bronze Peacock's sparkling, feathery logo and address, 2809 Erastus Street." He instructed Clarence to stop by when he was in Houston. After a long journey of hitchhiking, he made it to the Peacock on a Thursday night, March 13, 1947, to be exact to see his idol, T-Bone Walker. As this was Walker's ninth appearance at the venue, he was comfortable with space (not to mention the flowing alcohol) that surrounded him. Unfortunately, "T-Bone suffered from chronic ulcers thanks to youthful binge drinking and Texas homebrew." Clarence, wanting to soak in the show and his hero's presence, situated himself up close and personal with the stage.

As he approached the stage, T-Bone's ulcers got the best of him, causing him to unstrap his sax in order to race back to his dressing room. Naturally, the audience became curious and upset upon seeing this. When he saw his star exit the stage, Don Robey became

frazzled, but when he noticed that Clarence was in the audience, he barked at him to get up there and play. One could argue that this particular moment in Clarence Brown's life was fate or divine intervention; that T-Bone was meant to be ill just at the appropriate moment for a young, budding entertainer to stake his claim in the jungle that is the music business. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 132)

Regardless of what it was, Brown picked up the guitar that was left onstage and started to play. Knowing only one key, E natural (the essential Blues key) he began strumming and singing, "My name is Gatemouth Brown and I just got in your town. The repeated first line of Blues gives the performer a moment to plan ahead, which can come in handy when making up a song on the spot in front of five hundred people as if your career depends on it. My name is Gatemouth Brown and I just got in your town/If you don't like my style I will not hang around." At this point, the obligatory audience explosion-reaction kicked in right on cue, but rather than have women's undergarments hurled at his general direction, it was a hard rain of "cash and coin."

After Clarence finished his jam, T-Bone was more than ready to perform. However, he was not very pleased with the events that had just unfolded. Being the early rock star that he was, Walker had developed the infamous super-ego that inevitably comes with it. He "marched on stage and seized the guitar from Gatemouth. 'As long as you live and breathe, don't you ever pick on my guitar again'," he demanded. But in all honesty, Clarence, now known by his stage persona, Gatemouth, probably did not care what T-Bone had to say about the matter. He arrived broke in Houston, but after his knock-out performance, he was six hundred dollars richer in just a matter of fifteen minutes. Of course, there are other accounts of the story that was just told. Gatemouth recalls

strumming and humming in a pinch to try to quickly brainstorm a song. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 133) To be a fly on the wall that night at the Bronze Peacock would surely be interesting.

Brown's performance not only won him an adoring public, but it also caught the eye of a vigilant reporter from the Houston Informer. A scoop was published, mainly highlighting his guitar playing abilities and the resulting hail-shower of coins, that helped boost his name to regional fame. This was a perfect storm for Don Robey too, as he was now evolving into a Denver Ferguson-esque entertainment tycoon. He used Gatemouth's legendary first performance at his nightclub to his advantage. The morning after, Gatemouth signed a contract with Robey. Like the true rock star that he was, Brown had his picture taken for a poster showcasing his residency at the Peacock. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 134) Lauterbach wrote that he was decked out "...like a birthday party magician in black tails and cummerbund, white starched collar and bowtie, wearing a black top-hat cocked to the northeast, tall enough to hide a full-grown rabbit. The price tag hung from a tuning peg of the Gibson L-500 that Robey bought. Gatemouth grinned broadly, nervously, his feet spread as if straddled across a rumbling fault line." Though his name was misspelled on the poster, "'Clancece (Gatemouth) Brown'," he was a runaway success.

He played at the Bronze Peacock some nights until almost five o'clock in the morning. Don was already piling on the dough, but he knew he had an opportunity to cash-in on his newfound goldmine by putting him on a record. "Gatemouth spent late spring and early summer playing Houston, mostly at the Peacock, and building his set. Robey hooked Gatemouth up with L.A.'s Aladdin Records, where another Peacock alum, Amos Milburn, rocked. Gate's debut on wax was the tune he'd improvised as T-Bone's ulcers flared up, 'Gatemouth Boogie'" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 135-136).

The second notable Louisiana showman that shared Gatemouth's last name hailed from "a Cajun prairie town called Eunice, Louisiana, on the other side of Baton Rouge." Roy Brown was indeed a poor boy. Only having his mother, True Love Brown to take care of him, the two moved often. As a devout Southern Christian, True Love attempted to fill her son's fatherless life with Jesus, the ultimate moral, male figure. However, like many of the previous entertainers that I have listed, Roy was only interested in the music and the reactions that it created. However, he also knew a chance to excel in show business could allow him to flee his rural upbringings.

One day at their church house, Roy "had organized a quartet and wrote a song called 'Satan's Chariots Rolling By.' With the power of the Lord, and six to eight ounces of blackberry wine behind them, Roy and his boys sang it in church and had the sisters clapping, tapping their feet, and shouting." During the festivities, Roy's angry mother stormed in to yank him out of the holiest of houses in order to deliver an unholy beating on his behind. "At the house, True Love told Roy to snap a limb off the peach tree near the front step and disrobe. 'I'm gonna teach you to jazz up spirituals,' she said, and whipped him." To help financially support his mother, Roy worked hard days "in the boggy sugarcane and rice fields, battling relentless heat and mosquitos among the cypress knees between Morgan City and New Iberia." At the young age of fourteen, he lost his mother to pneumonia. At that point, Roy decided to stop his formal schooling and head out to Los Angeles to try and get a piece of the action. He always knew he wanted to shine bright in the spotlight, so he decided to chase his dream. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 139)

As his mother beat him for singing, he began his career in the entertainment business as a boxer. Ironically, he did not like the sight of blood, so "he went against his

late mother's wishes and began to sing." And so Roy Brown began his newfound singing gig covering jazz staples by white singers such as Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby. He eventually drifted down to Galveston, Texas when he found more steady employment at a local hotspot. The joint was owned by a fierce woman who was called Mary Russell. This woman in particular, "according to Roy, ran brothels, sold dope, paid off police and mayor, and, of course, all good musicians at her Club Grenada." Roy was part of "a six-piece unit and dubbed themselves the Mellodeers." The Mellodeers did it all. They played music when they were told, and then they fetched "patrons' orders for reefer, and ran to the stash spot during intermission." Mary paid the local radio station to play Roy and the Mellodeers as a way to advertise for her club. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 140)

Similar to Gatemouth, Roy was a quick thinking, jamming musician that created memorable characters and lyrics at just a moment's notice. Lauterbach said he composed a song appropriately entitled "Good Rockin' Tonight," which was a smash hit. But there is always more to the story. Apparently, Roy had been sleeping around with "the wife of a Club Grenada backer," so after the ad aired on radio, he headed for New Orleans. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 140)

It almost seems as if fate had a role in both of Brown's entertainment careers. When Roy arrived "on Sunday, April 6, 1947, he scribbled the lyrics of his Galveston whorehouse jingle on a brown-paper grocery sack in hopes that he could peddle it to his role model, who happened to be in town." Brown was a huge fan of Wynonie Harris, and he was scheduled to appear at the Rainbow Room, which was conveniently tucked away on the local Bronzeville strip on the corner of LaSalle and Seventh Street (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 141). He confidently approached Mr. Harris, pitching his song to him. Tired of hearing

songs from nobodies, he simply said, "Don't bother me, son'," as he "slithered off, sneering over his shoulder." The hurt young Roy exited the bar with a bruised ego. However, he shook it off as he continued down the street to another hotspot that doubled as a restaurant and hotel called the Dew Drop Inn. As he walked in, he saw the popular Chitlin' Circuit star, Cecil Gant performing, "dressed in starched khakis to remind fans of his wartime fame as Private Cecil Gant, and sported a black tie with his first name spelled down it in white block letters." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 142)

While he did not have the best voice, he played the piano with due diligence, singing in a voice that caught Brown's attention. "Roy recalled, 'but he had something in that voice, something catchy. . . He made you feel what he was trying to convey to you. He was terrific, he was beautiful, he was responsible for my career'." After Gant wrapped up his set, he smoked a cigarette as he walked towards the bar. Seeing this moment as an opportunity, Roy caught up with the performer to pitch his song to him. "Gant liked 'Good Rockin' Tonight,' not just the words, but the voice as well." Even though it was 2:30 in the morning, Cecil phoned the president of DeLuxe Records in New Jersey, Jules Braun, who had Roy sing it twice over the telephone for him. Being the record executive that he was, Braun smelled a hit. After Brown sang his tune, Cecil grabbed the phone from him, only to hear Jules ordering him to cough up fifty bucks, as he demanded him to keep Roy locked down. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 142)

The next month saw Roy playing in swanky juke joints like the "Black Diamond, a club at the corner of North Galvez and Conti Streets in New Orleans's Tremé section." He had written three more songs to help improve his artist portfolio, titling the new ditties "Lollypop Mama," "Long About Midnight," and "Miss Fanny Brown." With these three

new compositions, combined with the powerhouse "Good Rockin' Tonight," Rockin' Roy Brown made sure that the audience knew just exactly what was on his mind at the time. But here is where the tale of the two Browns gets even more interesting. The backing band that Rockin' Roy performed with "at the Black Diamond, Bob Ogden's Flashes of Rhythm, was the same group that had backed Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown the night Don Robey first saw Gatemouth in San Antonio." Because of Roy's influences, Louis Jordan and Joe Turner, his music sounded like early rock 'n' roll. "Pounding piano, chanting lyrics, rhythmic hand clapping, and frantic sax drove Roy Brown's songs." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 143) It hailed from blues roots, but rather than utilizing the traditional AAB song structure. Roy wrote songs "on a hook-heavy narrative quality," by the recollections of Lauterbach.

Lauterbach wrote that Roy had popularized the genre of rock by 1947, "no longer exclusively a stunt word for intercourse, but as a more musical, good-time catchall." Needless to say, the lyrical content in these new songs was anything but squeaky-clean, as each song contained a plethora of innuendos that suggested any or all of the three crucial elements involved with the circuit lifestyle: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. "'Good Rockin' Tonight' carried a more than linguistic consequences. Roy Brown would spread the sound and aesthetics of rock 'n' roll well beyond its Gulf Coast bastion, farther than Joe Turner or Wynonie Harris ever ventured" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 144). Do you recall our dear friend Mr. Harris, the entertainer that shot down Roy's original pitch for his breakout hit? About eight months after, he recorded a cover of "Good Rockin' Tonight," and to the chagrin of Brown, his new rendition of the song became a bigger hit than Roy's original on Billboard's Best-Selling Retail Race Records and Most-Played Juke Box Race Records indexes, placing high, staying long on both, feeding fire to the rockin' phenomenon in black music.

Wynonie's cover would finish 1948 as the third most-played "race" record according to Billboard (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 157).

Just a few years later in 1954, the King of rock 'n' roll, Elvis Presley would go on to record his rendition of the song as his second single with Sun Records (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 144). By June of 1948, both Roy and Wynonie's versions of the song "were among the top-15 race records sold" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 157-158). By 1948 the circuit's top acts--Wynonie Harris, Joe Turner, Amos Milburn, and Charles Brown, while Jordan reigned supreme--were some of the top artists in black music as a whole, with national reputations. Some of these artists in particular, like Roy Brown, may have had national spotlights on them at some moments, they were mainly still touring in the South near their local residencies. "Roy continued tearing up New Orleans while jumping at chances beyond his home turf." New Orleans was a vital spot on the Chitlin' Circuit (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 158). On the topic of the city (as well as the change from big bands to solo touring acts), Ella Fitzgerald said, "every artist who has made any real money, particularly bandleaders, has made it on the Southern one-night circuit'." Touring artists like Cecil Gant, Joe Turner, Wynonie Harris, and T-Bone Walker, who traveled solo and cheaply were able to reap the benefits of hiring local pick-up bands for gigs, eliminating the need to hire a backing band permanently. "In 1947 in New Orleans, the top ticket price to a Wynonie Harris show cost \$1.00; for Duke Ellington, \$3.10. New Orleans was perfectly suited for the new-style Chitlin' Circuit action" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 138).

By late 1948, Roy Brown had signed with a gentleman named Ben Bart who had founded Universal Attractions talent agency at the end of the Second World War. It is interesting to note that this man worked closely with one of Don Robey's first Mississippi

contacts, Tom Wince. Lauterbach stated that Wince was located up in Vicksburg, as he owned a nightclub called the Blue Room "and booked bands through a dozen more small-towns joints; including Jones Nite Spot in Indianola, Red Ruby Edwards' in Leland, Casa Blanca in Greenville, and the Harlem Nightengale in McComb, Mississippi." But unlike Tom Wince, Bart envisioned Roy's performing career moving North to the big cities with "big-capacity theaters" in New York and Chicago. "Bart sold blocks of Brown dates to the Chitlin' Circuit most powerful promoters--Howard Lewis in Dallas, B.B. Beamon in Atlanta, Ralph Weinberg, and Don Robey--and booked Roy 'Around the World,' at the upper-echelon Northern black theaters, Harlem's Apollo, Baltimore's Royal, Washington's Howard, the Paradise in Detroit, and the Regal in Chicago were collectively known." (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 158-159)

This tour would surely prove to be a challenge for Roy, but he was more than ready for it. Before beginning his journey, Brown assembled his all-New Orleans backing band, the Mighty Mighty Men, who were named after a clever lyric found in no other than "Good Rockin' Tonight," but it also eventually morphed into its own song as well. Lauterbach wrote, "by organizing a band and taking it on the road, Roy chose artistry over money. He could have easily worked as a single act, demanding the same guarantee and earning the same percentages, while performing with local pickup bands at his shows." This process was the industry standard used by newly-single acts that roamed the Chitlin' Circuit. But Roy must have known that if he had a band that regularly toured and played behind him when it came to cut a record, his Mighty Mighty Men would know just exactly what and how to play. By December of 1948, Rockin' Roy Brown and his band were blazing the

trail, first stopping in Memphis to play for a few months at a place called the Palace. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 166)

After spending the first month of the new year in Memphis, the gang headed up to the Big Apple where they would play at the renowned Apollo. Being used to playing at rowdy clubs in New Orleans, the band hit the stage with full force. The sax player, "Batman" Rankins swooped down from the rafters." One could easily compare Rankins' onstage antics with the high voltage, guitar-wielding maniac, Angus Young. "He 'flew around with that tenor sax,' Roy recalled. 'He walked the tables, he walked the bars'." Anywhere they played, the crowd simply could not get enough of not only "Batman" Rankins, but another sax player with the Mighty Mighty Men, John Fontenette. The group even went as far as changing their swanky and loudly colored suits in-between each song to up the ante-"red for 'Good Rockin' ' and blue for 'Mighty Mighty Man'." They danced in-step with one another while rocking the house down, but "no one outworked the leader. Roy sweated through four suits an hour." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 166)

Lauterbach said the men were living like rock stars, as Roy purchased a fleet of expensive vehicles and took his meals freshly prepared upon ordering them. "Roy bought a Cadillac limousine for the band, a Ford van for their instruments and uniforms, a station wagon for wives and girlfriends, and a Fleetwood for himself. His payroll hit \$565 a night, and he often cleared twice that. Roy's after show meal consisted of two whole fried chickens, two orders of fries, and three bottles of Jax beer. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 160) In hindsight, Brown's meal requests were simple and Southern. I guess even when one can afford the finest champagne and caviar that money can buy, the old traditions and habits of the home can still take precedence over any amount of cash.

There seemed to be no stopping Roy. Deluxe Records "released another wrinkle on the theme, 'Rockin' at Midnight,' in the early spring of 1949." He cut another hit tune entitled "Young Man's Rhythm" that had a lyric that very well may have predicted his everlasting stardom as it simply stated, "Good Rockin', that's my name, they're gonna put my rock in the hall of fame" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 161). He continued touring with help from his contacts at Universal Attractions, as they "...followed the Walter Barnes-Ferguson Bros. publicity model, flooding black papers with press releases. As dance promoters and black club owners typically financed the black entertainment pages, and scribes knew who buttered the bread, the publicity blasts ran everywhere that held a financial stake in a forthcoming stop of the Good Rockin' revival." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 161)

He played a plethora of shows in a myriad of towns throughout the North and South, with more than generous media coverage surrounding him and his tour. Lauterbach said, "Denver Ferguson saw that Brown releases appeared in the Indianapolis Recorder, Don Robey placed them in the Houston Informer, and Roy's New Orleans manager, Rip Roberts, supervised the Legend's local inflation. Readers all over the country followed Roy's crusade. "It is amazing that so many people working in the various fields throughout the entertainment industry made so much capital because of one man who sang to the masses. But then again, Rockin' Roy Brown was not the first entertainer to receive national attention. However, his rapacious and rocking style of music gave birth to an entirely new genre of music, and with it new opportunities for the entertainment industry to capitalize on it." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 161)

During the summer of 1949, "Billboard renamed its African-American music bestseller list from 'Race Records' to 'Rhythm and Blues Records.' The chart change

belatedly confirmed what the industry players knew--the sound Louis Jordan pioneered and popularized in the early part of the decade had all but pushed jazz out of the black pop culture" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 162).

Gone were the days of chart-topping black entertainers like the Ink Spots, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald. Lauterbach stated, "by the fall of 1948, rockers had almost fully taken over the Race Records chart. The last race charts in early 1949 read like the results of a revolution. Amos Milburn, Roy Brown, and Wynonie Harris pushed Jordan, Ella, and Billy Eckstine to the end of the list, and regulated Ellington and the swing generation to nostalgia" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 162-163). However, it is important to note that the term rhythm and blues did not exactly mean rock 'n' roll. It was, in all honesty, a corporate "...marketing phrase, shorthand for black popular music in whatever form happened to be selling. The standard definitions of rock 'n' roll, courtesy of institutions such as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Rolling Stone magazine, emphasize a fusion of black rhythm and blues and white country-western sounds, as if the two styles brought distinct elements to a new mixture" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 162-163).

While there were undoubtedly other rhythm and blues acts to perform at nationally recognized stages in 1949, the real stars were Roy Brown and a "foot-stomping Houston pianist" named Amos Milburn. Milburn was represented by a "Chicago-based black talent agency" called Shaw Artists, after its founder, Billy Shaw. Amos had "two of the top 3 spots on Billboard's bestseller list in early 1949" with his two songs "Chicken Shack Boogie" and "Bewildered." In the middle of the same year, Lauterbach wrote that "Billboard ranked Roy Brown (no. 2) and Amos Milburn (no. 3) as two of the top 3 best-selling race recording artists, behind Paul 'Hucklebuck' Williams, another new act, and

comfortably ahead of Louis Jordan (no. 12), Wynonie Harris (no. 14), and T-Bone Walker (no. 31). Rock 'n' Roll was energizing the black music business from the Apollo to its Southern barrelhouse roots." In the autumn of 1949, Roy and his band played in Ferriday, Louisiana at a small hole-in-the-wall club called Haney's Big House, cleverly named after its black proprietor, Will Haney. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 164)

Will was a World War I veteran who sold insurance to Ferriday's African-American population. He then opened a barbeque stand, eventually adding a barroom in the 1930s. His business grew, and he converted his business into the what was now the Big House, but as he was a black man in a small Southern town close to the Mississippi River, he had to enlist the help of a local baron named Lee Calhoun. "Calhoun was Ferriday's feudal lord. He owned the land under Haney's club and much of the rest on Concordia Parish. Calhoun protected his tenant from Ferriday's Klannish white populace and redneck cops," Lauterbach describes (p.165). Lee Calhoun had a rebellious nephew that roamed around town, particularly in Bronzeville, where he saw black entertainers perform through the window of Haney's Big House.

The young teenager was named Jerry Lee Lewis, and of Haney's, "Jerry Lee would say, 'It was giving birth to a new music that people needed to hear. Rock & Roll-that's what it was'"(Lauterbach, 2011, p. 166). Jerry Lee Lewis would later proceed to rock the youth of a nation with blazing fast piano licks that would, in turn, inspire countless other future musicians, such as John Lennon and his band, the Beatles. Similar to Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis also made his first breakout recordings at Memphis' Sun Records. To be honest, both men even shared comparable love interests, as the women that they courted were fresh, young teenagers at the ages of thirteen and fourteen.

Lauterbach wrote that in October, Roy hit his old stomping grounds of New Orleans "...to play two shows for promoter Don Albert, Don Robey's old San Antonio sidekick dating to Walter Barnes's days, and former proprietor of the Keyhole Club, where Amos Milburn and Gatemouth Brown were discovered" (pg. 167). After New Orleans, Roy hit Monroe and Shreveport. He then headed to Mississippi to play in Vicksburg at the Blue Room and then in our own Hattiesburg at the Harlem Club. He and his band even traveled to Tupelo, the birthplace of Elvis Presley. They even went out West to Tucson, Arizona where "...members of the Choctaw nation ceremonially inducted Roy Brown into their tribe" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 167). The Choctaw bestowed Roy an Indian name that translated as 'Big Blow'. "Rockin' "Big Blow" Roy Brown and his Mighty Mighty Men may not be common household names when it comes to the subject of early rock 'n' rollers, but their impact on the genre is jaw-droppingly astounding.

In a 1984 interview for a newspaper in Macon, Georgia, the reporter questioned a man called Melvin Welch who worked in the Chitlin' Circuit during Roy Brown's heyday about a popular worldwide entertainer at the time, Michael Jackson. Keep in mind that this was right after Jackson won "eight Grammy's for the Thriller album. A comparison occurred to Welch. 'Every so often there comes an artist . . . with something different to offer, and he'll catch a wave and ride the tide for a while,' Welch said. 'Like Roy Brown when I was just a kid--he was the number one black artist . . . I used to go to the auditorium and serve Coca Cola just to get in and hear Roy Brown.'" Indeed, he "shook black popular music. He brought tough, lewd lyrics-- the essence of a Chitlin' Circuit song and a staple of rock 'n' roll ever since--from down in the barrelhouse to the top of the Billboard charts and from coast to coast across the country in 1949, two years before Cleveland disc jockey

Alan Freed initiated popular use of the phrase rock 'n' roll, four years prior to Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock,' and five years before Elvis Presley covered Roy's composition, 'Good Rockin' Tonight.'" (qtd. in Lauterbach, 2011, p. 168).

While the Chitlin' Circuit in the 40s was prosperous and successful, it was not immune to the law. Back up in Denver Ferguson's Indianapolis stronghold, a local "negro patrolman named Jacque Durham" spilled the beans on "witnessed widespread corruption among his colleagues on the Avenue." Corruption was not news to anyone, but Lauterbach summarizes well that, "The Indianapolis elect needed to prove its cleanliness to white voters." Marion County prosecutor Judson Stark summoned the alleged bribers, including Denver, to city hall, where they mumbled, "I have never paid any bribes to any police officer of any rank and don't know who has'." The mayor, Robert Tyndall had the chief of police get rid of any gambling or racket establishments on the Avenue. This ultimately hurt Ferguson's pocketbook, like those men who partook in the typical vices of the street (drugs, alcohol, and gambling through his baseball ticket system) had to operate under closed doors" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 128-129).

In 1949, Denver had an encounter with the IRS that he barely escaped, only to have "the feds pick up his trail again in 1950." A power-hungry Tennessee Senator named Estes Kefauver "spearheaded an investigation of Indianapolis's gambling as part of his far-reaching crackdown on organized crime and political machinery." The investigation uncovered the fact that lottery operations within the city "grossed a combined ten million dollars annually. Federal tax agents followed one of the racket's revenue streams to Indiana Avenue." It was here where they cracked down on the numbers runners and "backroom policy house operators" in a collective effort to "uproot the city's resilient bribe system

from the street level to game bosses up to police and politicians." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 203)

By January of 1951, Indianapolis officials in Marion County had "introduced a bill in the state legislature to ban the printing or possession of numbers slips, the street lottery's unit of play, including the cleverly elusive baseball tickets that Denver had designed." The system had finally wised up to Denver's scheme, as Mayor Philip Bayt placed beat cops "outside known ticket stations 'round the clock, including the oft-raided one nearest Sunset Terrace." And when there is no money, there are no bribes; and when there are no bribes, there is no way to run a racket properly. Being the older gentleman that he was, Denver cut his losses and closed the doors on Ferguson Bros. and Ferguson Printing, selling the buildings for one more profit (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 204).

About the same time, down South in Houston, Don Robey had his hands busy in the record and booking business with some female assistance. Lauterbach wrote about Gatemouth Brown's tours "...through Texas's black nightclubs, and border-hopping to Louisiana rarely with a day off," noting that "Robey had realized that Gatemouth wasn't Louis Jordan" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 175-176). Robey felt that Houston star Amos Milburn's success came at a cost to Gatemouth. Both artists recorded for Aladdin Records, but that's where the comparisons ended." Amos was selling records, as he received far more promotion than Brown. Knowing this, Robey knew that if he wanted to get into the big leagues like Denver, he would have to "get Gatemouth out of the territory and into the national scene" (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 175-176). Robey's business manager phoned a woman named Evelyn Johnson who was quite the catch. She had attractive looks that complemented her able book-cooking skills.

Don knew he had to employ her at his Texas club, the Bronze Peacock. After Aladdin Records dropped Brown after "releasing only two Gatemouth couplings during their two-year contract," Don essentially said, "Screw you, I'll do it myself," and together, he and his business partner Evelyn Johnson formed Peacock Records in order to record and promote Gatemouth and other potential acts. "He developed a strategy for growing the Peacock brand, based on the old model that he and Morris Merritt had used to promote dances in the 1930s. He would establish partnerships in other places, with people who could get records on jukeboxes and sell dance tickets." Aside from their new recording label, "he and Johnson founded Buffalo Booking Agency, with Evelyn as its licensed agent, for the express purpose of booking Gatemouth Brown." With the new label and booking agency put in place, Brown was able to record two new songs entitled "Didn't Reach My Goal" and "Atomic Energy." Robey knew that to get the ball rolling with his new act he would have to "forge and expand alliances beyond his Texas-Louisiana territory" with the help of other promoters like Sunbeam Mitchell (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 177-178).

## Chapter 5: The City of Soul

Sunbeam was a Memphis native born in 1906. As a native of Beale Street, Mitchell evolved into a hustler as he worked alongside his father selling vegetables with a horse-drawn cart. Lauterbach wrote, "the closest thing to an education Sunbeam got took place behind the cart, where he learned to calculate his inventory and prices of various goods, the basics in mental arithmetic that would lay the foundation for his career." Sunbeam's experience towing a vegetable cart taught him the value of a constant street presence. Beale Street always had something going on at all hours of the day and night, so he worked hard with little to no time off. When he was fortunate enough to take a break, Sunbeam would listen to a "whorehouse pianist Money Clark, and a dance caller named Cat Eye" at the Savoy Club. Mitchell dreamed of working in the entertainment business, as he figured music would be a great way to try and strike it rich. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 183)

During the Second World War, Mitchell moved North to Detroit and worked at a factory where he could make more money and assist with the war effort. Afterward, he migrated back down to Memphis where he wed his wife, Ernestine McKinney. Similar to Don Robey and Evelyn Johnson, Mitchell and his wife would co-manage their own business. The couple had "leased two stories above the Pantaze Drug Store on the corner of Beale and Hernando opposite the Hotel Men's Improvement Club." The space that they leased used to be a tough juke joint named the Royal Gardens, where patrons would drink, curse, fight, and even throw people out of the third-floor window. Now it was a calmer space with rooms for rent for three to five dollars per week. Ernestine played the role as the vigilant bookkeeper. Sunbeam, on the other hand, was extremely disinterested in running a rental house, as "she wrote to a friend on January 15, 1945, 'Sunbeam, he won't

do anything but sleep, eat, go to the show, come in at 1-2, any time he'd feel like, and I don't have nobody to help me'." In writing this, she pondered as to how she could convince her show-going husband to stick around more, and then the idea hit her: bring the music that he actively sought closer to the both of them and their rental house. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 183-184)

On May 4, 1945, the couple renovated their space to create the Domino Lounge and Mitchell Hotel. Lauterbach stated that after this, "Sunbeam Mitchell would become the catalyst to black Memphis music's renaissance. Ernestine and Sunbeam's place had been like a Norman Rockwell soda fountain, only with blacks. Sunbeam and Ernestine were the pop and mom who kept a pot of chili on and their doors open for their adapted, nomadic children who might drop in broke or hungry at any time." They helped famous acts like B.B. King, Johnny Ace, Little Richard, and Bobby "Blue" Bland. Like the born hustler that he was, Sunbeam made a pretty penny selling whiskey, "making it more conveniently available than did liquor stores that closed certain hours of the day and days of the week." He even expanded his liquor market to the dry state of Mississippi, cleverly disguising his liquor selling caravans as traveling musical shows highlighting black touring musicians (while all the while selling liquor to those in need of it.) (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 185-186)

By 1946, the Mitchell Hotel was in full swing. For just fifty cents, one could patronize the Domino Lounge and listen to one of the two house bands: the first being led by a Louis Jordan-esque saxophonist called Bill Harvey, while the second one was conducted by a fellow named Richard "Tuff" Green and his band, Tuff Green and the Rockateers. Some Chitlin' Circuit artists even consider Green and his outfit to be the first real rock 'n' roll act. "Noted jazz pianist Mose Allison said, 'I always tell people that the

original rock-n-roll band was Tuff Green in Memphis . . . I used to go to the Mitchell Hotel, man, they used to sneak me in in '47 and '48.'" The venue was quite large, as it held two hundred people at maximum capacity. It was here where a man could cough up some change, get in, eat freshly cooked meals that were delicious, drink beer or hard liquor, and if he so wanted, rent out a room for the night with a willing woman of their choice"

Lauterbach wrote, "with thirty-five rooms in the Mitchell Hotel, and no more than ten boarders at a given time, Ernestine let several rooms out on a short-term basis, as a former regular Ford Nelson recalled, 'I would access some of those 'by the hour' rooms, have me a little fun back up in there.'" The Domino Lounge quickly became a hotspot for musicians to spend some time to eat, drink, and play. "Sunbeam's music contacts grew as his informal jam sessions, and cheap lodging became the exclusive spot for traveling black performers and their entourages." In 1947, Don Robey visited Mr. Mitchell to exchange contacts. The two hustlers were perfect together. "This association opened musical trade between Memphis and Houston that would boost these cities to the top of the black music world over the next two decades." The two men promoted each other's acts when they were in town, thus generating more success for both businessmen. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 187-188)

In 1949, the Mitchells opened another hotel and bar on the other side of town "By now, area band activity all ran through Sunbeam, as the Mitchell Hotel became an informal musicians' employment agency, a regional Chitlin' Circuit hub. Like New Orleans's Dew Drop, Dallas's Empire Room, and Indianapolis's Sunset Terrace, bandleaders organizing tours of the region would check in at Sunbeam's cantina to find musicians to hire" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 193).

Mitchell was not the only man to aid in revitalizing Memphis' black music. In 1948, a local station, WDIA 73, "was the first station entirely committed to programming for the black audience. The station's impact on Memphis music was profound and immediate." One of the first stars to give the station life was a young Mississippian born in the Delta in September of 1925. Lauterbach wrote about the young man receiving a Southern Christian upbringing, as he "grew up on spirituals and took up the guitar as the sanctified instrument of choice. He sang in gospel quartets around Indianola, Mississippi, and drove a tractor before fleeing for the city." In 1947, Riley King found himself in Memphis, Tennessee. He shared a living space with his cousin, an old bluesman that cut records back in the 1930s named Booker "Bukka" White. Aiming to become a recording sensation himself, Riley drifted to Beale Street where all the action was happening. He would frequent the W.C. Handy Park to watch the guitarists pick away in an attempt to pick up on previously undiscovered techniques. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 197-198)

King returned to the Mississippi Delta for a year to work and save up some money before he committed to moving to Memphis. But his first stint within the music business was not performing, instead it was a deejay gig at the black radio station, WDIA. He worked alongside another gentleman, Matt Williams who was a teacher and columnist that covered music on Beale Street. A young Riley scored the disc jockey gig after he came up with a jingle for an advertisement pertaining a medicine called Pepticon. The ditty was short, sweet, and to the point: Pepticon sure is good, (repeated three times) you can get it anywhere in your neighborhood (B.B. King Museum, 2018). Riley ditched his real name in exchange for a catchier moniker: Bee Bee (which was an even further condensed version of a nickname he had gained while playing at W.C. Handy Park: "Blues Singing Black

Boy"). When he finally developed the playing chops to perform live, it was Sunbeam that "booked the budding radio star into juke joints as far out as the WDIA signal traveled, and B.B. advertised his next appearance from the electric pulpit." B.B. performed in the Mississippi Delta and Arkansas settlements throughout various stretches of Highway 61, while also touring up and down Highway 51 to Tennessee destinations. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 199)

Though Sunbeam was in no way, shape, or form a musician in his own right, "he exerted artistic influence in his club, and that influence, however unwittingly, helped define his city's distinctive style for years to come." He was keen on knowing what both the musicians and the people want. The performers, playing with jazz styles, fused their previous influences and preferences with what the audience came night after night for blues. His style "was masculine, yet refined, blues stirred up with tight, polished jazz. This cocktail, whether called rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, or soul-heard on record labels from L.A., Houston, and Chicago-would be a vital force in American popular music for three decades to come." In Houston, a former band leader for one of Mitchell's in-house groups named Bill Harvey collaborated alongside a recorder working for Don Robey, capturing Sunbeam's powerful and quintessential sound. Bill worked alongside a trumpet player named Joe Scott who would eventually end up producing Don Robey's "most consistent earner from 1955 to 1973," Bobby "Blue" Bland. It is appropriate to mention that Bobby "Blue" Bland was one of Mitchell's Memphis graduates. (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 200-202)

As the 1950s rolled around, Sunbeam had established a reputable name for himself. Lauterbach wrote, "his connections now ran from Memphis's leading businessman to the depths of the Negro underworld. Despite his dizzying responsibilities around Memphis,

Sunbeam sought new territory for his bootlegging operation and found a thirsty market due south of his home city" in Mississippi. Seeing as the state did not officially overthrow Prohibition until the sixties, "Sunbeam built a circuit of black nightclubs in the Magnolia State. He provided libation and song and persuaded people to join the business much as Denver Ferguson had done to begin the Chitlin' Circuit" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 202). One man that was inspired by Sunbeam to open a nightclub business was Hattiesburg's own Milton Barnes. Preston Lauterbach's article in issue 172 of Living Blues describes Hattiesburg's contribution to the Chitlin' Circuit and overall "blues history thanks in part to Milton Barnes."

But with this being said the city of Hattiesburg was no stranger to music history. In 1936, a group consisting of two singing, guitar playing brothers and one pianist known as the Mississippi Jook Band recorded a few tunes that were deemed by blues critic, Robert Palmer to be the first "fully formed rock and roll" songs consisting of guitar with a stomping rock and roll beat" (Komara, 2006, p. 696). These songs ultimately served as inspirations and reminders to those touring artists and acts that would perform at Barnes' club in town.

Born in 1915, Milton never graduated from high school, but he still developed a knack for business that would eventually shape him into the Chitlin' Circuit legend that he is today. Milton opened his first business in Hattiesburg in 1935. It was a dry-cleaning establishment that he called "Barnes Cleaners." Milton was also a philanthropist, donating both time away from his endeavors and money from his cleaning business to help create the baseball team, the Hattiesburg Black Sox, in the early forties. In 1944 Milton opened a nightspot in Hattiesburg called the Embassy Club after he acquired the venue from other associates when they argued over the division of profits that they earned after renting the

pool hall for a show featuring the entertainer Earl Hines. Barnes said, "I can do better than that," so he opted to purchase the pool hall with the money he had made from the concert (Lauterbach, 2004).

Milton's new Embassy Club "competed with the Harlem Night Club, on Highway 11 South, to present big-name acts during the segregation era" (Mississippi Blues Commission, n.d.). However, the local institution did not last long, as it caught fire and burned down in 1949. No one knows what exactly started the blaze, but Barnes did say that "The Elks started giving dances there, but the Elks always went to fightin'," potentially signifying that a rumpus occurred, thus ultimately sparking the fire. Of course, fire hazards at performance venues were plenty back in the day. The year after the Embassy shut down, Mitchell reached out to Barnes, imploring him to open another nightclub that sold hard liquor under the table. Sunbeam informed Milton about "the modern-day medicine show concept" that allowed Barnes to sell bootlegged whiskey snuck into his venue via Sunbeam, allowing Barnes to sell the supply during a show, with Sunbeam getting a final cut. "Barnes built the Hi-Hat Club in Hattiesburg around 1950, and in no time he was running joints, down to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, on similar principles" (Lauterbach, 2004).

Seeing as the Hi-Hat Club was outside of the Hattiesburg City limits in an area called Palmers Crossing, it was "subject to fewer restrictions than nightspots in town on Mobile Street, the center of much of Hattiesburg's earlier blues activity." The city of Hattiesburg would spawn numerous nightclubs out in Palmers Crossing after the opening of the Hi-Hat. Some of these spots were Club Manhattan, Thelma's Place, Dashiki, Club Desire, Aquarius, and the Elks (I.B.P.O.E.W.) Lodge (Mississippi Blues Commission, n.d.). But out of all these clubs, the Hi-Hat still reigned supreme. Milton recalled, "I had

B.B. King on a Sunday night, the place was packed. I had sold out tables, chairs, so we stacked Coca Cola crates. Everybody made money. White men came to buy whiskey." Whiskey was a money maker in operation. In an interview, Milton recalled an instance in which he traveled throughout the dry state to acquire the goods for his hustle.

"You see, they got tight on whiskey. I went up to Laurel, and whiskey's flowin'. I will never forget, Christmas come on a Thursday, and I ordered 22 cases, Laurel called me and said, 'man we ain't got much of nothing yet.' I gets up, go to Bogalusa, and get ten cases, come right through Prentiss, and we sold it all before Sunday night was out" (Lauterbach, 2004). With the availability of liquor at a show, patrons at the Hi-Hat Club would stick around to drink, smoke, and listen to the music. "Barnes territory became such a stronghold in the 1950s that B.B. King would call Hattiesburg his second home" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 223). But he was not the only Circuit superstar to grace the hallowed halls of the Hi-Hat Club. Other notable musicians that played at the venue were Louis Armstrong, Louis Jordan, Albert King, James Brown, Z.Z. Hill, Denise LaSalle, Otis Redding, Sam Cooke, Al Green, Ike & Tina Turner, Bobby "Blue" Bland and Ray Charles (Staff Reports, 2018).

This little roadhouse served as "the epicenter for black music in the hub city" (Lauterbach, 2004). It even "drew crowds of eight to nine hundred, sometimes in excess of a thousand." Barnes was, fortunately, able to book these famous artists through his connections with the popular New Orleans club, the Dew Drop Inn, because Hattiesburg is within proximity to the Crescent City, allowing traveling artists to book a gig in both cities with ease. Later on in life, Milton opened two more clubs in nearby Laurel, the Crown Club, and the Hut Drive-In. He also opened another Hi-Hat Club in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Unfortunately, like so many other relics to the Chitlin' Circuit, the original Hi-Hat Club in Palmers Crossing, Hattiesburg closed its doors in 1994. "And while memories of the Hi-Hat Club remain vivid among those who were once regulars there, little else remains except a historical marker at its former site on Airport Road in southeast Hattiesburg." The marker serves as the 102nd installment to the nationally known Mississippi Blues Trail that was created in 2006 under Governor Haley Barbour in Mississippi to commemorate the state's rich history involving the Blues (Mississippi Blues Commission, n.d.).

Meanwhile, Lauterbach stated that the City of Soul began to rock audiences by "hosting live rock 'n' roll and remote radio broadcasts" out of the Hippodrome, a local skating rink near the end of Beale Street. The WDIA station rolled out a new radio program slotted from the afternoon hours of one and two o'clock, hosted by B.B. King entitled, B.B.'s Jeebies. He had recently seen a group of budding young men calling themselves the Kings of Rhythm, led by a nineteen-year-old man named Ike Turner. Ike was a Mississippi native, hailing from Clarksdale. He played piano alongside Jackie Brenston, who played baritone saxophone. The two were accompanied by a drummer, tenor saxophone player, and a guitar player named Willie Kizart (who would accidentally and unintentionally revolutionize the way rock 'n' roll guitar was played forever). After seeing the group perform in Clarksdale, "on Sunbeam's cotton-town juke-house circuit," King approached the band and told them to visit a Memphis record producer, Sam Phillips (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 206).

Phillips worked at Memphis Recording Service, a business that he started on his own. Living his version of the American Dream, Sam "rented a shop at 706 Union Avenue amidst used-car dealerships, a few blocks east of downtown Memphis. He acoustic-tiled

the walls and ceiling, and bought a few microphones and a recording deck." Phillips would eventually subcontract for prominent record executives like the Chess brothers up in Chicago and Modern Records in Los Angeles. Sam was a white man living in the South, recording listening to and recording music that was primarily aimed at a black audience. At the time, one would surely say that Phillips was a strange man for doing what he did, but he indeed had a passion for music, and he desired to share that same passion with anyone willing to listen to this new genre slowly emerging from a new decade.

While Ike and his band were traveling up Highway 61, they hit a bump in the road that broke the internal cone speaker inside Kizart's electric guitar amplifier. When the Kings of Rhythm arrived in Memphis to record with Sam, they were forced to improvise on the spot to fix the broken speaker cone. Lauterbach stated, "they improvised a solution, placing a crumpled newspaper in place of the damaged speaker cone to help carry the guitar's sound." Jackie and Ike were toying around with a song idea while driving. The tune was called "Rocket 88," and the group cut the boogie-woogie-styled song at their session. The track was an instant hit, as the broken guitar amplifier created what modern guitarists would define as distortion. Of course, the rest of the band shined on "Rocket 88," as Jackie sang the song, Ike laid down a bass-like piano riff, and the tenor saxophone and drums kept the rocking and jiving beat going. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 207) This song is a perfect example of how successful musicians can create a hit with the help of a great band and just a little spur-of-the-moment inspiration.

Sam Phillips knew that if he could get the tune on-air, they would be sitting on easy street. He pitched it to a white disc jockey named Dewey Philips (who had no relation to

Sam), and they both decided that the singer, Jackie Brenston, was the man that could best be exploited for profit, as he was the charismatic and crucial front man of the group:

“The song stirred up a sensation in Memphis. Dewey used 'Rocket 88' as the theme song for his late night, 'Red, Hot, and Blue' program on the radio station WHBQ. Oldsmobile dealerships--a powerful Olds Super 88, with its fat fenders and V8 engine had inspired the tune--located a few blocks on either side of Sam Philip's Memphis Recording Service on Union Avenue, set public address speakers out, and blared 'Rocket 88.' Raymond Hill's shrieking sax echoed up and down the Union, and Kizart's guitar blended with the V8's rumble in traffic” (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 207-208).

However, it is essential to note that while "Rocket 88" was technically recorded by Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston's band, The Kings of Rhythm, when it was pressed, published, and sent to the general public, the group's name was changed to Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats. Both Philips men promoted the frontman angle when they sent the demo of the song to Chess Records in Chicago, they changed the name of the group to better appeal to the current market trends. They also changed the group's name for a better market appeal, in a lucrative attempt to break out of the race record category. "The song made front-page news in the in the white Commercial Appeal on March 28, 1951." Though the news was not particularly positive regarding the new race record hit, it still showed that this new genre of music possessed the power even to turn the heads of white folks.

It is also important to note that while many music critics and historians alike generally agree that "Rocket 88" was considered to be the first real rock 'n' roll song, Brenston said himself in an issue of Jim O'Neal's Living Blues magazine that it was not. "By Jackie Brenston's reasoning, 'Rocket 88' was the second generation of black rock. The Kings of Rhythm (or the Delta Cats, depending on who you asked) cribbed the music from 'Cadillac Boogie' by Jimmy Liggins. Brenston would tell Living Blues and Lauterbach, many years later, 'If you listen to the two, you'll find out they're both the same. The words

are just changed." But the song is still important as it "was probably the first black rocker to cross over since Louis Jordan successfully marketed to white people or 'general popularity' in Sam Phillip's nice euphemism. A white deejay broke the song, a white company embraced its advertising power, and the white paper picked the story up, a rare combination of events." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 208)

After "Rocket 88," the city of Memphis and its new music were officially put on the map. The song "soared to the top of Billboard Rhythm and Blues charts in July 1951. Unfortunately for the Delta Cat Brenston, he could not replicate the initial success that he and his band reached with "Rocket 88." He arrived back at Sam Phillip's recording studio to cut a country tune entitled "Tuckered Out," but it would go nowhere. He was a young musician that had much to learn about the lucrative entertainment business, but unfortunately, he would only be remembered as a one-hit wonder. (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 209)

While Brenston had his time in the sun, another young and budding musician in Memphis was on his way to stardom. B.B. King already had his radio show going for him, but as a fellow aspiring bluesman himself, B.B. set his sights on covering a song from a man named Lowell Fulson. Both men worked under Bob Henry, as he was the promoter of Fulson and the manager for B.B. Lowell was "affable, overweight, and gold-tooth grinning." He was anything but a city-slicker, playing "loose, country blues." He also was not classically trained, as he could not read music (but neither could King). He had played Lowell's recordings on his radio show, as he enjoyed his particular style, and he desired to support Henry's touring acts.

One night in Memphis, at W.C. Handy Park, Lowell was scheduled to play a live gig for the public, thanks to B.B.'s planning. While he had no issue performing in other settings, this night would prove to be different. As his band started his original tune "Every Day I Have the Blues," Fulson saw the Memphis crowd in front of him, and he realized that the song "was one of the biggest rhythm and blues grooves going, he froze there in the wings all the same." After the band continued to vamp, and Bob Henry talked some sense into him, Lowell made his way to the stage and played the night away. Fulson may have had the pre-show jitters due to his phenomenal opening act. It is important to note that before Fulson went up to play, a "young twenty-one-year-old known by his impairment, Blind Ray Charles" blew the house down.

Like the previous circuit performers before him, "Ray made thirty-five dollars a week and lived the Chitlin' Circuit cycle, performing daily, chain-smoking and shooting dice on the bus between stops, and flopping in a furnished room" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 210). His lack of one of the major five senses heightened his musical abilities to an uncanny level. He "could hear every note played clearly as is isolated from the rest of the song. Keeping track of the composition as a whole, he identified and corrected mistakes during the group's rehearsal's, and tightened the Fulson band into a precise unit." This young man caught the eye of the press as he hit the road to become a star. After Lowell and Ray's W.C. Handy Park gig, B.B. approached Fulson, asking for a simple request, seeing as he helped book the gig in the first place. "'You the onliest one to fill this place,' King told Fulson after the show. 'I pat myself on the back 'cause I laid on your records.' Lowell thanked B.B. 'But I tell you what you can do,' B.B. continued, 'you can let me do that 'Three O'clock in the Morning.'"

Lowell cut that tune a few years back, but it did not receive the attention he thought it would. Fulson agreed to let him rerecord it, as he thought it would help B.B. make a name for himself as an entertainer. Lauterbach wrote, "B.B. wasted no time. Independent rhythm and blues record companies had scouts working around Memphis and could swiftly arrange ad-hoc recording sessions in makeshift locations, like Sam Philips's Memphis Recording Service, WDIA's cramped studio, Tuff Green's living room (where they hung blankets on the walls and windows to muffle the outside world), and the colored YMCA at the corner of Vance Avenue and Lauderdale Street toward downtown." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 211)

It would ultimately be the YMCA building where King and his group would record "Three O'clock Blues." This song would catapult B.B. straight into the limelight, as Lauterbach stated, "the Memphis sound's past, present, and future were well represented at the session. Tuff Green, a former student of Jimmie Lunceford and leader of many after-hours bands at Sunbeam Mitchell's, played bass." A man named Willie Mitchell graced the track with his trumpet playing, as he too gained fame jamming at Sunbeam's bar. Later on in his life, "he would achieve musical immortality in coming decades as producer-auteur at Hi Records in South Memphis. Mitchell would help to create Al Green in the 1970s, as well as the soul-stirring strings of Syl Johnson, Ann Peebles, Otis Clay, and O.V. Wright." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 212)

The legendary recording session that became "Three O'clock Blues" also had a former Delta Cat on the credit list. "Though barely twenty, pianist Ike Turner had already led a band on a hit. He was as tireless a talent scout and producer as he was a performer, and Memphis cats B.B. King and Bobby 'Blue' Bland-who, like Ike, are now Rock and Roll

Hall of Famers-would credit him with sparking their recording careers. In fact, Ike had connected B.B. to RPM Records out of Los Angeles, which supervised the session and released 'Three O'clock Blues'." This song would prove to be the start of King's celebrated and life-long vocation to the art of mastering the blues. It even surpassed a Ray Charles release entitled "Kissa Me Baby," as it placed "atop the charts for best-selling rhythm and blues singles and earning the most jukebox plays in the R&B category by mid-February."

It would be appropriate to mention that another one of Sunbeam Mitchell's regulars, Rosco Gordon, was the only artist that came close to topping B.B. with the Chess Records release of his tune, "Booted" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 213). King's manager, Bob Henry, knew that he could produce some serious revenue putting his new act on the road and that he did. "Henry signed B.B. up with Ben Bart's Universal Attractions, the agency that propelled Roy Brown's blockbuster 1949 tour." He was also generous enough to get his new act some fresh threads, as he "took B.B. to Paul's tailor shop on Beale and outfitted him in two suits, one merlot, and one lavender, with black and red shoes, a shirt, socks, and tie to match." (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 214)

## **Chapter 6: The Chess Brothers, Chicago, and the Big Leagues**

While cities such as Sunbeam's Memphis and Denver's Indianapolis inspired, cultivated, and contributed with their fair share of Chitlin' Circuit artists, when rock 'n' roll arrived on the scene, the city of Chicago took center stage. Where the Midget Maestro Walter Barnes once graced gangsters and socialites alike, there was a new sheriff in town. Cohen wrote, "By the 1940s, the music business had shaken itself out into what we recognize as the modern record industry, a world dominated by a handful of companies that, like the movie studios in Hollywood, are big enough and strong enough to dominate the entire market" (Cohen, 2005, p. 51). Gone were the days of finding fame primarily through countless shows and tour dates; entertainers and promoters alike knew that there was a change in the air, giving way to fresh, albeit older faces like the Chess brothers. The Chess brothers were not your normal rhythm and blues/rock 'n' roll enthusiasts, unlike the previous Chitlin Circuit promoters and managers that have previously been discussed.

The lucrative business behind the roots of rock music stemmed from musical contributions spanning all races. "By the mid-1920s, the city (Chicago) was crawling with Jews, second only to New York." Leonard and Phil Chess were merely two of thousands of Jewish babies born in the during the early 1900s. The younger Chess sibling, Leonard, was born and raised on the West Side, in a "Jewtown" that honestly "had been built up as a buffer" to shield the more prominent, White side of town from the Bronzeville that engulfed the Lower-West Side. Every day after school and on the weekends, Leonard would venture down to that side of town to check out the exotic sights and sounds. Cohen stated, "On Sunday mornings, Leonard would walk along Cottage Grove, drifting with the music from the church choirs, the soaring harmonies that drive away impurities and prepare

the soul for heaven. On Friday nights, on these same streets, members of these same choirs were singing dirty songs in the dives, casting off what had been so carefully earned in church, but of course, you have to get dirty to get clean, have to sin to be saved. In this way, Leonard, from his early years, developed a taste for black music" (Cohen, 2005, pp. 28-29).

After high school, Leonard and his older brother Phil worked with their father for a few years. He married in 1941, moving away from his parent's home to a new life in the city. The following year he had a son, Marshall, and three years after his son's birth, "Leonard took a job at a liquor store at 5060 South State Street, in the Black Belt." The establishment was known as Cut-Rate Liquors. At Cut-Rate, one would find a young, Jewish man chatting with his customers. Cohen wrote about the black population who grew comfortable around him, "Leonard came to know every part of black Chicago, mothers, and grandmothers buying wine for dinner, factory workers in denim jackets and boots, gangsters and corner boys-they came from the tenements on 47th and 50th and 53rd streets. Like Leonard, these were immigrants: Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, dirt farms and no-shit towns, a nation of men who reached their prime after emancipation but before civil rights, who channeled otherwise wasted energy into bar fights, feuds, music, a great tide that rolled up from the South." (Cohen, 2005, pp. 31-33)

In the time between 1940 and 1950, the state of Mississippi lost a fourth of its black population as they immigrated to Chicago, "packing up and leaving, taking along musical traditions that had been handed down for generations, long before records and radio, with every kid learning to play in the style of some forgotten slave-traditions that would turn up, as if out of nowhere, on records cut on the South Side," according to Cohen. Early

Mississippi blues artists like the legendary Robert Johnson would permanently capture the greatness of the city, with staple tunes like "Sweet Home Chicago." This particular song alone has been the subject of countless rock and blues covers spanning generations (such as Buddy Guy, Eric Clapton, and John Mayer). "In 1940, a black worker in Mississippi took home around four hundred thirty-nine dollars a year. In Chicago, the same worker could make over two grand. There was a cultural pull. Chicago was the home of the Chicago Defender, the oldest and most influential black newspaper in the country, a muckraking broadsheet sold across the South." (Cohen, 2005, pp. 36-37)

The reader has seen the importance of this publication as it supported the Chitlin' Circuit artists, and was even edited by Walter Barnes. But now it was Leonard's turn. His official entrance into the new music recording business that would soon evolve into one of the largest international industries known to man began on the Bronzeville streets of Chicago. In many ways, Sunbeam Mitchell, Denver Ferguson, and Leonard Chess were all kindred spirits, as they saw these black masses as an untapped market, waiting to be plundered. Cohen said, "the past is what they had come north to escape, and yet they never really could get away from anything: no matter what they did, there it was, in their music and in their language, especially when they were drinking." Leonard and Cut-Rate "were therefore holy as a church: the curse and the reward, the wound and the salt on the wound, the blind spot on the way to clarity." For many musicians, their vocation brings pain, and with it, unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as drugs and alcohol. (Cohen, 2005, p. 33)

As a genuine capitalist, Leonard used his sobriety to gain the upper hand in business ventures such as recording contracts. "As a rule, most of the first generation of record men did not drink, or drug, or do many of the interesting things that were a big part of the lives

of their artists. It played into one of the classic Jewish stereotypes, unfair, but kind of true: that Jews don't drink." But at the end of the day, stereotype or not, Leonard made the discernibly wise choice not to mix business with pleasure. (Cohen, 2005, p. 34)

Cohen wrote that "When a contract came up for renewal, he might just call an artist on the phone, offer favorable terms, then say, 'Just come on over and let's sign this thing.' He would make sure his office was well stocked with top-drawer scotch and vodka, set out an ice bucket and tumblers, then duck out. When the artist turned up, Leonard's secretary, as instructed, would say, Mr. Chess had to run out for a minute. He said to wait in his office. As the artist steps through the door, the secretary says, Help yourself to a drink. An hour later, Leonard calls in and asks his secretary, Is he drunk? If yes, Leonard races back, apologizes, says, We're so excited about this deal. Let's drink to it. He fills two tumblers, raises his glass, watches the artist throw his back." This is where sober the bait-and-switch technique comes into play. "Leonard then shakes his head and says, Now, you see, well, unfortunately, ahem, and you know, I have been in with the bankers all day over this, knocking my brains out, but we just can't come up with that kind of scratch-but how do you feel about white walls? I can really sweeten this deal with a boss set of tires." (Cohen, 2005, pp. 34-35)

In a similar fashion to Sunbeam in Memphis, Leonard purchased a restaurant in one of Chicago's many teeming Bronzevelles located "at 39th Street and Cottage Grove, the heart of the ghetto. Leonard and Phil rebuilt the restaurant into a nightclub, tearing out tables and countertops and classing it up, with velvet booths and a horseshoe-shaped bar, a barbeque pit, and a stage for bands. He called it the Macomba Lounge" (Cohen, 2005, p. 42). The soon-to-be-famous lounge opened its doors in 1949 when jazz music was still in

full swing. Cohen said, "This was before the Delta Blues hit the city. Most of the clubs still featured velvet-voiced singers who danced with the microphone and enunciated, music geared to the black middle class and the white slummers who claimed to find elemental power on the wrong side of town." Leonard and his brother Phil were in it for the long haul, as they took part in formerly mentioned illegal activities such as bribing police officers, ultimately allowing them to stay open later than they were supposed to. The Macomba was supposed to close at four in the morning, but if the event was lively, Leonard would pull down the shutters and keep the party going on through the dawn. (Cohen, 2005, p. 43)

Naturally, this seedy establishment also gave way to drug selling. "Exchanges in the bathroom, in the alley, right up front, a packet of cocaine taped under a stool." This trafficking issue would eventually force the Chess brothers to "check every chair, flushing what they found" when it came time to finally close down for the night, or in most cases, in the wee hours of the morning. These were not the only dangerous elements that Leonard and Phil would face, as the lounge was home to "threats, fights, and holdups." Someone even attempted to stab Leonard with a knife one particular evening, but his bodyguard, Big Gene intervened, having the blade pierce him rather than Leonard. Big Gene survived, but he would need seventy stitches to properly heal his wound. The chaos would not stop there. Cohen wrote, "Another night, Leonard brought Marshall to work-he was five years old-gunfire broke out. Marshall remembers his father tossing him over the bar and lying on top of him-an incident that probably convinced Leonard there was not much future in the nightclub business." (Cohen, 2005, p. 45) After this incident, Chess took to carrying a piece with him, a 44-caliber pistol to be exact. This would prove to be a wise move, considering that the Macomba was strictly a cash business.

Like Denver Ferguson before him, after closing time, Leonard would take the bags of cash out to his car (with his pistol holstered on his hip), drive across town to the bank, drop his hard-earned cash off, and then head home to fish with his son. All in all, owning a nightspot like the Macomba was indeed a risky business, but Leonard would soon discover a way out that involved the newfangled process of recording artists to a record. "Before long, a new type of patron had appeared at the Macomba: white men in dark suits who listened to bands with sharp-eyed detachment. Some carried pads and scribbled notes." These gentlemen would always pull Leonard aside, they would ask about the performances that would occur nightly "Leonard at first believed that these men to be aficionados, experienced collectors ahead of the tide, but soon realized that they were record men-small-time producers scouring the clubs." The business intrigued Leonard, as he soon found himself watching for these individuals enter his nightclub to scout out potential talent. Leonard himself acted as an "unpaid scout, steering them to artists, watching how a record man approaches a musician, works him, then, for chump change, presses a single that can be sold in the bars, the newsstands, the drugstores." As time progressed, Leonard saw a plethora of talent scouts flock to his establishment. With this, he soon realized that there was indeed a promising future in the record business if one knew how to turn the tides in their favor.

Cohen stated, "In 1947, when Sammy Goldberg, a black scout, came after Andrew Tibbs, who now and then sang at the Macomba, Leonard had a realization: Why recruit Andrew Tibbs so Sammy Goldberg can turn a dollar? Why not record Tibbs myself?" (Cohen, 2005, p. 46). Being the entrepreneur that he was, Leonard talked to his talent, Mr. Tibbs, and wrote a recording contract for him. Andrew was to record with a local,

independent record label known as Aristocrat. This record company was owned and managed by a wedded couple named Evelyn and Charles Aron. Leonard knew he had leverage, as "the Arons had the company and the experience, but Leonard had access to the talent" (Cohen, 2005, p. 47). "There were dozens of independent record men working in big cities in the Northeast and Midwest, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, wherever large immigrant populations were thrown together with blacks from the South-rural people reeling in the industrial landscape" (Cohen, 2005, p. 56). These men had names like Syd Nathan, Herb Abramson, Herman Lubinsky, George Goldner, and even two gentlemen who were known as the Schwartz brothers. Like Chess, they too desired a piece of the American dream by capturing the new sounds of the time (Cohen, 2005, p. 60).

These early record executives did not have the capital for lavish office spaces. The new "record men rented offices on the edge of the slums, DMZs where Jewish and Italian neighborhoods ran into the ghetto." But sometimes even these physical office locations were unaffordable to those starting out in the business with no money to their name. "The most desperate operated as nomads, what the writer A. J. Leibling called Telephone Booth Indians. As their office phone, they gave out a number for a pay phone in the lobby of a building downtown and would camp in front of the phone for hours. A girl was hired to answer calls: 'Hi Class Records!' And she shuffles some papers and hands the phone over to a sweating Telephone Booth Indian. 'Kaplinsky here. And make it quick, it's my busy time'."

To further complicate the business, some opted to borrow start-up money from the mob. As dangerous as it sounds, acquiring a loan from the mob was the only way some executives could afford to stay in business. Cohen stated, "First Boston would simply not

loan some immigrant sheeny ten grand to record a Negro from Alabama. But the gonifs were always ready with a roll. That's what the mob does: loan capital to those without options." Many were fortunate enough to pay back what they were loaned, because if they did not, not only would they be forced to forfeit their business and contracts to the mob, they would more than likely lose a finger, toe, or limb at worse. (Cohen, 2005, p. 57)

Seeing as Leonard had experienced his fair shares with dangerous and life-threatening situations, he did not desire to enter the record business with funds from loan sharks. Rather, he teamed up with the local Chicago label, Aristocrat, which was operated by Charles and Evelyn Aron (Cohen, 2005, p. 61). To say that the duo shared the management and operating roles equally would be a stretch, considering Evelyn "recruited the artists and produced the records." By 1948, "Leonard approached Evelyn to form a partnership." As she herself was a raised a Jewish, she was immediately drawn to his presence, but not exactly in a positive light. "She knew Leonard from the Macomba, and from the scene," but she was not entirely sure that he could be partner material. But Leonard had a golden ace up his sleeve: the coveted and highly sought after recording contract of Andrew Tibbs. So, being the hustler that he was, Chess struck a deal with Evelyn, saying that Tibbs could record under Aristocrat, only if she taught him how to become a record producer. (Cohen, 2005, p. 62)

Chess still devoted some time to the Macomba, but he set his sights on recording. Enlisting help, Leonard recruited Sammy Goldberg. Cohen wrote, "the scout who first turned him on to Andrew Tibbs. Together, they would fill the roster of Aristocrat. It's funny, how this Polish immigrant, this kid who did not even learn English until he was in school, winds up at a company called Aristocrat. But that's America: no past, no pedigree,

the great ones give birth to themselves." Gone were Leonard's days of smuggling cash in and out of his lounge with a gun. He no longer had to check under the tables for narcotics or jeopardize his life and his career due to random acts of violence.

Getting started in the record business was simple enough for Leonard. "Overhead was nothing, Twenty, thirty bucks for rent, some chairs, a secretary, gas money." And in those days, recording artists only got a cut when they were finished recording, on top of an extra flat-rate of "\$41.25 for a three-hour session." Artists also recorded relatively fast, considering that "many of the early records were just one guy on a piano or guitar." Add this factor in with the twenty-dollar musician's union fee, along with "twenty-five to forty bucks an hour, and throw in a few hundred for pressing, and for three or four hundred dollars, you've got a record." For this recording price, the net income was almost always in their favor, considering that a record could "bring in a thousand dollars. And that was before he hit the real big time. (Cohen, 2005, pp. 63-64)

In the early days of Chess' Aristocrat employment, he would simply load his Cadillac car full to the brim with finished records and drive them around town (and even to adjacent states) to the record stores where they could be sold. Cohen wrote, "If a record flopped, Leonard was out a few week and some C-notes. But, if it hit, he might gross fifty, sixty grand; if it really hit, he might gross a hundred K-2 or 3 percent went to the artist in royalties (the majors paid closer to 5 percent), but the rest, depending on how honest he was with the government, was profit" (Cohen, 2005, pp. 63-64).

Cohen also said that Leonard's first major recording experience was with Andrew Tibbs at a rented studio space at Columbia Records. Being the businessman that he was, Leonard "tended to believe that everyone is pretending anyway, so if you just feigned

knowledge, the real thing was sure to follow" (Cohen, 2005, p. 64). Because of the technical limitations and lack of physical recording space on analog recording machines, the recording artist had to concentrate on recording their best performance without any errors. Chess would yell and shout at his artists like Tibbs, not only to look and sound like a record executive but to also inspire them to give it their all. If the musician could not deliver, Leonard would take over and try his hand at the recording. An instance of this occurrence can be heard on the Muddy Waters song, "She Moves Me," as Leonard banged out the drum beat (Cohen, 2005, p. 65).

## Chapter 7: Epilogue

The Chitlin' Circuit, its players, and its public wholly altered how popular genres of music were performed and distributed. The rich history of the tour route can be traced back to the song stylings of both black and white performers from both sexes, as they cultivated success in the new entertainment industry. These musicians interacted with one another when they labored together during the day or when they traveled together on early medicine shows. They collaborated to better learn their instruments and hone in on their craft. Early performers knew that the best chance at success in this occupation was to develop diverse musical repertoires, thus rendering their services more marketable. As the twentieth century persisted, new technological innovations like the record player and its predecessor, the phonograph gave birth to the business of recording music. Many circuit performers cut records that were desired by blacks and white audiences alike, further paving interracial exchanges in the music entertainment industry.

As both black and white artists began recording with new record labels, they created a new form of popular music that was conceived on the circuit. The new stylings of music ultimately forced Billboard executives to alter their record classification format in regards to African American releases, as time ushered in a new, more rocking form of music. This early rock and roll music transcended cultural barriers, as it was recorded by immigrants and Americans hailing from countless ethnicities and religious affiliations. These early record labels that produced these rocking blues artists inspired competitors to create similar records with more circuit performers, allowing these players with the opportunity to record and potentially become nationally recognized. All of these positive advancements to

American culture were made possible because of the Chitlin' Circuit and the numerous individuals and business that kept it alive and well.

On November 3rd, 2018 I attended a memorial for a Mississippi photographer, James Patterson, at a local venue called Hal and Mal's in Jackson. I paid my respects and briefly chatted with the university instructor that invited me to the event, Mr. Gregory Preston. He then ushered me to an older gentleman who was sitting nearby, informing me that he was a genuine Chitlin' Circuit performer. His name is Jessie Robinson, and what he had to say about the circuit is quite interesting. He first asked me what a chitlin' actually was. I responded, saying something along the lines of, "Yeah, it's the fried intestines of a pig." He agreed and defined what a chitlin' was to him, saying basically what I had stated, but he also made sure to state that "that's where the shit comes out."

He then went on to ask me, "What is the Chitlin' Circuit?" He elaborated upon his question, stating that the Chitlin' Circuit could be anywhere, implying that wherever there are touring bands to play at local venues, the Chitlin' Circuit will always evolve and exist. I enquired if he was familiar with the book, *The Chitlin' Circuit and the Road to Rock 'n' Roll* and its author Preston Lauterbach, to which he replied with a yes. But Robinson's overall demeanor made it clear that he was not thoroughly impressed with his work. While he confirmed that the events that unfolded in the book happened, there are countless other souls that performed at these same venues mentioned that were not discussed at all. I sincerely think that Robinson knew that Lauterbach was an intellectual, academic type of man, and they were not cut from the same cloth. In his final statement, Jesse stressed that if people really desire to understand the Chitlin' Circuit as a whole, one must first take a walk in the shoes of the performers that lived it.

But the steady, creeping hand of time has forever altered the Chitlin' Circuit's past heritage. Like the original circuit performers, many of the places where these star attractions played no longer exist. In the introduction of his work, Lauterbach highlights the effects of a changing time and culture as he stated, "While the ghetto's contours reverberate through the music in ways that often define notation, rock 'n' roll simply couldn't have happened anyplace else. The Streets of Indianapolis, Houston, and New Orleans are as fundamentally crucial to this story as the people who walked them. As money and power flowed through the ghetto during the 1930s and '40s, creativity and musical innovation followed. But as black downtowns atrophied and disappeared thereafter, not only was their influence diminished, their mark faded from America's cultural history" (Lauterbach, 2011, p. 13).

Preston also discusses a meeting he had with a more modern Chitlin' Circuit star, Bobby Rush, while working on an article for Jim O'Neal's magazine *Living Blues*. Rush was quick to point out the changes from the past, as "Their blues shows, which typically feature upward of five acts and go on for hours sell out rodeo arenas and civic centers, mostly in the Deep South." The past venues that acts like B.B. King, Ike Turner, and Muddy Waters used to frequent have vanquished now due to urban renewal and revitalization acts. The Hi-Hat Club that Walter Barnes built in Hattiesburg is now the sight of a local laundromat. These once-sacred spaces meant for music and enjoyment can only be accessed via imagination.

But people can still access and tour certain Chitlin' Circuit stops and attractions in the modern age. Of course, the overall experience is certainly different, as circuit performers like Bobby Rush socialize with the crowd throughout the evening, posing for

pictures with fans in front of airbrushed backdrops for the price of ten dollars. "The big concerts attract both young and nostalgic fans, and everyone has a good time, dragging coolers and bottles in and feasting on smoked turkey legs, fried catfish, and pulled-pork-shoulder sandwiches." There is even "an annual Grammy-type celebration" that celebrates the accomplishments of the contemporary circuit acts dubbed the Jackson Music Awards, hosted in Jackson, Mississippi (Lauterbach, 2011, pp. 4-5).

Today, the Chitlin' Circuit tourist industry capitalizes on the remaining venues and locations, as tourists from around the world can travel to places like The Shack Up Inn, found in Clarksdale, Mississippi, to put themselves in the life of a sharecropper who labored during the day and jammed the night away with pure Mississippi blues. Locations like this boast a special opportunity for true blues aficionados, immersing "themselves in the living history found within restored sharecropper shacks." The Shack Up Inn's website states that tourists can "walk around the grounds surrounding the original cotton gin" that has been converted into the inn's bar and main lobby. Guests can also spot "one of the first mechanized cotton pickers, manufactured by International Harvester." The Inn also is home to its own little dive setting called the Juke Joint Chapel. To help improve on the authenticity of the experience, the Shack Up Inn's "corrugated tin roofs and Mississippi cypress walls will conjure visions of a bygone era. As you sit in the rocker on the porch, sipping a cold one while the sun sinks slowly to the horizon, you just might hear Pinetop Perkins radiatin' the 88's over at his shack. Perhaps, if you close your eyes even Muddy or Robert or Charlie might stop to strum a few chords in the night" (The Ritz We Ain't: The Shack Up Inn, n.d.).

Without the brave entertainers to blaze the trail for the Chitlin' Circuit, the world would not have many of the distinct and immensely popular genres of music that exist today. Countless popular radio hits that are well-known and that have stood the test of time drew direct inspiration from artists that either worked on the circuit or had contacts along it. While many of the original establishments that hosted these performers are now gone, new spaces have emerged not only in the South but also throughout the country to celebrate the Chitlin' Circuit's heritage.

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