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## Down On Hastings Street: A Study Of Social and Cultural Changes in a Detroit Community 1941-1955

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### Recommended Citation

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# **DOWN ON HASTINGS STREET**

A STUDY OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES  
IN A DETROIT COMMUNITY 1941-1955

by

JOHN FREDRICK COHASSEY

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For over twenty years, I have listened, studied, and admired the music of African-American artists. It is their gift to our national and world culture that provided me with the inspiration for writing this work. My recent literary endeavors and academic ambitions, however, would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of Professor Roy Kotynek whose passion for history and the arts helped broaden my understanding of the value of education and serious academic study. Special thanks must also be extended to Michael Poll for his advice and editorial skills in the early stages of this work. Volunteering many hours of his time, Sunnie Wilson brought information which proved vital to my historical interpretation of Detroit's black community. A man of kind disposition and humanitarian principles, Mr. Wilson emerged not only as an important source of knowledge, but a close friend. Jonathan Knust must be acknowledged for his contribution to my understanding of jazz and the development of my skills as a music writer and critic. I am extremely grateful to jazz researcher Jim Gallert for his expertise and comments which contributed to the final editing of the text. Lastly, I would like to thank my mother Nancy Chubb and my wife Gretta: two wellsprings of human spirit responsible for providing me with strength and reassurance during my years of artistic and academic study.

## INTRODUCTION

Cutting a sixty-foot wide path through Detroit's black and Jewish districts, Hastings Street's buildings and residences bordered tightly against the sidewalk, robbing the avenue of any earth or greenery. Unlike Woodward, the city's palatial showcase boulevard which had served as a "great barrier" separating the races, Hastings accommodated migrants from both the cotton fields of the Deep South and the cities and rural villages of Eastern Europe. Connected with the route of the Detroit Railway and the city's streetcar line, Hastings served as the east side's main avenue of business, the gateway for thousands of blacks and whites seeking a new life in the promised land of the industrial North.

Streets represent a cross section of people, tradition, and culture. They offer a gauge with which to measure the social and economic health of their surrounding environs. Despite their location within miles of urban development, certain streets retain their own identity, their own character, their own history. A key to understanding the uniqueness of famous thoroughfares is to look at the development of the arts within their boundaries. Like Memphis' Beale Street, Los Angeles' Central Avenue, and Dallas' Elm Street, Detroit's Hastings Street—celebrated in song and lauded in poetic verse—featured a thriving jazz and blues scene that reflected not only the various cultural and social forces within the greater community, but the changes within modern urban America during the twentieth century.

Looking into the rise and fall of Hastings jazz and blues scene reveals a national rather than a local trend. Within the migrations of black workers who came to seek jobs in Detroit's auto plants, Los Angeles' shipyards, and Chicago's stockyards, were hundreds of musicians—jazzmen and bluesmen determined to reap economic reward from the wealth of northern industry. Inves-

tigating African-american music in these segregated urban boundaries, one can find a parallel, a cyclical pattern that followed the effects of three primary forces: post World War II recession, desegregation and urban renewal. The wane of the popularity of these urban music scenes can also be attributed to changing popular tastes—the rise of rhythm & blues, rock 'n' roll—yet these musical trends do not explain, how after fifty years as thriving cultural centers, African-american urban communities along Beale Street, Hastings, and Central Avenue experienced almost immediate demise.

The study of the Hastings Street jazz and blues scene affords a look into Detroit's African-american community when it faced the burden of segregation, and also shared in the city's economic prosperity. Because the black and Jewish proprietors of Hastings Street's nightclubs and restaurants catered to patrons of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, the study of the street contributes to the understanding of racial relations in Detroit, concentrating primarily on the years 1941 to 1955. The delineation of the distinct features separating the migrant Southern folk blues culture and the older established jazz community reveals the diverse social and cultural elements of Detroit's African-American population.

This unique perspective has few scholarly precedents. One of the first works that does investigate the relationship between jazz music and its cultural environment is sociologist Leroy Ostransky's *Jazz City*. But Ostransky's comparative examination of New Orleans, Kansas City, Chicago, and New York, although informative about the social forces responsible for engendering unique jazz movements, fails to provide a well integrated picture of the music and its cultural surroundings. His discussions of local history and machine politics never makes a strong connection with the segregated neighborhoods and venues which supported an urban jazz subculture.

Yet despite its shortcomings, *Jazz City* makes an attempt to present the jazzmen's social environment.

Margaret McKee and Fred Chrisenhall's work *Beale Black & Blue* deals with the racial aspects, musical legends, and the effects of urban renewal on Memphis' legendary music strip. Written in a loose, narrative style, *Beale Black & Blue* takes a random storyteller's approach in resurrecting the famous strip. Oral interviews of Beale Street's club owners and musicians supported by scattered surviving primary sources provide the foundation for this informative, yet loosely structured work, that traces the street's music scene and how white machine politics and social programs that led to its creation and postwar demise.

Published more than a decade after McKee and Chrisenthal's work, Paul Da Barros' study of Seattle's jazz scene, *Jackson Street Afterhours: The Roots of Jazz in Seattle*, is a comprehensive social-cultural history of the city's musicians and the venues that supported them. Based primarily on oral interviews, Da Barros' work sheds light on the little known world of Northwest jazz. As opposed to this study, which attempts to remain focused on a specific urban section, Da Barros' book deals with a more complete history of the city's jazz culture including both black and white musicians and the city's jazz trends from the 1920s to the Be Bop era. It stands as first-rate introduction to Seattle's jazzmen and their unique environs.

Barbara J. Kukla's study of African American music in Newark, New Jersey, *Swing City: Newark Nightlife*, like *Jackson Afterhours*, spans the same period of musical development. A far less extensive book, *Swing City* is written in an interesting narrative-style, and like former works takes on a documentarian approach, containing little musical or historical analysis.

Other works by music critics, writers, and historians offer only brief mention of the segre-

gated urban areas where modern blues and jazz emerged. Primarily based upon musicology and historical biography, these studies rarely reflect the urban milieu of the African-American music: the economic venues, audiences, and urban environs responsible for supporting the evolution of two unique African-American music forms.

This study is an effort to place the African-American musician within their proper sociocultural perspective—to bring the artist in contact with the audiences and business venues where they displayed and honed their talent. It reflects the urbanization of rural southern blacks through the music of migrant bluesmen. By avoiding a one dimensional view it too explores how Detroit's black middle class population supported a vibrant jazz scene on one of the city's most legendary thoroughfares.

In his recent study, *The Jazz Scene: An Informal History From New Orleans to 1990*, W. Royal Stokes wrote that "Detroit and its environs ranks high on the list of those cities that deserve a volume, perhaps several," on the culture of African-Americans. Concentrating on the early years of Detroit's African-American music scene, this book reveals the cultural seedbed that helped give rise to the city's world renown modern jazzmen, R&B singers, and Motown—the commercial and glossy inheritor of nearly one hundred years of rich musical tradition.



# CHAPTER I

## The Human Tide: Origins of a Community

With the constant influx of diverse ethnic groups to Detroit's eastside during the nineteenth century, Hastings became the city's symbolic Ellis Island, welcoming blacks and Europeans whose economic conditions forced them to live within the confines of the eastside ghetto district. Hastings and its surrounding community served as a place where immigrants and rural migrants began the process of Americanization and urbanization. The street became a stepping-off point for thousands of ambitious blacks and European immigrants, an economic springboard in which to climb the social ladder.

For blacks, however, this process of assimilation and social mobility would prove a particularly arduous struggle. First settling in the Hastings district before the Civil War, blacks initially shared the "decaying waterfront" with the French in the early nineteenth century. The eastside originally occupied an area bounded by Randolph and Beaubien on the west and Dequindre on the east. In the 1850s blacks also established themselves in the Kentucky district, a section of the city known for its black and white-owned saloons, dance halls, and brothels.

A decade later, the Hastings district contained a number of saloons and dance halls notorious for their rough atmosphere. In 1866 a black dance hall on Indiana Street between St. Antoine and Hastings was raided by the police. Twentyfive men and women were arrested, and one man was fatally shot as he tried to escape. In the following years the police increased their efforts to close down illegal black establishments.

But the hostile atmosphere of saloons and the threat of police raids did not deter blacks from

entering the city during the 1870s. Constituting what Gilbert Osofsky refers to as the "advance guard" of the Great Migration, black migrants joined the local population in establishing the near eastside as Detroit's largest black community. During the 1870s and 1880s 84.7 percent of the city's 2,235 blacks lived in the Third, Fourth, Sixth, and Seventh Wards. The Fourth Ward, divided north and south by Hastings Street, contained 373 blacks. Because of the diverse ethnic and racial composition of the district, blacks generally lived a few doors apart or resided in small clusters of homes scattered throughout the community. Within the Fourth Ward, for example, sixty-one blacks lived in five adjacent residences located on Mullet between St. Antoine and Hastings. On Lafayette between St. Antoine and Hastings thirty-six blacks resided in seven homes in close proximity. Along Hastings between Croghan and Lafayette twenty-seven blacks occupied five adjoining houses.

In the 1890 Detroit City Directory, listed 48 blacks living on Hastings. Of these residents were 3 plasterers, 3 barbers, 4 waiters, 2 cooks, a porter, gardener, watchman, janitor, and twelve listed as common laborers.

Near the turn of the century, many eastside taverns and "groggeries" catered to blacks. The "Bucket of Blood" saloon on the corner of Clinton and Hastings, for example, earned its sobriquet for its frequent "cutting affrays" and "razor fights." In this eastside area stabbings were commonplace, and "human life meant nothing if a few dollars were at stake." Traveling in pairs, policemen often avoided arrests in fear that vengeful neighborhood crowds might side with the criminals. Patrolmen named the area between Brush and St. Antoine, "Hell's Delight," a district known to support "deft-fingered alley workers" and "coke-snuffers" who rolled men for their wallets.

Into this area of illicit nightlife activity moved a tremendous European migration that transformed the ethnic composition of the Hastings Street community from 1900 onward. During the decade before 1910, ninety thousand Jews a year migrated to the United States. Russian Jews fleeing the persecution of Czar Nicholas II constituted a great number of those who crowded into the urban ghettos of New York, Chicago, and Detroit. Settling on the eastside at the turn of the century, Russian Jews represented eighty-eight percent of Detroit's Jewish population of 5,000.

Long before the mass European migration of the 1890s, Jews had established roots in the eastside community. In 1845 Polish-born Jew Andrew Kaminski purchased four parcels of land on Mullet and Hastings, paying \$100, \$80, \$20 and \$15 a parcel. After the Civil War poor Polish and other Eastern European Jews remained in small numbers in the proximity of the several synagogues in the Hastings area; eastside Jews resided in an isolated sphere separated from the German-Jewish population living in the prestigious neighborhoods north of Grand Circus Park.

As they arrived in growing numbers with their traditional dress, Russian Jews became the most visible element of Detroit's Jewry. Like a city within a city, the Hastings Street district earned the epithets of "The Ghetto," "New Jerusalem," and "Little Jerusalem." Within an area lagging far behind the rest of the city in water pipes laid and sewage systems constructed, most Jewish newcomers took up residence in two-family dwellings that typified midwestern housing patterns. Though some multiple-family buildings existed in the Hastings Street area near the Stroh's brewery, the majority of homes on the eastside bore little resemblance to the tenements of New York's Jewish quarter.

While it did not exhibit the architectural features of New York's ghetto, Hastings Street remained, as historian Sidney Bolkosky wrote, "obviously Jewish in its sights, smells, and

sounds." To accommodate the demand for ethnic foods and goods, Jewish entrepreneurs converted the first floors of their homes into shops, restaurants, and bakeries. Hastings "is no longer a street of poormen," stated a local paper in 1896. With property values rising, the author predicted that in ten years hence Hastings would become one of the busiest thoroughfares in the city. Outside of the long rows of fish stores, confectioneries, and butcher shops, rickety wagons made their way through the deep holes and rises of Hastings. In alleys junkmen blew tin horns to announce their arrival as they pushed carts heaped with discarded merchandise. On the corners of side streets, bearded men in dark suits smoked Turkish cigarettes as they discussed politics and religious issues.

In 1917 Jewish businessmen and developers expressed the desire for converting the Hastings ghetto district into a modern commercial center. Witness to the rapid growth and construction throughout Detroit, Jewish civic leaders saw a dire need to raise the "standard of the entire district." With the construction of a four-story apartment building on Hastings and Division, the refined Detroit newspaper, *The Jewish Chronicle*, announced that the building "will transform the Hastings Street section to a thoroughfare that will be a pride to the city." This vision, however, would be outstripped by the number of black and European immigrants who spilled into the eastside section.

Though it came to be dominated by blacks and Jews, the Hastings district did contain small populations of Russians, Slovaks, Hungarians, Croatians, Irish, and Chinese. One could walk down the street and find the name of Moscovitch, Johnston, Bonifideo, and Podizikovski on doors next to those decorated in Yiddish characters. On adjoining residential streets, blacks lived alongside Italian immigrants who often competed for jobs as stevedores, barbers, artisans, and

small businessmen.

The only major eastside ethnic group not represented on Hastings was the Poles, whose animosity for the Jews led them to establish the Hamtramck district north of Hastings. Tensions between Poles and Jews often created disturbances. In 1920, for instance, a mob of young Poles marched down Hastings where they met some young Jews in a vacant lot and began a street fight with fists, bricks, and bottles. Describing the dissension between the residents of his Jewish neighborhood and the Poles of the northern district, a former resident recalled that "If you walked past the borderline, you were likely to get beaten up. If they came over, some of the guys on our side would reciprocate."

The drivers of horses along Hastings' sixty-block stretch encountered a rough stone surface between Atwater and Jefferson which yielded to brick between Jefferson and Mullet. On Jefferson and Hastings, Detroiters of genteel background visited the Detroit Museum of Art. Built at a cost of one hundred thousand dollars, the museum brought European Gothic architecture to the street's southernmost section near the river. North above the Jewish district between Mullet and Grand Boulevard existed a cruder section paved with a mixture of dirt and cedar. In 1896, a news reporter walked the length of Hastings and described the diversity between the Jewish and African-American sections: "A good many colored people live on Hastings they live for the most part in the section of the avenue above the Jewish section. They contribute to a livelier and more cheerful aspect to the street." In this area of Hastings, blacks opened several small business operations. In the 1890s William Binga, a black barber, owned a one-story tenement on the corner of Hastings and Rowena. Known as Binga Row, the structure contained six units the width of a window and a door.

After 1900 black middle-class newcomers contributed to the economic development of the eastside ghetto. Their aggressiveness and determination to achieve economic success in the North led to a transformation in the appearance of streets like St. Antoine and Hastings. Throughout the eastside, blacks opened drugstores, funeral parlors, lumber yards, cigar stands and saloons. Although many of these small venues were high-risk businesses requiring little capital, very few, even when forced to close, remained vacant long. Such efforts made the area bound by St. Antoine and Hastings a thriving center for gambling joints, saloons, pool halls and illicit "sporting houses."

Because of the severe housing shortage, blacks and Jews, irrespective of the ties they retained to their communities, were compelled to move beyond the district. Confronted with racial discrimination, realty fraud, restrictive covenants, and high rents, blacks slowly gained residence in neighborhoods near Eight Mile Road, where they lived within an atmosphere of threats, ostracism, and violence. The few blacks fortunate enough to escape the confines of the ghetto also learned that success did not always shelter them from the racism of the larger community.

Unable to better their economic means, the majority of rural poor blacks arriving during the Great Migration of 1917 remained within the district. Claiming only 3,431 blacks in 1890, Detroit witnessed the arrival of between 25,000 and 30,000 blacks in 1916-1917. When the Federal government cut immigration during World War I, Detroit automobile companies stepped up efforts to recruit black workers. Lured by the campaigns of northern industrial recruiters and the promise of Henry Ford's "five-dollar day," many southern blacks traveled by train to Cincinnati where they boarded the Michigan Central Railroad for Detroit.

Arriving at a rate of one hundred a day in 1917, the number of black migrants caused concern

among many of Detroit's black religious and community leaders. "The Southern States are being rapidly depopulated of their colored people," warned Detroit Urban League executive Forrest B. Washington, "and with the general movement toward the north I'm afraid that Detroit is getting more than she can handle at this time." Well aware of the underdevelopment caused by segregation and lack of city planning, Washington knew that no matter how many black men and women found work, their prospect of acquiring living quarters and decent housing would prove far more difficult.

What alarmed individuals like Washington went unheeded by the city's auto company executives and Progressive politicians. In their quest for efficiency and industrial expansion, they did little to address the conditions faced by poor black Southern migrants. Nothing had prepared the city for the sudden influx of laborers standing in long lines outside employment offices. Urban League officials, religious volunteers, and professional sociologists wrestled with the problem of acclimating the recent arrivals to their new environment. Reverend L. Bradby of the Second Baptist Church stood at the railroad depot to welcome every trainload of newcomers, hoping to instill them with the spirit of the gospel before they fell prey to the city saloons and gambling halls. The Urban League handed out leaflets outlining the "proper" behavior, dress, and conduct expected of Detroit's black citizens. Of the two hundred black workers employed at Ford Motor Company in 1917, adherence to religious and social guidelines were required if they expected to receive the full payment of the five-dollar day.

The measures taken to help blacks adjust socially, however, far exceeded efforts by the city to deal with the problem of public housing. In 1917 poor blacks, much like the Jewish immigrants of the previous decades, took refuge in Detroit's congested eastside "ghetto"—a thirty

block area bounded by Leland on the north, Macomb on the south, Hastings on the east, and Brush on the west. Poor blacks, labeled "stayers" by the local press because of their inability to move out of the eastside ghetto district, paid high rents for what amounted to "alley-sheds" and subdivided barns.

These unpainted grayish wooden structures lined the dirt alleyways behind Hastings. Born and raised in Black Bottom, boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson gave his impressions of the district: "In Detroit the sky hung like a big tent, over the smaller separated houses...mostly two-story, on flat dusty streets." These residences, "festooned with cables and telephone wires," were built primarily of rough plank construction covering a modest skeletal frame. Characterized as "chicken coop style architecture," Black Bottom's decrepit residences, most of which did not have windows or inside plumbing, often resembled the shacks migrants occupied in the South. An alley house located between Hastings and Rivard which sheltered two families and as many boarders as it could house demanded a rent of eighteen dollars a month. Another black eastside family paid sixteen dollars a month for one unfurnished room without running water.

Workers without a permanent residence often wandered the streets between shifts. Some rented rooms by the hour or paid fees for the privilege of sleeping on saloon pool tables and in back rooms. Destitute newcomers often sought the services of the YMCA, YWCA, the Second Baptist Church, and the Urban League. On Hastings migrants flocked to Bethel Social Center, the adjoining meeting hall of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church. After its relocation to the corner of Hastings and Napoleon in 1889, the Bethel AME emerged as one of Detroit's first organizations to involve itself in social work. During the nineteen-tens the AME's social work program raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for public services in the black commu-



nity.

Migrants seeking the shelter of organized charities converged upon an already crowded ghetto district. Even with reports of job shortages and the citywide scarlet fever epidemic of 1917, an estimated one thousand blacks per month arrived in Detroit. Nothing seemed to slow the northward human tide.

In the nineteen-tens overcrowding, disease, and crime fueled racial animosities which in earlier years rarely advanced past the stages of verbal slurs and hostile glares. Blacks and Jews, despite periods of cooperation and calm, began to experience outbursts of antagonism and violence. In his discussion of the black and Jewish urban experience, historian Herbert Gutman wrote that "African-Americans inhabited the same island as Jews and other ethnic groups, but lived in a separate world." Though blacks and Jewish civic leaders made efforts to form racial and business alliances, those forced to live in the poverty of the ghetto could not escape the growing dissension existing between these two worlds.

On August 1, 1915, at six o'clock in the evening, racial tensions turned to violence on Hastings. Stepping off a streetcar at Hastings and Davison, a woman was robbed by two young blacks. One youth escaped down a side street. The other jumped aboard a moving streetcar while being pursued by a Jewish man, a resident of Hastings Street. Crossing into the next block, the Jew managed to stop the car by pulling down the trolley pole. In his attempt to stop subdue the robber, however, the Jewish man was stabbed in the back. The robber led the man into the street where a large mob of Jews awaited. Backed against the streetcar, the nervous youth held the crowd at bay by carving broad, sweeping motions in the air with his knife.

The mob soon gave way as a black man with a revolver came to rescue the robber. Amid the

men's shouts and warnings, twenty-five blacks armed with pistols, knives, and bricks rushed toward the crowd. From upper-story windows along Hastings black women cheered and applauded as the routed Jews scattered in all directions. When the police arrived, thousands of people were on the street. One man had been shot, another stabbed. As the police loaded five black men into the patrol wagon, Jews struggled to pull the captives back on to the street. Cries of "lynch 'em" echoed through the angry mob. At the precinct house the five blacks were charged with felonious assault. An hour later, despite rumors of renewed violence, the street was empty.

Upon the arrival of thousands of blacks, in 1917 the eastside's main concern stemmed not from racial antagonism, but from the vice thriving among southern black migrants. Since most migrants were young adult males ranging in age from eighteen to forty, the demand for recreation rose substantially. To the abhorrence of church leaders, thousands of migrants spent their time in Detroit's houses of prostitution, which numbered five thousand in 1910. "Clubs and gambling houses fatten themselves off earnings," observed a local paper; "there are brothels in which men are lured, robbed, and then thrown out on the street if they protest the treatment they receive." The article concluded, "Negroes looking for vice need not search very far of diligently."

Though the Urban League sponsored dances at local eastside high-school gymnasiums and churches offered social events, most turned to the atmosphere of street-corner taverns. In 1916 Police Commissioner James Couzens discovered fifteen hundred saloons operating twenty-four hours a day. One thousand of these were "blind pigs" which operated without licenses. On Hastings fifteen saloons existed alongside numerous restaurants and pool halls.

For migrants saloons served as social clubs where a person could make important connec-

tions, receive a line of credit, read a newspaper, or join in a game of poker, dice, or checkers. They also provided various kinds of live entertainment in the form of floor shows, stage acts, and music. With the increasing number of migrants came a greater demand for southern musical styles such as barrelhouse piano, blues and stomps. Similar to the southern culture of the black roadhouse, juke joints, and honky tonk nightclubs, segregated black Detroit offered pockets of blues and jazz—musical forms which continued to be viewed by many members of the community as anti-Christian and morally degenerative. A Detroiter who lived in Black Bottom during the 1920's, Paul B. Shirley, recalled the controversy surrounding this music: A lot of people didn't want jazz in their house because jazz came from whorehouses. 'I don't want that devil music in here.' My grandmother wouldn't allow you to play it in her parlor. You could play it in the kitchen, or you could play it on the back porch, but you couldn't bring jazz into her parlor." But whether black migrants preferred the sounds of jazz or rural-based blues they flocked to corner taverns and brothels to hear black music.

Forced to stop serving alcohol due to Michigan's prohibition law in 1918, saloon keepers and musicians resumed operations in the ever-increasing number of blind pigs which numbered 20,000 in the city by 1925. These operations flourished in apartments and ill-ventilated cellars. Known as Barrel Flats, they became a haven for migrant blues pianists. The piano, the popular instrument of the northern barrelhouse circuit, acted as a whole orchestra, producing syncopated 4/4 bass lines and treble-register horn figures. The heavy left-hand style referred to as "stomping" laid down a driving dance rhythm and could be heard above the noise of lively parlor-blues parties. In storefront blind pigs piano men entertained at "Too Tight" or "Too Terrible" parties where they played the rhythms of boogie-woogie or what southerners called "Fast

Western." At these raucous affairs barrelhouse pianists performed breakdowns, shakedown, Calico hops, Chitterlin' rags, and slow drags. Those in the audience drank homemade beer and gin. Some, desperate for the taste of liquor, drank "canned heat," a mixture of wood alcohol and paraffin sold in cans. Others shared rounds from bottles of homemade whiskey known as "lightning."

House parties offered another important source of employment for blues pianists in the wide-open section of the eastside. Common to northern cities, house-rent parties were the tenants' answer to high rents charged by the mostly white landlords. Migrants forced into the overflowing eastside ghetto found such gatherings not only a means to alleviate the pressure of daily life, but essential for economic survival. Behind domestic facades, many front rooms and tenement parlors earned a semi-permanent status as neighborhood drinking and dancing spots. The host charged admission for jugs of liquor, platters of homemade southern-style food, and dance music provided by a pianist or guitarist.

During the early twenties, as its black population reached over 40,000, Detroit established a national reputation for its vanguard of blues pianists. One of the most famous of the first wave of migrant blues keyboardists, "Big Maceo" Merriweather—a six-foot-tall, 250 pound pianoman—was born Major Merriweather in Newnan, Georgia, on March 31, 1905. One of 11 children, raised on a farm in Coweta County, Maceo moved with his family to Atlanta 1920, where he learned to play piano in the city's red-light district. Maceo's older brother Reverend Roy Merriweather, recalled how the budding pianoman learned strictly by watching and listening to other Atlanta keyboardists: "He played by ear....He just kept catching music and kept playing it just about about as good as anybody else. So he became famous by practicing in that capacity.

He went around these joints where piannas [sic] was sitting around and people liked to dance."

In 1924 Maceo arrived in Detroit to join his parents who lived in the eastside ghetto district. Years later, Chicagobased Big Bill Broonzy, one of Maceo's finest guitar-sidemen, recalled meeting the Merriweather family in Detroit: "I remember one day that I went to the train with Big Maceo. He was going to Detroit, Michigan, to visit his sister and brother there. I met three of his sisters, two of his brothers and one of his nieces. He had a very nice family, some of which was church members." In Detroit Maceo worked as a day laborer, including a job for the WPA during the Depression. At night Maceo pounded out his blues piano-style at house parties around Hastings.

While performing at a house party at 980 Alfred Street, between Rivard and Hastings, he met the proprietor, Rosell "Hattie Bell" Spruel. On the second floor of the establishment, Spruel sold whiskey to neighborhood customers. Aware that Maceo's other employers in the house party district subjected him to the all-too-common practice of paying musicians with alcohol, Spruel admonished him to play strictly for money. Years later she told an interviewer that, "I told him don't take no whiskey, don't play yourself cheap. Don't bring no whiskey or no wine 'cause soon you soon be a whiskey-head or wine-head and you won't get no place." Hattie's genuine concern for his career led Maceo to take her as his wife. "When I married Maceo he was quite a kid, long before he was working on the WPA," recalled Hattie, "He was the man that walked the track and when times was bad he was a handyman, when times was good he worked everywhere—he always kept a job. He worked at Fords and he worked all over."

Maceo's stint in the Hastings house party district was immortalized in his later recording, "Can't You Read," for Lester Melrose's Chicago-based recording company. The song was first

said to be heard in Spruel's establishment as the tune "'Filte Fish," a direct reference to the Jewish presence on the thoroughfare. Recorded in the 1940s, the song still retained, between the oddly phased and improvised verses dealing with the folkloric exploits of the monkey figure, reference to Hastings:

Come right down on Hastings Street  
Go down there about the end of the week  
You get most anything that you care to eat  
If you don't like shrimp  
Just name your dish  
They'll even serve you some o' that old 'filte fish

After honing his talents in the house party district, Maceo landed a job at Brown's Bar at 2800 Hastings between Alfred and Brewster, an established that became a stronghold for Detroit blues. Left-handed, Maceo became renown for his thunderous bass patterns. A versatile musician, he often performed at Brown's with trumpet and saxophone accompaniment. As with the case of other Detroit early blues keyboardists, Maceo did not record in Detroit, and thus the sound he produced in Detroit's clubs and house parties must be approximated from his later sessions made for Lester Melrose's Chicago-based Bluebird label—sessions that brought forth, not only the "Monkey and the Baboon," but the classic numbers "Worried Life Blues" in 1941 and the often-imitated "Chicago Breakdown," in 1945.

A mentor of numerous Detroit pianists, Maceo spawned a whole host of imitators along Hast-

ings. Often they performed under variations of his name, such as "Maceo Charles." His brother "Little Maceo," a.k.a. Bob or Rozier, also emerged as a formidable blues pianist. A familiar figure around Hastings, Little Maceo often could be seen pushing a cart up the avenue or displaying his keyboard talents at jukejoints and house parties.

Private homes and clubs also featured barrelhouse pianists like Tupelo Slim from Mississippi, the 375 pound James Hemingway from Atlanta—"so fat that his rested on the keyboard"—and Charles Edward "Cow-Cow" Davenport, a gruff itinerant musician who passed through the city on his travels through the Midwest. Others included Texas-born Will Ezell, a former sideman with Bessie Smith, who, like Davenport, specialized in boogies and rags. Unlike many of the less refined pianists of the house-party circuit, Ezell possessed an "impressive drive" capable of skilled passages and "stuttering treble parts." Ezell's jukejoint style is exemplified in his numbers "Gin Mill Blues" and "Mixed Up Rag." A more permanent member of the Detroit blues scene was Floyd Taylor from Tennessee. After arriving in Detroit with his parents during World War I, Taylor learned piano at an early age. The former accompanist with blues singer Sippie Wallace recalled, "I heard a lot of fellers that were playing along Hastings, most fellers had their own style but many used to learn from each other. Sometimes you could tell where the piano player came from by the way he played the blues."

An open exchange of musical ideas fostered the talents of others in the Hastings Street scene as well. From behind the piano at Butch's Club on Hastings, Paul Seminole, "a diminutive half-caste native American hailing from the brothel district of Atlanta," gave instructions to young Rufus Perryman. "A squat, broad-shouldered troubadour," Perryman was known as "Speckled Red" because of his albino pigmentation and red hair. One of Henry and Ada Perryman's sixteen

children, Rufus G. Perryman was born on October 23, 1892, in Monroe, Louisiana. Around the First World War, Henry Perryman, a blacksmith, moved his family to Hampton, Georgia. When Perryman was sixteen, his father moved the family to Atlanta where he began to learn keyboard by playing on a church organ. After hearing Seminole accompanying a film at a Atlanta movie house, Perryman took up boogie-style piano. With the permission from the madame of a local brothel, he was allowed to practice on the establishment's piano. Performing anywhere he "could make a nickel," he hoboed on train cars to cities throughout the South, working in "jooks," saw mill camps, and Mississippi cotton towns.

Moving to Detroit with his mother in 1924, he worked, augmenting his day job, at house parties and brothels around Black Bottom—venues like Miss Fat's Goodtime House, where he cleared tables and played on an old upright. Possessing a loud shouting voice and a rough-hewn piano-style, he gained musical employment in Black Bottom. Known around the Hastings scene as "Detroit Red," Perryman found the eastside a very lucrative environment. In his later years, he boasted of riding around Detroit in his car with a uniformed chauffeur. Three decades later, Perryman honored another of his early Detroit piano mentors with the recording, "Dad's Piece," dedicated to a local pianist known only as Dad or Fishtail.

Making his rounds down Hastings and Brady Streets during the 1920s, Perryman heard, "the lean and nimble fingered," Charlie Spand another migrant Atlanta pianoman. Though Spand's popularity came when he recorded in Chicago for Paramount during the late 1920s, he bided his time, as did Perryman and many other itinerant pianomen, traveling between Detroit and Chicago. Reputed for his high-pitched voice and thoughtfully constructed blues, Spand "frequently employed heavy rolling walking bass in his playing, which he coaxed from his long slender fin-



gers. "Near the end of the decade he teamed up with guitarist Blind Blake in Chicago to record "Hastings Street," a musical tribute to establishments on Hastings and Brady streets: "...I know you want to go back to 169 Brady...I can't hardly rest...Always tellin' me about Brady...wonder what's on Brady...wonder what's on Brady? must have been marvelous mmm.mmm.mmm..."

While Hastings jumped to the sounds of southern migrant blues pianists during the twenties, Detroit featured a vibrant jazz scene as well. Although jazzmen, like their blues counterparts, played blind pigs and various private functions, they did not rely upon such performances for their livelihood. For jazzmen these gigs represented afterhours jam sessions or small side jobs independent from their regular club dates. Because of their ability to read music, or at least perform complex arrangements under the direction of able bandleaders, jazz musicians played a variety of jobs in segregated and non-segregated ballrooms, theaters, and cabarets throughout the city. The years 1917 to 1921 marked the era of Detroit's society jazz bands which performed a repertoire of ragtime, light classics, and popular songs. By 1917 the city claimed four society orchestras with twelve or more members. During the 1920s society big bands like pianist Bill Miner's group Miner's Melodians, violinist Earl Walton's orchestra and the Chocolate Dandies played ballrooms and dances for both white and black audiences.

Detroit's society band tradition of the twenties emerged out of the brass band tradition that appeared in the city around the time of the Civil War. Blacks were among the city's formal music teachers, composers, performers, and bandleaders. Charles W. Thompson, an escaped slave who came to Detroit in the eighteen-fifties, established a music school on Macomb Street between Hastings and Rivard. Thompson's school possessed a student body of over a hundred white and black music students. Theodore Finney, a freeborn black from Columbus, Ohio, who

came to Detroit in 1857, established a reputation as one of the city's finest bandleaders. A violinist and pianist, Finney established the Detroit City Brass Band and Society Orchestra which played resorts, political rallies, parades, and parties of the wealthy. The band supplied music for local ferries traveling between Belle Isle and Sugar Island; it also performed on the steamer *Frank Kirby* sailing from Detroit to Sandusky, Ohio. Upon visiting Detroit in the eighteen-nineties as a trumpeter in a circus band, W.C. Handy marveled at the proficiency of Finney's band, especially the compositions "My Ragtime Baby" and "Silks and Rags" written by band member Fred Stone. The driving rhythm and tempo of these tunes fascinated Handy, who in 1914 composed the sheet music hit, "St. Louis Blues."

After Finney's death of a heart attack on April 17, 1899, his orchestra fell under the direction of Ben Shook, who had studied music at Fisk University in Nashville. Former Finney Orchestra member Fred Stone led his own band featuring the sounds of syncopated dance music, a style rooted in ragtime, marches, and brass-band music. Though syncopated music emerged in black urban populations across the country, Detroit jazz historian and critic Herb Boyd points out, the ragtime-based syncopated music performed by Finney and others contributed to the development of local brass band and society orchestra-style, the precursors of the jazz groups that became popular after the turn of the century. The syncopated music performed by the bands of Shook and Stone dominated Detroit's entertainment and social world until the rise of jazz in the nineteen-twenties.

With the rise of territory bands in the 1920s, Detroit benefited from its close proximity to other midwestern black musical communities. Part of the midwestern territory circuit—including Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York,

Detroit's African-American musicians were brought into contact with other instrumentalists, thus creating an interaction between regional styles.

Located in central Ohio, the town of Springfield became an important contributor to the development of Detroit jazz. Springfield's small black population provided a wealth of future jazz talent. Springfield-born clarinetist Garvin Bushell recalled coming to Detroit with blues singer Mamie Smith in the early 1920s, to play an engagement in the black neighborhood along Gratiot: the Koppin between Beaubien and Mullet and the E.B. Dudley between Between St. Antoine and Hastings. Like most theaters throughout the country, the Koppin and Dudley ran films and live entertainment, featuring a band, comedy troupe, magician, dance team, and singers. A stop on the Theater Owners Bookers Association circuit, the Koppin featured not only local group's like Ben Shook's Creole Orchestra, it brought in national acts such as singer Ma Rainey and her Paramount Flappers.

Bushell was not the only musician to leave his hometown in search of steady employment. Emerging out of the syncopated music and society band tradition, Kentucky-born William "Pops" McKinney, a former circus drummer, along with saxophonist Milton Senior and pianist Todd Rhodes, founded the Synco Trio in 1921. As the band expanded, it took the name the Synco Septette, and later as the unit exceeded seven members, took the name the Synco Jazz Band. Recruiting members of Scott's Syncopaters, another important Springfield outfit, the group toured the Ohio area before coming to Detroit in 1925. Before arriving in Detroit, McKinney ceded his drum chair to Cuba Austin, a tap dancer and percussionist, in order to become the unit's full-time business manager. After the Synco Jazz Band took a job at the Arcadia Ballroom on Woodward Avenue, it moved north along the boulevard to the city's most prestigious jazz

dance establishment, the Greystone Ballroom. Owned by bandleader Jean Goldkette and Charlie Horvarth, the Graystone accomodated 2000 dancers. Upon the insistance of the Graystone's management the band changed its name. In an era when dance bands were imbued with imbued with plantation and riverboat themes of the Antebellum South, the band was given the name McKinney's Cotton Pickers.

The Cotton Pickers' recruitment of saxophonist/arranger Don Redman in 1927 marked one the most significant events in the history of the former Ohio-based unit. Just as he had almost single-handedly transformed the band of Fletcher Henderson, Redman's tenure in the Cotton Pickers, 1927-1931, brought the ensemble its greatest period of critical and commercial acclaim. Born in the border state of W. Virginia, Redman emerged as a musical child prodigy, a brilliant conservatory-trained-multi-instrumentalist whose arranging skills with Henderson's orchestra produced the model band charts of the period. Writing first-rate arrangements and teaching the members to read music, Redman, along with Nesbitt, helped musically discipline the band. Through these two musicians' efforts , the Cotton Pickers became a top box office attraction. "Out in Detroit we really had the town sewed up and people used to be wild over our stuff," commented Redman, "we were so popular we battled bands all over the country."

When not booked at local engagements or on the road, members of McKinney's Cotton Pickers found employment at small clubs such as the Harlem Cave on Canfield and Brush, and at afterhours spots around Hastings and in establishments on St. Antoine and Adams, usually above or below level venues decorative high-class style, these clubs would often operate between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., serving an array of liquor and fine food. "In those days they had after-hours places called 'Blind Pigs' where musicians used to go and take their instruments to

jam," explained Cotton Pickers' banjoist Dave Wilborn. "Bix (Beiderbecke), Frank Trumbauer, Don Murray and half the Goldkette Band used to go to these places and jam to the wee hours of the morning. We had a great time together and a lot of fun, that's where a lot of the white musicians picked up the coloured style of playing." These late-night jobs not only allowed musicians more freedom to play authentic jazz away from white ballrooms, they were vital outlets for keeping members of the band employed. As showman and producer Sunnie Wilson recounted, "The Cotton Pickers had to take these jobs because there just wasn't enough steady gigs around town."

The afterhours clubs along Hastings Street not only supported this thriving jazz culture, but also provided an environment for professional gamblers and criminals who came to Detroit during the Great Migration. Both black and white opium dealers found a large market in the eastside during the twenties. Addicts were known as "junkers" who, in reference to the Asian origins of the drug, "kicked the gong around." During his 1926 visit to the eastside of Detroit, Chicago jazzman Mezz Mezzrow was introduced to the use of opium. He recalled, "Detroit must have been built on a poppy field, there was so much opium going up in smoke. . . Detroit was as open as a politician's pocket on election day." Mezzrow remembered seeing men smoking opium out of "ebony pipes" and madames carrying thousands of dollars in their stockings. Pianist Rufus Perryman recalled: "Down there in Black Bottom were all kinds of good-time houses. They'd sell liquor, dope, anything. Those young girls would go crazy."

In times of economic downturn, the criminal element involved in the liquor and drug trade often resorted to more violent means. Stricken by poverty and desperate for money, some black migrants and professional criminals turned to armed robbery and break-ins. In 1920 Police Commissioner James W. Inches found blacks committed eighteen percent of all robberies,

seventy-five percent of all breaking and entering, and seventy percent of all burglaries. The Southern practice of carrying concealed weapons increased the probability of violence within the "conflict-oriented street culture of the ghetto." Professional gambler and bluesman Avella Gray, who made his livelihood by running a gambling house and "selling dope" in Black Bottom told how during times of economic hardship he went on "stick-ups" and once made off with thousands of dollars from a bank on the corner of Brewster and Hastings.

To curb crime in the eastside ghetto, the police implemented a policy of open brutality against blacks. With a police force dominated by racist white patrolmen, Detroit's law enforcement community supported a policy designed to "keep blacks in their place." Police Commissioner Charles Bowles declared, "So long as [blacks] confine their shooting to their own kind, there will be no police drive or any assignment to such cases." Poor blacks, most of whom lost their jobs due to cyclical unemployment, received harsh treatment by police. Workers down on their luck found no sympathy from patrolmen who indiscriminately beat and pistol whipped those they found on the street. "A negro may look suspicious to an officer because he's raggedly dressed and idle," lamented a local paper; "it's the sad truth."

To preserve "social control," Detroit policemen patrolled the eastside to keep a watchful eye on the blind pigs and brothels within the community. In houses on Hastings, brothels existed alongside Jewish-owned homes and businesses. Sitting in front bay windows, young women tapped on the glass with chopsticks and long metal objects to attract the attention of potential customers. On Saturday nights young black and white men formed long lines outside houses of prostitution on the eastside as "squads of cops" turned out to keep customers in order.

But amid the poverty and subculture of crime, Hastings in the early twenties managed to re-

tain a sense of community not revealed in the images of the local press. It was a place where the Old World met modernity—where fortune tellers and organ grinders existed alongside black shoeshine boys who popped their rags in steady rhythm. Along Hastings, families attended many places of religious worship and conducted business from wagons, lunch counters, or behind ledger books. On their way to school, youngsters stopped at candy stores with marble fountains and bakeries like Rosen's, where bread, hot rolls, poppyseed horns, and bagels were baked "three times a day." Traversing the avenue, passers-by could hear the sounds of ragtime and Dixieland jazz drifting from the doorway of a black record shop. On the corner of Forest and Hastings, families flocked to the Winterland Gardens to enjoy the block-long amusement park's merry-go-round, wooden slide, house of mirrors, dance floor, and bumper cars.

This Hastings milieu, however, did not outlive the decade. The results of "Americanization" caused the disappearance of Yiddish speech, and streetcars replaced pushcarts and wagons. More significantly, the once Jewishdominated thoroughfare underwent a redistribution in its racial and ethnic population. By the nineteen-twenties, a second wave of black migration brought thousands of blacks to the eastside.

Meanwhile, Jewish population declined. The federal government's new immigration restrictions virtually ended that flow. The influx of blacks caused Jews to establish a "second front" along Oakland Avenue and Twelfth Street and small colonies downriver in neighborhoods around River Rouge, Wyandotte and Trenton. This Jewish relocation was not a mass exodus, but a slow retreat which occurred throughout the decade. But, as Sidney Bolkosky explains, by 1926 the majority of Jews "had left the Hastings Street area, sometimes to escape escalating crime—which frequently served as a euphemism for their flight from the mounting black popula-

tion—sometimes in pursuit of new business opportunities." In the next decade, Hastings became the major economic lifeline of Detroit's black population. Located in an area once known as the "Jewish ghetto," Hastings and its surrounding community was rechristened Paradise Valley, the segregated site of Detroit's African American population.



## CHAPTER II

### The Street of Broken Dreams

Factory closed this mawin',  
Done drawed that last fullpay,  
One of these Hastings studs  
Done coaxed Ma Brown away.

**ROBERT HAYDEN**

Stepping off the streetcar onto Hastings in 1930, Detroiters were quick to notice the absence of Jewish families who once thronged the avenue. Though Jewish proprietors maintained businesses on Hastings, most commuted daily from outlying areas. If not to escape crime, some left the Hastings Street area to flee the unsanitary conditions that bred epidemics and disease. At night Hastings belonged to the adventurous searching for nightlife in the neighborhood's blind pigs. In its effort to rid the city of "undesirables," the police combed the eastside in search of establishments serving "poisonous liquor." On Hastings the police frequently raided blind pigs in which they confiscated barrels of beer, quarts of gin, moonshine and whiskey. Massive raids resulted in the arrests of black and white men and women whose names were published in the local newspaper. This attempt to curtail the number of illegal establishments by humiliating and discrediting patrons had only a momentary, if any, real effect. For over the next two decades the neighborhood teemed with illegal afterhours spots and gambling joints.

Traditionally born in this underground subculture, jazz flourished throughout the 1930s in nearly every American city which contained a substantial African-American community. De-

troit's eastside, like New York's Harlem and Chicago's Bronzeville districts, produced a vibrant swing jazz culture. Despite the economic effects of the Depression, jazz thrived in places of business within the Hastings district.

Since jazz was the popular music in nightclubs and afterhours spots, musicians found a great deal of work in the two different economies of the eastside ghetto: legitimate licensed ventures and businesses operating outside legal limits. One of the most lucrative underground businesses, gambling, became an important source for raising funds and pooling capital. It generated an economic base which helped support afterhours places and the purchase of black-owned establishments.

At first spurned by most religious leaders, the first of these gambling operations to appear after World War I, the policy known as "Yellow Dog," "Alabam'," or "Georgia" was a lottery game based on the numbers obtained from spinning a wheel or shaking a container of small tubes with numbers inside. Printed on small strips of paper, the winning three digits were distributed throughout the community. To win a player had to guess all three digits.

Policy gradually gave way to the numbers game. Known as "clearing house," the numbers was a lottery form of gambling composed of three digits obtained from the clearinghouse reports of the daily paper. Businesses from corner drug stores to hat shops often served as fronts for gambling operations. Numbers runners established their own districts and made themselves easily accessible at nightclubs or on the street. Bets ranged from one cent up, and paid odds of five to six hundred to one. Thus, a cent bet would net the winner five or six dollars, less the fee paid as a commission for the operator.

In the early thirties, the eastside gambling houses remained under firm control of black op-

erators. Known for their "reputation of honesty," numbersmen like Bill Mosely, Policy Geech, Slim Jones, and Everett I. Watson, were respected men in the community. The proprietors of neighborhood gambling houses kept a watchful eye on their employees and customers. A former resident recalled that "blacks made the rules" in gambling joints, including the stipulation that prohibited whites from gambling in private black clubs. Whites could "slip their money" to a black runner, but they were not permitted to place the bets themselves. One reason for this policy was to prevent operators from having confrontations with the wives of white patrons who often showed up at the door to demand the return of the family's weekly earnings.

The large sums of money generated by the numbers game, however, soon began to fall under the control of smalltime white racketeers and gamblers. By the late thirties, Jewish and Italian mobsters controlled a great deal of the gambling operations in Paradise Valley. Though white gangsters infiltrated the numbers game, blacks continued to benefit from the large flow of money generated by the gambling operations of the eastside underground economy.

Through the funds acquired by gambling or money borrowed from loan sharks, blacks established a number of small businesses on Hastings. Paying as high as fifty percent interest to loan sharks, blacks opened shoeshine parlors, newspaper stands, and barber shops. Black-owned rib shacks, chili houses, and shrimp huts sprang up on nearly every corner of the street, filling the air with a thick spicy smoke which hung in the air for blocks.

Small black businesses arising out of the underground economy existed side by side with the efforts of middle-class entrepreneurs. From bank loans and personal savings, blacks who advanced under the apprenticeship of Jewish businessmen opened their own tailor shops, groceries, and fish markets. Educated black professionals along Hastings established a number of drug

stores and private medical practices including, J.W. Collins who specialized in "painless extractions," and Dr. C.C. Strickland, who treated "private diseases."

Sidney Barthwell, the most famous of the eastside black entrepreneurs, opened a chain of nine drug stores, one of which was located on Hastings. In spite of the success of his operations, Barthwell faced fierce competition from white stores outside the community. He explained, "Black shoppers would often buy a popular brand from white stores at a higher price for prestige reasons. They wanted to be able to say 'I got this from Hudson's,' not 'I got this from Barthwell's drug store.'"

Thus, black businessmen on Hastings had to struggle to promote the patronage of black stores. They wanted to build a strong economic base for commercial enterprise as well as to promote racial advancement. Committed to a self-help philosophy, black proprietors of the Busy Bee Cafe on Hastings prided themselves on the fact that they stocked their establishment with supplies purchased from "negro manufacturers and merchants." The proprietors of the cafe expressed a belief in the "unlimited" possibilities for the advancement of Negro business throughout Black Bottom.

Like many of the black merchants on the eastside, the Cafe's owners belonged to the Booker T. Washington Trade Association, an organization established in 1930 by James H. Peck, pastor of the AME church on Hastings. Combined with its sister organization, the Housewives League of Detroit, founded by Peck's wife Fannie B. Peck, the BTWTA became an important promoter of black Detroit's self-help consciousness. Members of the Housewives League would often enter shops in Paradise Valley to inquire if the business stocked black products. If the proprietor did not stock them, they encouraged customers to boycott the shop. In the gymnasium of the

AME church, the BTWTA held meetings to provide advice to businessmen and shoppers regarding programs and strategies for building and maintaining a strong black economic community. An organization containing a broad spectrum of classes, the BTWTA's membership included doctors, lawyers, newspapermen, ministers, and a small number of blue collar workers. Members attended local, regional, and national conferences fostering not only the self-help ethic of Detroit's black population but that of organizations around the country.

In an era of chronic unemployment, overcrowding, and poverty the rise of black businesses provided vital services for those forced into the confines of the segregated eastside. In Black Bottom, or what was euphemistically referred to as Paradise Valley, residents faced abysmal health conditions which exposed them to an exceptionally high risk of disease. For the 23,000 blacks living between Hastings and Beaubien in the mid-thirties, the lack of new housing forced poor migrants to take shelter in tenements built in alleys behind Hastings. Originally designed as service streets for the removal of rubbish, these alleys overflowed with filth. Children played by foul smelling pools of stagnant water and the offal of butcher shops.

A health survey of this twenty-block area found the average life span for blacks was twenty-seven years and that residents suffered from a three-times higher death rate from pneumonia than the average for the rest of the city. The same year, the *Detroit News* reported that blacks living in the eastside ghetto suffered from a one-and-a-half times higher infant mortality rate and 71.5 percent higher rate of tuberculosis as compared to the city's overall population.

Throughout the thirties, black political and community leaders spoke out against the conditions of the eastside ghetto. In 1934 efforts by black and white leaders led the federal government to appropriate one-and-a-half million dollars to the erection of low-income housing

units. One of the eight cities selected for the "slum clearance" project, Detroit was to receive public housing for 1,700 black families. With the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act, housing construction came under the direction of the newly created Federal Housing Commission which employed workers through the Works Progress Administration. Once constructed, the housing project came under the control of local city government. To abate the overcrowding and crime within the eastside ghetto, the Federal Housing Commission broke ground for the Brewster Housing Projects in 1934. Bounded by Hastings on the east and Beaubien on the west, the project provided nine hundred and forty-one brick units.

The construction of the Brewster Housing Project, however, did little to remedy the overcrowding around Hastings. In 1930, the police department increased the size of its force to 3,769 patrolmen. The majority of these new officers were white southerners, many of whom were recruited by traveling agents or through advertisements published in Southern newspapers. Southern-born patrolmen were hired on the assumption that they knew how to "handle negroes." Their iron-handed policy of social control, however, usually led to open conflicts within the city's black neighborhoods.

In one published case a black man named James A. Spenser refused to obey the order of two policemen to "move on." Arrested and taken to the station house, Spenser received repeated blows and kicks in the presence of the inspector. After this harassment, he was released without charges.

In 1933 several blacks were killed by police in rapid succession. After police killed one black and seriously wounded another on Hastings, an officer was held on charges of manslaughter but subsequently was freed by a hung jury. Two years later, a black youth was shot in the

back seat of a patrol car. To protest this "orgy of brutality" on Detroit's streets, the local NAACP sponsored "Police Brutality Week," topping off the events by holding a mass meeting at the AME church which included such speakers as Charles H. Huston, the prominent Howard University law school professor and civil rights activist.

As long as black crime remained within the community, white officers maintained a hands-off policy. Often patrolmen visited blind pigs, slept on the job, or became involved in theft rings. Some stood on the sidewalk to watch razor fights and were known to place bets on who would draw first blood. One former resident remembered how two white officers leaned against a car and ate sandwiches while two blacks fought with axes.

To institute a drive against crime and bolster the image of the community, blacks of Paradise Valley, like those of Sepia City in Toledo and Bronzeville in Chicago, elected an honorary mayor. Despite his unofficial status in city government, the mayor was expected to campaign against crime, stage charity drives, and generate jobs for the poor. Chosen from the prominent members of the black business community, the mayors were elected to one-year terms through the results of a newspaper poll organized by black newspaperman and promoter Rollo Vest. Known by his nickname "the Bow Tie Kid," Vest started the mayoral election as a means of increasing newspaper sales. Eventually the office became a regular tradition within Paradise Valley. Most of these mayors were small businessmen, nightclub owners, and booking agents. Upon entering office, they attended a prestigious inaugural ball held at the Graystone Ballroom, where the Duke Ellington Orchestra played for the ceremonial activities and dancing pleasures of the guests. A combination "civic leader" and "racial spokesman," the mayor often worked with City Hall to enact tougher measures against criminals. Mayor Chester A. Rentie, a theater book-

ing agent, attempted to pass a "switchblade knife bill" to prevent "hoodlums" from carrying weapons on the street. One Detroitier told Rentie he was "worth ten policemen" in preventing trouble in the neighborhood.

But the progress blacks made within their community failed to deter the subjugation they faced outside its borders. Throughout the thirties blacks continued to encounter discrimination in uptown hotels and restaurants. In defiance of the 1937 Civil Rights law sponsored by Senator Charles C. Diggs, white restaurant owners often opted to pay a city fine rather than serve black customers. In downtown theaters, blacks paid higher prices than whites. Those not turned away at the door usually sat in segregated sections.

Barred from nightclubs in uptown hotels and restricted to segregated Monday night dance shows at venues like the Graystone Ballroom and the Arcadia, blacks established a thriving nightlife in Paradise Valley during the thirties. Upon the repeal of prohibition in December of 1933, several new clubs opened their doors on Hastings. Black and white proprietors held grand opening parties which featured "big floor shows" and the "finest orchestras." Clubs provided large show revues including a master of ceremonies, comedians, singers, shake dancers, and fan dancers who "exposed themselves just as the lights went out." Despite dire economic circumstances, the local paper took note of the crowds which gathered in eastside nightclubs: "Mobs jam into late night spots every week-end, and the way the elite stampede to rest their feet under the gaily covered tables or on brass rails, one would think that there was no such thing as of man Depression."

Though Hastings did feature a number of small entertainment spots, blind pigs, gambling houses, and corner taverns, it was known primarily as a business thoroughfare - a place where



shoppers crowded the street during the day and prostitutes walked in the evening hours. The only black-owned nightclub on Hastings during the 1930s, Mac Ivey's Cozy Corner, featured dance acts floor shows and the music of trumpeter Bill Johnson's band which included such noted musicians as drummer J.C. Heard and Texas-born pianist Sammy Price. Formerly with McKinney's Cotton Pickers, Johnson was a handsome frontman whose showmanship made him one of the most popular entertainers in the city.

The most exclusive of the establishments, black and tan cabarets, catered to integrated audiences of middle-to-upper class backgrounds. Since their first appearance in the nineteen-twenties, black and tans became some of the first establishments to break down the barriers of segregation. On their evenings "slumming" in the black ghetto district, whites often constituted a majority of crowds in cabarets along Hastings, and numerous establishments southward in Black Bottom along St. Antoine, and Adams. Establishments which, as a former neighborhood resident recounted, served "marvelous food" while providing first-rate entertainment.

Located in the basement of the Norwood Hotel, on St. Antoine, the Plantation attracted a very well-dressed clientele, women dressed in "the latest and best Paris and London creations," and "gentlemen well groomed" and tuxedoed. The Plantation featured chorus girl shows and local bands led by noted Detroit musicians like Cecil Lee. Its national acts included name entertainers from Louis Armstrong to Earl Hines. The club employed a talented in-house show producer, Leonard Reed - a close friend of Joe Louis who later later became a business partner and employee of the boxing champ. On the top floor of the Biltmore Hotel on St. Antoine, Earl Walton ran his own nightclub and afterhours spot. As Sunnie Wilson explained, "Earl Walton didn't have to hire a band because when the jazz musicians would get off their regular gigs around town

they would come and jam all night at his place."

On East Adams popular black and tans included Andrew the 606 Horseshoe Bar and Andrew "Jap" Sneed's Club Three Sixes on 666 E. Adams. Because of Sneed's Asian-looking features, he was given the nickname, "Jap." His club was beautifully decorated, with a seating capacity of 750, a wrap-around stage, a orchestra pit, and a bar constructed of glass-brick. It employed a doorman and numerous cooks, service people, and bartenders, known among nightclub-goers as "mixologists."

Eastside black and tans offered jazz musicians steady employment. In these clubs jazzmen were required to read musical arrangements and play various musical styles from "hot" dance music to sentimental "blue mood" songs. Among the popular artists of the period were Lanky Bowman, Gloster Current's Nightingales, Monk Culp and his Club Harlem Orchestra, Howard Bunts and his Thirteen Monarchs of Rhythm, and pianist Milton "Milt" Buckner, former arranger with Earl Walton's band, and later sideman with the band's of Jimmy Raschel and Lionel Hampton. Buckner's brother, alto saxophonist Ted Buckner, was also a regular member of the Detroit scene until joining Jimmie Lunceford in 1937.

In an era when fashion reflected status and success, bandleaders and patrons sported their finest wardrobes in eastside cabarets. Flashy dressers not only commanded attention from fellow patrons; they expressed a demeanor representing maturity and distinction. Even if they had to borrow a suit of clothing, nightclub-goers in Paradise Valley wore the finest fashions of the day. Some men emulated bandleaders like Count Basie and Duke Ellington, whose image and titles evoked a sense of refinement and social status. "Dressed to the nines" men walked the street with neatly pressed pants, manicured fingernails, and brightly colored shoes, evoking a boastful

refinement, directed at disassociating themselves from the images of Southern rural culture and hard labor.

In afterhours spots throughout Paradise Valley well-dressed black and white patrons watched spectacular floor shows featuring ten to fourteen piece big bands and long rows of chorus girls. Jazzmen played behind dancers and comedians in elaborate venues located in basements and spacious rooms above restaurants and businesses. Afterhours clubs offered music performed by members of Jean Goldkette's orchestra and Bill Johnson's ensemble. On their nights off from jobs at the Greystone and Paradise theaters on Woodward Avenue, musicians from the Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson orchestras often joined local Detroit jazzmen in jam sessions on the stages of afterhours clubs. Such gatherings of talent brought local Detroiters in close contact with nationally famous performers like Earl Hines and Cab Calloway.

In his observation of the black population of Paradise Valley during the late 1930s, Mayor Coleman Young, known to his young friends around Black Bottom as "Big Time Red," explained how upper class "black socialites preferred ballroom dancing, very elegant and refined, and when they really got to partying hard, they tended to dance like white folks." These black bourgeois ballroom events, added Young, failed to bear any "resemblance to the way they danced on Hastings Street." In afterhours clubs and dancehalls along Hastings blacks danced the jitterbug and other popular steps to jazz ensembles. When Joe Louis won a fight, nightclubgoers would spill out into the street by the hundreds, causing the authorities to block off Hastings until the early morning hours.

While the middle and upper classes hobnobbed in cabarets and afterhours spots, poor migrants found entertainment in the many theaters along Hastings. These white-owned

establishments offered audiences stage shows by theatrical troupes, comedy acts, and revues like Lou Leslie's Blackbirds and the Brown Skinned Models. They booked vaudeville-style blues singers like Mamie Smith, who performed at the Castle Theater in 1933. As opposed to movie theaters in later decades, establishments like the Castle emerged as social meeting places. "We used to go the Castle Show," reminisced a former resident, "You'd go there, and there be so many people; and everybody be talking out loud and everything, but you looked forward to that." Independent neighborhood theaters on Hastings such as the Willis, Dunbar, and Medbury showed old B-movies ranging from cowboy pictures to Flash Gordon. High ticket prices and unsanitary conditions were a constant concern at movie theaters like the Castle, where refuse piled up outside the alleyway, or the Willis, where crowds applauded when cats chased rats across the stage.

Despite the hours spent watching stage shows and movies, workers could rarely ignore the haunting specter of unemployment. In a city where thousands of jobless white workers walked the streets hungry and unshaven, blacks faced a more stark experience. Black workers not employed in factory work were offered one dollar a day by Ford Motor Company to cut weeds and perform general cleanup work. For these near-destitute workers, called "Ford Mules" by the young hustlers and gamblers of Paradise Valley, Ford's wage proclamation of 1914 fell to one-fifth of its original promise.

Tales of Ford's benevolence toward blacks traveled far into the back regions of the rural South, where folk bluesmen composed tunes which lionized the man known as "the savior of the black worker." Bluesmen like Blind Blake told how he was "going to get me a job at Mr. Ford's place." Sleepy John Estes extolled Ford's contributions in lyrics celebrating the "T. Model Ford"

as "a poor man's friend." Mississippi Fred McDowell sang: "If I had money like Henry Ford, I would have a woman at most every door." Performing in isolated rural regions of the South these musicians made Detroit and Ford attractive to blacks seeking a better life in the North.

Devotion to Ford was not unfounded. Ford's company employed 10,000 out of the 21,000 blacks working in auto plants during the thirties. By the early forties, many black workers had grown restless in their loyalty to Ford. With the efforts to recruit black workers by the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the coalitions among union officials and politicians, some black workers formerly distrustful of and antagonistic to organized labor began advocating a closed shop policy.

Though most black churches were firm in their loyalty to Ford, several black clergymen began to advocate the cause of unionism. Reverend William Peck, a former associate of Ford, turned toward the support of unionization. In 1939 Peck, despite warnings from Ford, invited labor leader A. Philip Randolph to speak at the AME church, a decision which resulted in the firing of several workers in his congregation. "The brave black church" continued to challenge Ford by featuring guest appearances by Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, who discussed the positive aspects of black participation in industrial unions. Though Johnson spoke at the church on several other occasions, he was asked, upon the request of working-class church members who were fearful of losing their jobs, to conduct his meetings elsewhere.

As unions struggled to recruit black workers in 1940, Detroit received a cascade of federal work orders which brought forth "the largest equipment expansion in history." Hundreds of manufacturing plants underwent major retooling in order to fill massive government contracts needed to supply Great Britain with war material. The influx of war production orders also

brought a small yet steady stream of black and white southern migrants. Black migrant workers soon found that unskilled menial jobs were being monopolized by whites. It did not take long to realize that the prerequisite to finding work was color rather than ambition or background.

The struggle by migrant workers for employment coexisted with the increasing demand for outdoor recreation. Confined primarily to the segregated boundaries of neighborhoods around Hastings, Detroit's 132,000 blacks flocked to the city's waterfront and outdoor theaters to take in sights and sounds not afforded them in the congested ghetto. Unemployment and overcrowding caused racial animosity to flare. In public parks blacks competed with whites for picnic spots, boat rentals, and bicycles.

On July 4, 1940, large crowds of Detroiters spent their holiday afternoon on Belle Isle Park, a seven-hundred acre recreation area located a few miles from the periphery of Paradise Valley. Dressed in traditional garb, five thousand foreign-born residents flocked to the island to attend a concert and ceremony to renew their allegiance to the United States. Amid the festivities two white policemen chased a nineteen-year-old black youth who had stolen a canoe and beaten the rental operator. After the young man's arrest, hundreds of blacks surrounded the small Harbor-master Division station to demand his release. The police barricaded themselves inside and waited for reinforcements. Within the station house shards of glass crashed to the floor as the mob pelted the building with rocks and bottles.

Upon the arrival of police cars, the crowd of blacks and white onlookers grew to 2,500. Through a hail of stones which shattered windows of squad cars, sixty police officers wielding nightsticks dispersed the crowd. Numerous bystanders and eleven policemen were injured. Without a shot fired, calm prevailed.

In the following weeks news of the incident became lost in the headlines of Nazi victories in Europe and the Japanese bombing of China. With the city gearing up for war, the incident seemed to pass without serious controversy. Local black clergyman Reverend George Baber expressed his disappointment by stating, "I deeply regret the occurrence because we have built up unusually fine relations between white and black people of the city. We will use the Belle Isle incident to point a duty and a great lesson." But as America plunged into war and industrial production dictated the pace of life, the riot emerged as a dress rehearsal for violence—the first act in a series of events culminating in the citywide outbreak of destruction known as "Bloody Monday."

In the overcrowded eastside district, violence reflected the changes in the community since 1930. Despite auto plant shutdowns and the economic conditions of the Depression, black migrant workers had continued to arrive in Detroit. By the early forties, as Jews moved beyond the Hastings district, the eastside community underwent a major transformation in population -- one that resulted in the overwhelming presence of blacks in Paradise Valley.

Among this population of the Second Great Migration were a new generation of migrant blues musicians whose modern electric sounds brought southern-born blacks a popular style of entertainment. At house parties and taverns along Hastings Street blacks engendered a new entertainment scene that would become nationally known for its blues and jazz talent.

## CHAPTER III

### Hastings Street Opera

America's entry into the Second World War caused a labor shortage in Detroit's war industrial plants. The demand for workers in northern industry set into motion a second black migration. Detroit's economic upswing, however, proved a mixed blessing for blacks. They not only experienced greater employment opportunities and union representation, but racial tension which resulted in the citywide riot during the summer of 1943.

The tension leading to racial conflict was fomented in the dissension emerging on the shop floor and city streets. After 20,000 auto workers walked off the job at Ford's River Rouge plant on April 1, 1941, black workers found themselves caught in the midst of the biggest strike in the thirty- eight year history of the company. Forming a picket line and car cavalcade outside the gates of the Rouge plant, CIO union strikers forced the shutdown of the largest industrial complex in the world.

To gain black support, the Ford-backed AFL sponsored several back-to-work meetings in the black community. One of the largest was held on April 4 at the Forest Club, located on the corner of Forest and Hastings. While a vanguard of police under the command of Police Inspector Edward Morgan formed a line around the outside of the club, two thousand workers and union representatives gathered inside the building's massive meeting hall. During the following week, the AFL, discredited by charges of inciting racial violence, lost favor with black workers. On May 20th, the eve of the election, Paul Robeson sang "I Will Vote UAW-CIO" at a mass union rally in Detroit's Cadillac Square. The next day the UAW-CIO won a sweeping victory in the



greatest labor board election in history.

A month after the election, a local black paper announced that the "Motor City is jumping again to the tune of mass production, and all working folks are looking forward to more money to keep the wolf away from the door." With increasing employment, blacks flocked to night-clubs and restaurants along Hastings. The largest venue to emerge on the thoroughfare, the Forest Club outsized Madison Square Garden, boasting a one-hundred-and-seven foot bar, banquet hall, dance floor, roller-skating rink, and bowling alley.. Aside from an extensive waitstaff, the club employed big-framed prize fighters who walked the floor to keep order among the massive crowds which came to drink and dance to the music of nationally renowned jazz bands.

Its owner, popular showman and entrepreneur, Sunnie Wilson, had long been known in the community as a successful boxing and band promoter. Often serving as the club's master of ceremonies, the diminutive Wilson hosted shows featuring artists like Louis Jordan, Nat King Cole, and Dizzy Gillespie. As one Detroit musician commented, "Anybody who was anybody in the entertainment world at that time came to see Sunnie Wilson."

No stranger to the stage, Wilson had long been a colorful figure in Detroit's entertainment, business, and political worlds. Born in Columbia, South Carolina, where he earned a bachelor's degree in art and literature from Allen University, Wilson first came to Detroit around 1927 in search of work at Ford Motor. With no jobs available at the plant, he returned to South Carolina. Through the connections of his uncle, he found work in New York as a bellboy at the Floor Hotel and later as a waiter at a prestigious millionaire's club. Before graduating from Allen in the late twenties, he worked in Detroit as a porter on excursion boats of the Detroit & Cleveland line, that sailed the Great Lakes. Returning to Detroit in the early thirties, Wilson performed on stage and

choreographed chorus girl shows at clubs like the Slim Jones' Harlem Cave on Canfield and Brush, the Chocolate Bar on East Adams, and Mac Ivey's Cozy Corner on Hastings.

Wilson's affable manner and ability to deal with the public led him to success in politics as well. Elected one of the first mayors of Paradise Valley, he established close ties with politicians, businessmen, and celebrities like boxing champion Joe Louis, who joined him in acquiring the Brown Bomber Chicken Shack in 1937. As the owner of the Mark Twain Hotel beginning in 1943, Wilson, in an effort to counter the effects of segregation of downtown establishments, offered lodgings to black celebrities and musicians. The hotel's suite became so popular that out-of-town performers bid for the use of room number fifty. Known as the "lucky suite," room fifty gained its reputation among musicians. While staying in the "lucky suite" entertainers such as T-Bone Walker and Dinah Washington were known to land high paying musical jobs. As Wilson recalled, "When Sarah Vaughn stayed in room fifty she got her first \$5000 gig in Detroit."

When Wilson purchased the Forest Club in 1941, he encountered resistance from the white businessmen on Hastings. To prevent his acquisition of the club, neighboring businessmen signed petitions of protest against him. Following the opening of the club, vindictive whites harassed Wilson's operation until an entourage of athletes from Joe Louis' Brown Bomber softball team, most of whom were professional boxers, ended such activities through a brief confrontation on the street outside the establishment. Within months of the club's grand opening, the paper announced that the establishment "jumps morning till night" and with "new shifts milling in faster," added the article, "furniture in that dizzy spot never gets a rest."

The opening of the Forest Club represented the rise of middle-class black-owned businesses

on Hastings. In the early forties, the Urban League reported that blacks in Paradise Valley owned 25 barber shops, 71 beauty shops, 30 drug stores, 3 furriers, 57 restaurants, 11 shoe repairs, 49 tailors, 151 medical practices, and 5 beauty schools. Nearly half of all the east-side-owned businesses were located on Hastings, the majority of which remained under the proprietorship of Jewish absentee landlords and shopkeepers. The handful of Jewish residents who remained lived in flats above pawnshops, groceries, and second-hand stores designed to cater to low-income customers.

As blacks were making gains in establishing a thriving business community, Detroit Mayor Edward Jeffries drafted the city's first formally outlined slum clearance plan. It designated the twenty-block area of the Hastings district for redevelopment. Generally unsympathetic to the plight of blacks in the segregated ghetto, Jeffries viewed the Hastings area as a breeding ground for crime and urban blight. In an effort to "reverse the decay," he urged city officials to accept one of the three plans for urban development: the replatting of lots for sale to the highest bidder; the creation of a limited-dividend corporate system; and the selling of land with property tax benefits in the form of frozen tax assurances, or the transfer of land with a tax subsidy to an unlimited corporation.

But whatever course of action civic leaders advocated, it became obvious to many in Detroit's African American community that Paradise Valley was targeted for a slum-clearance plan designed to disperse the black population of Black Bottom. The city's failure to address the conditions of the east-side ghetto was a sign of a determined effort to starve the Hastings district economically. By portraying Black Bottom as a dangerous and unliveable slum, city officials were able to gain support from the larger population for the redevelopment of the area.

Though the negative image of Black Bottom projected by politicians and the press failed to capture the communal and entrepreneurial spirit of the community, it did reflect a true picture of the living conditions in neighborhoods around Hastings. Of Detroit's 150,000 blacks, most lived in squalid residences in Paradise Valley; most had only outside toilets located over open holes in sewer mains. Without new housing to accommodate the growing population, blacks paid three--times-higher rent for "tumble-down" shacks, carriage- house apartments, and lofts. A flat which rented for ten dollars in white districts cost twenty-five dollars in Black Bottom.

At his Metropolitan Church on Hastings, the "social- minded" Reverend Williams conducted a survey of the area which found the average rent for dilapidated structures to be twenty-one dollars a month, and the average weekly wage of blacks to be twelve dollars and eighty-one cents a month. Williams reported that the Hastings district possessed the highest rate of juvenile delinquency in the city. Dedicated to "spiritual and economic progress," Williams warned neighborhood residents to place "more trust in God and not so much in Roosevelt."

To alleviate the pressures of overcrowding, the federal government set out to build a public--housing project for Detroit's black defense workers. Against the protest of whites, the project was constructed a mile from the Polish neighborhood of Hamtramck on the city's northeast side. Named after Sojourner Truth, the eighteenth century preacher and ex-slave abolitionist, the project spawned the formation of a white improvement association which, through its protest to City Hall, persuaded the state government to redesignate the project for white occupancy. Realizing the severity of the situation, Mayor Jeffries and white liberals pressured federal officials to reverse the decision.

In January 1942, as black tenants prepared to occupy their new homes, whites burned a cross

in a nearby field. Forming a line at the entrance of the project, picketers-- many of whom carried knives, clubs, and bricks--stood ready to block the entrance of the Negro tenants. On the morning of February 28, twelve hundred white picketers clashed with blacks armed with pipes. After two months of conflict, blacks, escorted by police and state troops, took residence in the project.

On the streets and in the war plants of Detroit's eastside, however, racial tension continued to flare. On June 11, 1943, a few days following a series of riots in Los Angeles between Mexican-American "zoot suiters" and white sailors, a small-scale riot broke out at Detroit's Eastwood Amusement Park. A popular dancing and entertainment spot since the thirties, the stage of the Eastwood Park Garden's outdoor theater featured jazz groups from McKinney's Cotton Pickers to Benny Goodman. Following a pattern similar to the Los Angeles riot, blacks, many of whom were dressed in zoot-suit attire, were "ambushed" by white teenagers. After the crowd of two hundred white youths and servicemen attempted to chase one hundred blacks out of the park, police and state troops quelled the disturbance with clubs and tear gas. Despite the display of machine guns by police and troops, there were no casualties. All those arrested were white.

While in Detroit to play a job at the Paradise Theater in May of 1943, drummer Roy Porter encountered the city's atmosphere of racial antagonism. "There was a lot of tension in Detroit," related Porter. "Me and a white girl friend hailed a cab. The driver stopped, looked at her and said, 'I don't pick up nigger lovers.'"

Nine days following the Eastwood Park disturbance, on June 20th, as a bright afternoon sun heated the city to a temperature of ninety-one degrees, an estimated one hundred thousand people converged on Belle Isle. Composed of an equal number of blacks and whites, the crowd covered the 945 acre site in a swarm of human activity. In a city which had received 50,000 more blacks

since the outbreak of violence on the island three years earlier, the competition for outdoor recreation reached a near-explosive state.

By late evening, the crowd began to cross the three-quarter-mile bridge to the mainland. Moving shoulder-to-shoulder over the bridge, the crowd bumped and shoved its way toward Jefferson Avenue. About ten p.m., two black youths crossing over the bridge knocked down a white man and threatened to throw him over the rail. After the white man's escape, a group of sailors chased the two black youths. Their pursuit set off a series of brawls on the bridge. Not long afterward, two hundred white youths and sailors became embroiled in a flurry of fist fights. Called upon the scene from various precincts, one hundred sixty-six policemen arrested twenty-eight blacks and nineteen whites before successfully dispersing the crowd.

While police were still breaking up the riot on Belle Isle, Leo Tipton, driven by rumors of the day's events, walked through the door of Sunnie Wilson's Forest Club where jump-blues sensation Louis Jordan was scheduled to perform. A former employee of Wilson's, Tipton took advantage of the incendiary situation. Dressed in a dark suit and carrying a briefcase, he made his way through a crowd of seven hundred dancers. Once on stage, he grabbed the microphone and, identifying himself as Sergeant Fuller, announced to the crowd that a black woman and her baby had been thrown off the Belle Isle bridge. "Get your guns .... there's free transportation outside," cried Tipton. Suddenly hundreds of patrons rushed out of the club, only to find the street empty. Making their way down to Belle Isle, the crowd found that police had blocked off the area. After returning to Hastings, the restless mob began throwing rocks at white motorists. In the early morning hours, thousands joined in destroying the windows of Jewish shops. Due to the small numbers of Jewish residents on Hastings, rioters were able to inflict extensive damage

without opposition from store owners, whose absence resulted in a prolonged response from police units which arrived in the early morning hours.

In the interim, looters made off with bottles of liquor, quarters of beef, sides of bacon, shoes, and articles of clothing. In proposed effort to search for weapons, police ransacked Wilson's apartment on Vernor Highway. After forcing their entry, the officers "hacked-up" the piano in the living room and left his valuable wine collection a litter of broken bottles. Following the discovery of the damage to his residence, Wilson joined many other black entrepreneurs who, fearful of roving mobs, sought to protect their places of business. After he told his employees to return home to their families, Wilson holed up in the Forest Club, with two rifles and his dog. Other black businessmen attempted to deter looters by writing "Negro" on their windows. To ward off "bloodthirsty whites", Clarence Sharp, proprietor of the Hastings Street Cafe, fired pistol shots into the air, only to be arrested later by police.

On Monday morning, the mile-long stretch along Hastings bounded by Adams and Medbury was transformed into a pathway of splintered glass. In the effort to stop the looting of white stores, police sealed off the area. Untrained in riot control, policemen conducted sporadic raids, firing random shots into buildings to chase off looters. "Other bluecoats," wrote Dominic J. Cappecci Jr., "sprayed black crowds with machine guns and shot spectators who happened to be standing in the wrong place - then offered either no or delayed medical assistance to their victims." Walking down Hastings and Alfred, a former resident related how he saw police use an "automatic gun" that tore a man's body in half. On the corner of Hastings and Division, ten policemen attempted to turn back a crowd which gathered outside a men's clothing store. Recovering the garments which had been strewn in the street, police began to carry suits and

coats back inside the shop.

While most of the crowd cleared the way for the policemen, William Hardges, a twenty-three year old ex- amateur boxing champion, refused to step aside. Pushed toward the patrol wagon, Hardges, according to official record, grabbed patrolman Ernest Hartwick's gun and fired several shots, wounding Hartwick and Sergeant Floyd Noot. Within moments, four policemen fired their weapons simultaneously. Hardges fell to the ground with seven bullet wounds. Two other shots struck Robert Davis, who also died among the crowd of neighborhood onlookers.

While living in the Forest Club's vault during the week of the destruction, neighborhood residents told Sunnie Wilson a far different account of Hardges' death. The shooting of Hardges, one of Wilson's former golden gloves boxers, shocked the neighborhood nightclub owner. According to residents at the scene, Hardges sister was knocked down by a policeman. Coming to her aid, Hardges landed a blow which drove the policeman to the ground. In a brutal act of retribution, a fellow officer fired a shot which, as Wilson recalls with a sense of sadness and painful reflection, "blew the young man's head off."

Determined to help stop the destruction and loss of life, Wilson cooperated with the police in urging the crowds to return to their homes. From atop a police car, he shouted, "bricks cannot fight bullets," to the crowds of blacks who milled about in the streets. Known for his generosity and dedication to the black community, Wilson, following the closing of businesses and groceries, provided neighborhood residents with goods purchased outside the barricades on Woodward Avenue and food from the Forest Club's stockroom.

But neither Wilson's efforts nor the actions of police served to end the wave of violence. At six-thirty Monday evening, Governor Harry F. Kelley went on the radio to declare a state of mar-



tial law, but there were not enough reserve units to enforce the order. President Roosevelt then sent in federal troops. On June 22nd, armored cars and jeeps filled with troops in full combat gear patrolled the length of Hastings. Of all the areas of the city damaged by rioters, "Hastings represented the most complete picture of destruction through its entire length," reported the *Detroit News*. Denuded "clothing dummies hung from store signs and door frames lay shattered" and discarded food and store merchandise littered the sidewalks.

Upon returning to their shops on Hastings, Jewish proprietors found their places of business in shambles. In the three days of rioting, Jewish stores received the greatest amount of damage. Ben Levine, owner of a Hastings dry-goods store, closed his shop at eleven-thirty Sunday evening. Three days later, he found the shop's doors wide open and its merchandise in total disarray. Another dry-goods store owned by Isadora Cohen lost one-third of its inventory, worth eighteen thousand dollars.

Though the destruction of property totaled two million dollars, the worst result of the rioting emerged in the cost of human life. Thirty-four people died: nine whites and twenty-five blacks. Over five hundred others were injured, including seventy-five policemen. Approximately one hundred thousand people took part in rioting; of these, most were black males between the ages of twelve and twenty. Seventy percent lived in Paradise Valley, and most had never been arrested previous to their participation in the riot.

In the wake of the riot, Hastings remained under curfew. With orders to "fix bayonets," load their guns, and "not to take anything from anybody," khaki-clad federal troops and military police continued to occupy Hastings. Mayor Jeffries closed all saloons throughout the city and ordered the removal of guns, knives, and ammunition from store windows. By decree of the

Governor, the Tigers canceled their baseball game at Brigg's Stadium and the horsetrack at the State Fairgrounds was closed. In arbitrary door-to-door searches, police found radios, shotguns, revolvers, hats, and shoes piled in backyard sheds and storerooms. Unfortunately, the random investigations also resulted in the ransacking of homes of innocent blacks, including Sunnie Wilson's, whose owners played no part in the vandalism and looting.

During the same week, city officials pushed to restore a state of "normalcy." The local papers evoked a "business-as-usual" attitude, encouraging Detroiters to channel their antagonisms toward foreign enemies. Outraged by the riot, black and Jewish community leaders formed investigative committees to probe the causes of the disturbance. The NAACP attributed the riot to "the brutal policies" of the Detroit Police department and the city government which failed to play a part in the rehabilitation "of the black community's social and economic order." Through the creation of the Property Owners Sufferers Committee, the NAACP encouraged the cooperation of members "of all races, colors, and creeds." The Negro Victory Committee attributed the violence to "a national conspiracy against the war which pitted white workers against Negroes."

In a similar charge, a Detroit Jewish Youth Committee blamed the incident on the "subversive activities" of a fifth-column conspiracy. They demanded a federal investigation of the police force and reparations for the damages incurred by Jewish shop owners. Through the formation of an interracial commission, Jewish merchants also advocated a federal inquiry directed at exposing those accountable for the "bloodshed, rioting, and lootings." The commission admonished that all "unnecessary rumors must be avoided and all elements in our population must work together in a harmonious effort to prevent the recurrence of such outrages."

Careful to assess the riot, Jewish leaders did not blame the violence on black customers;

rather, they believed the riot stemmed from the actions of outside hoodlum mobs. A Wayne University study published in 1944 reported that Jews in the Hastings Street area (the poorest section surveyed) showed a far greater "tolerance for blacks than gentiles" and that competition between Negro and Jewish business did "not lead to conflict."

Despite the rhetoric of civic spokesmen, the shopkeepers and residents of Hastings were left to resume life in the ghetto district. By early July, Jewish merchants began replacing windows and opening their doors for business. But many businesses remained closed, with their windows covered by heavy boards to protect remaining merchandise. Some disillusioned owners posted dates for sale or placed "For Rent" signs on their buildings.

On June 28, as merchants repaired their shops and swept up piles of glass which remained ankle deep in some places along the street, saloons and nightclubs returned to normal business hours. Although the sale of bottled liquor was prohibited, patrons gathered inside taverns on Hastings to hear jazz and blues music. Outside these drinking spots, troops still patrolled the avenue. Walking down the debris-covered street, residents passed military policemen as they made their way home from work.

News of the rioting and the rampant destruction of Detroit's ghetto did little to deter black migrant workers from arriving in the city. Demand for labor in wartime industry continued to draw southern blacks to Detroit, whose hope for economic advancement overcame their fear of racial violence. Attracted by a new life in the North, twenty-eight-year-old John Lee Hooker joined the flood of southern migrants who converged upon the city during the war. Following the blues piano stylists of the 1920s, Hooker represented the second wave of younger migrant bluesmen. Like Hooker, this newer generation of bluesmen were primarily guitarists versed in

an electrified country-blues style, characteristic of what music critic and historian Paul Oliver describes as an unpolished "urban folk sound." Like Hooker, few were full-time professionals. Most found work on weekends playing parties and private dances. Like the earlier piano players, the migrant guitarists could perform solo, which enabled them to find work in the barrelhouse circuit or in small corner taverns on Hastings.

One of ten children, Hooker was born in August 1917, on a farm near Clarksdale, Mississippi. Sited along the Sunflower River, in the soil-rich countryside of Cahoma County, Clarksdale was located in the Delta - "a flat alluvial plain two hundred miles long and fifty miles wide that runs between the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers from Memphis down to Vicksburg." Though Clarksdale was home to a number of famous bluesmen, not all of its black residents approved of the music. Hooker's father, a deeply religious man, disapproved of blues and its lifestyle. When his parents separated, Hooker went to live with his mother and his step father William Moore, a farmer and blues guitarist who gave young John Lee his first lessons on the fretboard, teaching his young stepson pieces like "Pea Vine Special," "Rather Drink Muddy Water," and "Dog Jumped a Rabbit." At his home in Clarksdale, Hooker met his stepfather's musical companions, bluesmen like Charlie Patton and Texas guitar legend Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Like most delta bluesman, Hooker's early exposure to music balanced itself between the worlds of the secular and the religious: the blues of his stepfather and the spirituals of the church. Reflecting his early years in Clarksdale Hooker accounted, "I was normally a spiritual singer. I reversed from the spirituals to the blues and when I get that big fellin' look like it's something like a bombshell hit me. You, you can turn it right aroun'." Though he sang in spiri-

tual quartets including the Fairfield Four, he remained drawn to the storytelling aspects of blues: "I just had a lot of soul for the blues. Could express myself better, tell my story and hard times of different peoples and myself, and the things you come through - trials and tribulations."

Hooker's preoccupation with the blues attributed to dislike for working the cotton fields. As he later admitted, "Farming never appealed much to me, I was lazy, you know. I just loved the guitar." But Hooker's aversion to working the fields was most likely engendered by the worsening conditions of tenant farming in the Delta region. For rural blacks in Clarksdale, the effects of the mechanical cotton picker had caused even greater economic blight, leaving family's like Hooker's severely destitute, with little hope of ever achieving economic advancement. Unable to reconcile himself to the vocation of his family, he left home around age thirteen. Making his way to Memphis, he lived with his aunt and worked as an usher, selling peanuts and candy at the W.C. Handy Theater on Beale Street. In his spare hours played guitar and sang at fish fries and country suppers, often performing with musicians like slide guitarist Robert Nighthawk. Locating their son in Memphis, Hooker's parents brought him back to Clarksdale. But after returning to work in the fields, he soon left home, bound once more for the nightlife and music of Beale Street. Leaving Memphis, he made his way to Cincinnati and again found work as an usher in a downtown theater.

In 1943 he arrived in Detroit, taking a job at the Ford River Rouge complex. Later, after being employed as an orderly at Detroit Receiving Hospital, he worked as a janitor "pushing a broom" at the Dodge Main and Comco Steel plants. One of 11,000 black workers in Detroit, Hooker found no trouble getting a job considered too hot, dirty, and low-paying for white workers. As he later explained, "At that time, jobs weren't hard to get .... you could go anywhere, any

day and get a job."

In the evening after work, Hooker could be found playing his unique brand of Mississippi blues boogie for tips at house parties around the Hastings district. Upon establishing a reputation in the barrelhouse circuit, Hooker went to clubs along Hastings to sit in with groups hoping to attract the attention of bar owners and locally established musicians. Working his way up from playing house parties, Hooker landed jobs playing in Black Bottom. In clubs around the Hastings district - the Apex, Monte Carlo, Vogue Lounge, Forest Inn, the Sensation and others - Hooker resorted to playing an electric amplified sound. He took the acoustic blues sounds of Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Patton--all of whom he heard at his stepfather's home in Mississippi--and transformed their sound into a unique style of boogie blues. Hooker's "Delta bred" vocals evoke eerie moans, stutters, and cries typifying the music of a rich Mississippi heritage. His "half-spoken, half-sung" lyrics often defy formal musical structure. Like the solo guitar singers of the Delta, Hooker's musical accompaniment follows the improvised and sometimes erratic rhythm of his vocal lines.

Crude in structure, Hooker's powerful musical sound appealed to southern migrants living in Detroit's ghetto district. Through the use of amplification, Hooker found he could perform dance music for the large audiences in the noisy atmosphere of the city's saloons and corner taverns. "In those clubs in the North," explained Hooker, "you had to play electric, otherwise no one could hear you. But I got to love those sounds I could make."

Once established in Detroit's club scene, Hooker assembled a band, one of which included two horns, bass, and two guitars. Performing under the name the Boogie Ramblers, the group featured Jimmy Miller and Otis Finch on saxophones. In relation to the development of the ca-

reers of other younger delta bluesmen like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, Hooker initially performed as an acoustic solo artist and, after a period of time, switched to electric guitar, subsequently adding the accompaniment of a rhythm section.

This ensemble-style electric folk blues flowed from small white-owned clubs on Hastings like the Corner Bar on the corner of Hendrie, the Silver Grill between Warren and Theodore, Jake's Bar at the intersection near Forest, the Ace Bar between Bradley and Livingston. On Hastings at Brewster, the Three Star Bar had an open door through which passersby could see acts perform on its sawdust-covered floor. Around 1945 Detroit resident Carl Hill recounted how, as a youth, he stopped at the door of the Three Star and caught a glimpse of a then-unknown B.B. King performing on guitar, dressed in brown-and-white knob shoes, made of unborn calfskin.

But small Hastings clubs like the Three Star did not lend themselves exclusively to music. They featured, for the most part, stage acts and female impersonator shows that often employed a blues pianoman or a small combo to play behind the performers. Blues pianist Floyd Taylor explained how most of these spots were "what you might call nightclubs, but mostly they were show clubs you know strip joints. Show clubs had these freakish fellers - what they call female impersonators and some of them was very funny. And there were plain strip-and-clip joints, but they all had we blues players." These corner taverns gave Hastings, as bluesman Eddie Burns described, a "Bourbon Street-like quality." To advertise up-and-coming acts, bar owners displayed handwritten signs in their front windows, usually scrawled on large pieces of brown paper.

At this time, Hastings earned a national reputation for its blues clubs and musicians. "The street was known more than any other street in the U.S.," commented Hooker. "Anywhere you'd

go, you could hear people talking about Hastings Street." Hooker described Hastings as a "rough, wide-open" street which "had everything you wanted right there [and] everything you didn't want." During the day the street bustled with shoppers. Cars filled its length. At night it teemed with prostitutes, gamblers, and drunken male youths looking for a night on the town. A sign posted on a Hastings tavern gave evidence to the riotous nature of its after hours visitors: "Please consider the neighbors in this district who are sleeping. Refrain from making loud noises when going home late at night." A former Paradise Valley resident and later Motown impresario Berry Gordy, described how at night "Hastings was lit up like a Christmas tree. You could always hear shouting Blues songs blasting out of the bars, and exciting women standing out front with nothing to do." A fixture of the night crowd, Hastings prostitutes, as one former resident recalled, "Had nice cars and nice clothes, and they were nice to children." Youngsters on the street earned money from these women who paid them for bringing them warm bricks, in which they put in steel drums to warm themselves on cold winter nights.

Neighborhood vice did not deter black and white "cabaret goers" from frequenting the Hastings nightlife scene. Cab drivers continued to bring adventurous out-of-towners and regular nightlife patrons to Black Bottom. Though vice flourished, there was little violence. As Sunnie Wilson recalled, "You had a lot of drunks on the street. They might get robbed, but they leave them a dollar to get home." Another resident describes Hastings as "part carnival side show, with hard drinking dudes and loud street ladies, and part close community, with people who looked out for each other."

The excitement and wild atmosphere of Hastings was captured on several recordings of the postwar period. In 1948, Hooker scored a nationwide hit with "Boogie Chillen" released on the



Bihari brothers' west coast-based Modern label. Discovered by Elmer Barbee while playing at a house party in Black Bottom, Hooker made some demos for the record store owner and producer that were taken to Bernie Besman, owner of Pan American Recording Corporation and its subsidiary label Sensation.. Unimpressed with the recording's back-up musicians, Besman, nonetheless detected the raw talent of Hooker's musicianship. Upon Besman's suggestion that Hooker be recorded as a solo act, Barbee made another set of demos and set a recording date for Sensation Records at United Sound Studio on Second Avenue.

A few weeks later, on a cold and rainy evening in 1948, Barbee walked through the door of Besman's business accompanied by a tall young black man wearing a long overcoat, and carrying a crude pawnshop guitar. Introduced by Barbee as great new blues talent, Hooker entered the studio, took a seat, and performed several numbers - three well-arranged original slow blues "Sally Mae," "Highway Blues," and "Wednesday Evening Blues," along with a loosely-structured, mid-tempo number. Realizing the commercial potential of the song, Besman encouraged Hooker to rework and tighten the lyrical structure of the song. After making several takes of the composition, Besman captured a polished performance. Titled "Boogie Chillen," the song, leased by Besman to the Modern label, became an immediate million-seller.

This "Detroit ghetto travelogue," as it is described by music writer Robert Palmer, captures the singer's impression of a street which continued to serve as a gateway for black southern migrants. Backed by the propulsive rhythm of his boogie guitar style, Hooker sang: "First time I came to town, people, I was walking down Hastings Street." This stanza of the song brought even greater fame to an already legendary center of Detroit nightlife. Soon, jukeboxes in drug-stores, taverns, and department stores blasted out Hooker's Detroit blues hit. With the success of

jockey, Malone's most commercially successful session was the ballad "Bewildered" by pianist Red Miller, a tune reminiscent of Lonnie Johnson's "Tomorrow Night."

The most legendary black-owned studio was located in the back of Joe's Record Shop located on Hastings. After opening the store in 1948 in a two-story brick building, Joseph Von Battle set-up a backroom recording studio. Similar to the hundreds of postwar independent labels, Von Battle's place of business emerged as a combination record store and recording studio. From a speaker outside his store, passersby on Hastings heard the sounds of down home blues and boogie piano numbers. Known for driving gold-colored Lincolns down Hastings, Von Battle boasted that his store was "the largest outlet for race records in the country," featuring 25,000 discs of which blues outsold all other music "ten to one." In his homemade recording studio, lined with acoustic tile, Von Battle set up a piano, drum set, microphones, and a sound booth housing an eight-track recording machine on which he recorded jazz, blues, and gospel artists like Reverend C.L. Franklin, father of soul superstar Aretha Franklin. After hearing Franklin's sermons on a local Sunday radio broadcast, Von Battle brought the powerful pastor of Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church into his studio. Released on the Chess label, Reverend Franklin's sermon recordings became million-sellers.

\*Aside from Chess, he leased his material to Deluxe and Excello. His close connection with the eastcoast-based Savoy label resulted in the signing of a contract for Detroit saxophonist Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams who later recorded the smash hit "The Hucklebuck" as well as the hits "Hastings Street Bounce" and "3530," a song which took its name from the address of his shop.

Released on Syd Nathan's Cincinnati-based King label, Hooker recorded several sessions for Von Battle under the pseudonym "Texas Slim." In November 1948, shortly after the release of

"Boogie Chillen," Hooker agreed to record for Von Battle and cut his first number "Black Man Blues," a menacing tune about a man's tormented decision to sever his relationship with a woman by taking her life. Between 1948 and 1953, Hooker periodically returned to Von Battle's studio. A session in February 1949 found Hooker in fine form, the relaxed atmosphere of Von Battle's studio inspiring him to record the driving instrumental "Boogie Awhile." On the number "Miss Pearl Boogie," he engages in a dialogue with Von Battle who calls out: "Let ya play some of that fast Boogie you got there. I know you can do it." Addressing Hooker as "Slim," he adds to the imagery of the song by inquiring, "Who's that little gal with the red dress on?" In response Hooker returns with, "Why that's Miss Pearl." Despite the quality of Hooker's performances on these recordings, however, they never became a lucrative product. On one his last sessions in 1953, Hooker, in an obvious attempt to update his rural-based style, chose to cover Rosco Gordon's hit "No More Doggin'," complete with piano, horn, and drum accompaniment.

Although he limited his record business to over-the-counter sales, Von Battle offered an important opportunity for local artists to record their material. Following the pattern of hundreds of small postwar labels, Von Battle's business emerged and was supported by his record outlet business. To help fund his recording operation and pay the rent of his building, he relied on the income of his front room record store. Limited to a shoestring budget and with little money to front the artist, he turned, as did most one-man recording operations, to recording many musicians without or little compensation. In need of a recording to attain nightclub work, most recorded with the understanding that their legal obligation ended after the 15 or \$20 payment for the session. Assessing the role of Von Battle's operation, bluesman Little Sonny Willis commented that, "Von Battle wasn't doing anything new. Producers around the country were doing

the same thing, whether it was the Chess brothers in Chicago or Don Robey in Houston. If someone went to record at Joe's they knew they weren't going to make any money. What Joe offered was a way to get your name out there."

Von Battle leased his recordings, often unbeknownst to the artist, to larger recording companies like Chess, Deluxe, and Excello. His close connections with the New York-based Savoy label resulted in the signing of a contract for Detroit saxophonist Paul Williams, who later recorded the smash hit "The Hucklebuck," as well as the hits "Hastings Street Bounce," and "3530," a song which took its title from the address of Von Battle's shop. Though Von Battle limited his business by restricting distribution to over-the-counter sales, he offered an important opportunity for local artists to record their material.\*\*

Although many musicians looked upon Von Battle as a self-seeker and economic opportunist, they considered him friendly and outgoing, an important business connection who encouraged them to gather at his shop. Since most of the popular nightclubs featuring blues-like Henry's Swing Club on Orleans, The Harlem Inn on Congress, Apex on Harper, and Post Club on Fort, and the Monte Carlo on Clinton and Russell - were located off Hastings, Von Battle's shop remained "the headquarters" for Detroit blues, the main hangout for musicians in search of club work and recording opportunities. Frequent visitors to Von Battle's shop, singer Jackie Wilson and Berry Gordy came to learn about Von Battle's method of operation. As one musician stated, "Jackie Wilson and Berry Gordy used to come into Joe's to learn about the recording business. Joe was always willing to show you around his place, because he was proud that he built it himself. I'm sure Gordy got ideas from Joe that used when he began Motown years later."

Berry Gordy, who opened the 3-D Record Mart during the 1950s, found that, despite his passion for the more modern sounds of progressive jazz, blues remained the most popular music among black Detroiters. Because his short-lived 3-D mart handled only swing jazz and bebop, Gordy found great difficulty selling his discs to neighborhood residents. "I knew I had to educate my customers about the beauty of jazz - right away, " explained Gordy, "I would quickly launch into why Charlie Parker was the most brilliant genius of all time and how Miles Davis' horn could soothe you to death. But these people were hardheaded. They wanted what they wanted. And they wanted the blues. I told them to try Hastings Street. They did."

Hastings attracted not only record-buyers in search of blues, but musicians who, aware of Von Battle's deep interest in delta-style blues, came to Joe's to record their music. Although he recorded jazz, gospel, and various styles of African American music, Von Battle expressed a special affection for the blues. Years later, he told how blacks living around Hastings shared his interest in blues music: "The war was over, and all those people who came out of the South was here, and that's all they heard down in the cotton fields, down in Georgia and Alabama, and Mississippi: that's all they ever heard."

After hearing a man on the street playing a homemade one-string African-style fiddle, he invited the musician into his studio. Accompanied by the one-string instrument constructed of a wire stretched over a two-by-four and played with a slide, the unknown musician recorded two songs for Von Battle, "I Need \$1000" and "My Babe Oooh." Completing the session, the unknown artist pocketed the twenty-dollar fee and left, never to return. Years later, Von Battle recalled: "All I know is that his first name is Sam, and on the record, I called him One String Sam."

One of the first well-known local musicians to record for Von Battle, Bob "Detroit Count" White produced a regional hit with "Hastings Street Opera" in 1948. Originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee, White moved to Detroit in 1938 and worked in the construction trades until taking a job at a restaurant on Hastings. While he performed in clubs in the area, listeners began to dub him the "Count Basie of Detroit," thus giving rise to his title Detroit Count, under which he recorded "Hastings Street Opera." A piano/rap number, the tune offers listeners a vaudevillian-like tour of the Hastings Street scene:

Boy its all down on Hastings Street

Hendrie and Hastings! The Corner Bar!

That's the only place you can walk in and  
get yourself a bottle of beer, turn your head  
and somebody else is trying to drink it up.

Boy that's a bad joint!

Forest and Hastings!

Sunnie Wilson, longest bar in town.

That's the onlyst bar you can walk in  
when you get ready to buy a bottle of beer  
you have to walk a mile after you get in the joint.

The Willis Theater!

That's the only picture show in town;  
If you missed the picture fifty years ago  
you can see it right now.

Leland and Hastings! Leland Bar!

That's the only bar in town  
Where bartenders carry pistols.

Joe's Record Shop.

He got everybody in there 'cept a T-bone steak

Down on Hastings Street! Eliot! Benson!

Hastings Street Bar. That's the only place  
where bartenders shoot everybody after two o'clock.

In the first three weeks of its release, Von Battle's shop sold over 4,000 copies of "Hastings Street Opera." With the sudden success of his Hastings piano boogie, White went on to record "Hastings Woogie" another tune inspired by his years on the famous strip. But due to his incessant use of alcohol Detroit Count never emerged more than a local figure. According to one of his employers, Sunnie Wilson, "the Count never took much care of himself. I used hire him to play at the Forest Club. When he was down I would give him money and something to eat."

Another early migrant bluesman to record for Von Battle's JVB and Von labels, Arkansas--

born guitarist Calvin Frazier came to Detroit in the late thirties to work in its auto plants. Before settling in Detroit, Frazier performed on the streets with guitarist Robert Johnson in Osceola, Arkansas. When the Library of Congress sent researchers into the rural regions of the South and urban centers of the North to record African-American music and folklore, John A. Lomax and his son, Alan, came to Detroit to record Frazier and another singer, Sampson Pittman. Recorded in his Detroit apartment, Pittman, as Alan Lomax wrote, was an "excellent guitar player," who "had the habit of telling wild tales of his Southern adventures to the beat of his instrument." While Pittman's tunes focused on themes of rural life, Frazier's compositions, like "Welfare Blues," contained criticisms of the hardships of the northern ghetto.

A familiar figure around the Hastings blues scene, Frazier was considered by many local bluesmen to be the finest guitarist in the city. Adept in the Delta blues style, Frazier also performed jazz-inspired numbers, resembling the sophisticated musicianship of bluesman Robert Junior Lockwood. "Calvin Frazier was a great guitar player," commented Little Sonny Willis, "an all-around guitarist who was into everything. He knew his chords and changes. He could snap his fingers and have his sidemen playing right behind him." Booked by Detroit promoter and newspaperman Rollo Vest, Frazier went on frequent tours of the South, playing small clubs and road houses. At Von Battle's studio, he cut several sides including the song "Have Blues Will Travel."

On several dates Von Battle paired Frazier with Louisiana-born Boogie Woogie Red, a.k.a. Vernon Harrison. One of five children, Harrison moved to Detroit with his father in 1927. Known as "Red" for his "pinkish, mottled complexion" and reddish hair, Harrison began to teach himself piano at age eight. He credited the development of his barrelhouse boogie style to Big



Maceo: "My style is somethin' after Macey's style. He was playing at Brown's Club on Hastings for six years, and I learned a lot from him." Harrison eventually spent nearly a decade as sideman in Hooker's band, touring and playing local clubs.

While Harrison reigned as the city's foremost barrelhouse boogie pianist, Robert Henry "Baby Boy" Warren emerged as one of the most formidable guitarists and singers in the Hastings Street circle. Born in Lake Providence, Louisiana, Warren grew up in Memphis, playing guitar with Willie "61" Blackwell, Robert Junior Lockwood, Howlin' Wolf, Johnny Shines, and Little Buddy Doyle at roadhouses, dances, and honky tonks. In 1942, Warren appeared on Sonny Boy Williamson's (Rice Miller) legendary King Biscuit Time Show on KFFA in Helena, Arkansas. Two years later, Warren moved to Detroit and took a job at General Motors. At weekend parties, he performed with Willie Blackwell. Attracting the notice of Idessa Malone, he recorded several numbers under his own name, among them were "My Special Friend," and "Nervy Woman Blues," both featuring Charley Mills on piano. Between 1953-54, he recorded for JVB. His signature piece "Hello Stranger" featured Boogie Woogie Red, Calvin Frazier, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Washboard Willie. Despite the primitive quality of his Detroit recordings, Warren's vocals remain among the best of the city's postwar bluesmen.

Arriving in Detroit one year after Warren, Washboard Willie, a.k.a. William Paden Hensley, another Alabama-born musician, joined the Detroit blues community. Growing up in Columbus, Georgia, Hensley began to play drums at age eighteen. A longtime veteran of the street-musician scene, Hensley worked street corners and clubs in Black Bottom, playing washboard, snare

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\*Hensley utilized two washboards--one metal, one glass--in order to obtain different tones, and wore thimbles on each finger of his right hand.

drum, skillet, kazoo, and a variety of other instruments.\* He not only was a featured performer on the JVB label, but was a back-up musician on numerous session dates.

Another well-known Detroit bluesman of the period, Bobo Jenkins, a.k.a. John Pickens Jenkins, came to Detroit in 1944. Born in Forkland, Alabama, on January 7, 1916, Jenkins was raised on a sharecropper's farm where he learned to sing gospel in local churches. Upon leaving home and hoboing throughout the Delta for fifteen years, he survived by taking numerous small jobs. In Detroit, Jenkins first worked as a gas station attendant and a mechanic before finding steady employment at the Chrysler plant. At night Jenkins frequented the music scene around Black Bottom. "After I came to Detroit," he recalled, "I started to visit nightclubs where Johnny Lee Hooker was playing.... Washboard Willie [and a] guitarist named Percy." To make extra money at these places, he moonlighted as a photographer, taking snap shots of nightclub patrons and processing them in a dark room located in the back of the Harlem Inn. It was during his stint as a photographer that Jenkins came upon the idea to play guitar. Years later he explained:

One Day I went to work to the dark room to develop my pictures and left my girl outside whose name was Elizabeth Thomas. When I came out, Percy, the guitar player, had stole my girl and taken her away. I discovered he had left his guitar - I was then Johnny Lee Hooker told me, 'He got your girl so go take his guitar,' but I didn't know how to play guitar. The next morning I went down to the Wurlitzer Music Company and bought me guitar and amplifier - my purpose for learning guitar was to get revenge.

Through Hooker's connections, Jenkins recorded the number "Democrat Blues" for Chess

Records in 1954--a song reflecting the postwar factory shutdowns occurring during the Eisenhower administration. A minor hit, the song earned him the nickname among Detroit bluesmen, the "President of the Blues."

Since clubs did not offer a steady income, bluesmen like Jenkins and Baby Boy Warren relied on their jobs in the factories for economic survival. Unlike migrant workers, migrant musicians looked upon factory work as a temporary expedient. Though few ever escaped the employment of the steel mills and assembly lines, Detroit musicians did incorporate themes of factory life into their music. Jenkins, for instance, drew inspiration from the rhythms of the factory, composing songs based upon the automated sound of machinery and the pounding of stamping presses.

Those migrant bluesmen who continued to arrive in Detroit for industrial employment during the early postwar years represented a small number of Louisiana and Mississippi bluesmen like Eddie Burns. Born in Belzoni, Mississippi, Burns was raised by his grandparents, owners of a jukejoint who exposed him to the latest 78 r.p.m. discs of bluesmen like Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, Big Maceo, and harmonica-stylist John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson. Inspired by Williamson's musicianship, he began to learn to play harmonica. As Burns stressed years later, "I was only playing as a hobby. Although people kept telling me, 'you should be recording,' I never had any intention of playing music for a living."

Early in his career, Burns met the renowned members of Rice Miller's (usually referred to as Sonny Boy II) King Biscuit radio band in Helena, Arkansas, and often went to juke joints with singer/guitarist Honeyboy Edwards. In 1947 he worked for the Illinois Central Railroad in Waterloo, Iowa, and befriended a fellow railroad worker, John T. Smith, a guitarist from Chat-

tanooga, Tennessee. With Burns on harmonica, they played local spots around Waterloo. After Smith met a local woman, who claimed to have important music connections in Detroit, the two left Waterloo and traveled to Detroit in 1948. In the city, Burns and Smith played at house parties in Black Bottom. After hearing the duo perform on the second-floor of a house party John Lee Hooker, drawn to the sound of Burns' harmonica style, invited him to accompany him at United Sound studio. At these sessions for Besman the duo of Hooker and Burns produced several sides including "Black Cat Blues" and the powerful, Son House-inspired shuffle-tune "Burnin' Hell." A member of a gospel group, Burns was also recorded by Besman who put out the sides under the name Swing Brothers.

Around the time he was accompanying Washboard Willie on harmonica, Burns took up the guitar. His apprenticeship began on an acoustic Harmony guitar and continued on an electric model lent to him by Hooker, who invited to take his place playing at the Harlem Inn. In 1948 he recorded "Papa's Boogie" for Besman, who, without Burns' consent or knowledge, released it on the Holiday label, under the given pseudonym "Slim Pickens." The same year, he recorded with Hooker on the Sensation label. By 1951, he formed his own group, fronting the band as a singer, guitarist, and harmonica player.

In 1957 Burns recorded for JVB, producing the numbers "Treat Me Like I Treat You" and the hit "Don't You Leave Me Baby." Initially Burns gave the song to Von Battle for the Detroit producer to forward it to Chess, in Chicago. After the song's success on Chess, Von Battle approached Burns to sign a contract with him. With Burns' refusal to sign with JVB, a contractual dispute ensued, and the song was pulled from the radio. "Don't You Leave Me Baby" did, however, attract the notice of Don Robey's Houston-based Duke Records who offered Burns a re-

ording contract in 1958. Distributed through the Deluxe and King labels, Burns made several more sides for JVB: "Dealing With the Devil," "Miss Jesse Lee," and "You Better Cut That Out."

A native of Minter City, Mississippi, L. C. Green joined the Hastings Street blues community in the late forties. Accompanied by Walter Mitchell on harmonica, Green played clubs in the area. In 1952, Green recorded "Going down to the River" on the Von label, as well as "Pet Milk Blues" and "Little School Girl" for JVB. In the same year, Iverson Minter, a guitarist and singer born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, recorded for JVB under the pseudonym "Playboy Fuller," cutting the sides "Soon One Morning" and "Sugar Cane Highway," both of which exhibited the strong influences of Muddy Waters' and Lightning Hopkins' delta sounds.

An honorary member of the Hastings scene, Mississippi-born Alex "Rice" Miller, a.k.a. Sonny Boy Williamson, lived in Detroit during the early 1950s. Recording as a sideman for Von Battle, he appeared on Baby Warren's "The Chicken," "Sanafée," and "Mattie Mae." Initially, Williamson teamed up with Baby Boy Warren, playing clubs around the Hastings district. But over time, Williamson's aggressive behavior and popularity, led to the break-up of their partnership. An elder to most of the Detroit bluesmen, Williamson remained a rough, itinerant street musician who, since the 1920s, had eked out a living playing and singing for tips at picnics, carnivals, and lumber camps. A successful recording artist on the Chess label, he remained a hard-drinking and often confrontative individual, given to a life of rambling.

But as Eddie Burns explained, "Sonny Boy could entertain a whole field of people by himself." While a still a young man in Mississippi during the mid-1930s, Burns and a friend encountered Williamson walking down Highway 49. Wearing a self-fabricated leather belt to

hold his harmonicas and "cut-up shoes," Williamson performed Peetie Wheatstraw's "Good Whiskey." After Burns' companion gave Williamson a fifty-cent tip, the harmonica great took the money and resumed his travels.

During Williamson's stay in Detroit, Burns accompanied him on guitar at the Tavern Lounge. Despite his incessant drinking, Williamson remained a brilliant entertainer, rarely exhibiting the effects of hard drink. Accompanying Williamson at the Tavern Lounge, Burns recalled how the harmonica legend retained a hard street-musician attitude. Between sets Williamson made rounds demanding tips from patrons by sticking out his hand in an assertive yet humorous manner. If they did not give him a substantial sum, he would chide them, blatantly stating, "I wouldn't give that to your mammy!" As Burns added, "Sonny Boy was never broke because he would play for tips anywhere anytime. I used to see him playing in Black Bottom on street corners." Often the owners of Italian shoe stores let Williamson hang an extension cord over their door allowing Williamson to plug in his amplifier. The potential customers that were drawn flocked around the harmonica great.

Despite the presence of elder stylists like Williamson, young Detroit musicians, by the mid-1950s, were exposed to new sounds by radio and records that bore little resemblance to the rural blues of their southern heritage. One of these early groups representing the increasing influence of rhythm & blues, Joe Weaver and the Blue Notes, emerged one of the first groups in Detroit to perform what became known as rock & roll. An inspiring assemblage of high school musicians, the quartet included pianist Joe Weaver, guitarist Johnny Basset, saxophonist Jesse Allman, and drummer Calvin Andrews. As guitarist Johnny Basset later explained, "We learned our music from the radio or what we could pick off recordings. We were one of the first groups in Detroit

to play Bill Dogget's "Honky Tonk." Honing their skills by winning numerous local talent contests - where they backed such later greats such as singer Little Willie John - The Blue Notes developed a formidable sound. Joseph Von Battle's son, Joe Jr., a school mate of the band at Northwestern High School, heard the Blue notes perform at a talent contest. Through the connections of Joe Jr., Von Battle invited the band to his studio.

Impressed by the group's sound, Von Battle offered the use of his studio for the band's rehearsals. Every day after school the band assembled in the studio, and, on occasion, brought in a school mate Aretha Franklin to sing with the group. Present during the band's rehearsals, Von Battle, without the knowledge of its members, recorded the group. Out of these impromptu sessions came the hit "1540" Special" on the Deluxe label. "He put our name on the record," explained Basset, "but when it came to pay day there was no money. We didn't know anything about contracts, we didn't sign a thing."

Though Joe Weaver and the Blue Notes did not find economic return for their first recording, they soon secured club dates on Hastings. Benefiting from the popularity of R&B and blues, the band played corner establishments up and down the street. Only nineteen years old when he began performing with the group along Hastings, Basset told how, "You could walk out of a bar they'd have three or four guys playing on one weekend. The next weekend the same group would be playing up on the other end of the street. These musicians were not members of the union, and most were playing for drinks. These were neighborhood places which had acts like Washboard Willie and the like."

While rhythm and blues and the down-home rhythm of delta-style blues entertained audiences in small corner taverns, Hastings continued to offer middle-class audiences jazz and the

sounds of jump rhythm and blues--an idiom popularized by the bands of Louis Jordan, Lucky Millinder, and Kansas City vocalist Joseph Vernon "Big Joe" Turner. Featuring slick horn arrangements and refined piano accompaniment, fashionably dressed jump bluesmen brought Hastings club-goers a more refined sound than that of the southern-born folk-blues guitarists.

Visitors to Hastings found this style of blues at Wilson's Forest Club and Raymond Jackson's Sportree's Music Bar, the popular "valley nightery" located at the corner near Adams. Florida-born, Jackson first worked for the WPA, and after selling his Cadillac and gaining loans from friends bought his first nightclub. A flamboyant dresser and fond of cigars and expensive automobiles, Jackson became known as one of the Valley's most successful nightclub owners. Known for its colorful female impersonator shows, Sportree's also featured the finest national jump blues acts like the renowned Texas guitar great Aaron "T-Bone" Walker and Kansas City shouter Joe Turner. "T-Bone never fails to send patrons," stated a local paper's review of Walker's show. "He plays blues that put you in a low-down groove and make you tap your feet."

Sportree's, similar to many jazz and dance-oriented nightspots during the forties, featured a revue-style show complete with an emcee and several local opening groups. Detroit bandleader and trumpeter, King Porter, led a "hot quintet" which backed most visiting acts. "One of the top little bands in town," Porter's outfit often played behind local blues singers Honey Brown and Alberta Adams.

Porter's "fast-moving orchestra" included young Detroit saxophonist Billy Mitchell, one of the rising stars of the modernist jazz movement. As opposed to folk blues and swing-jazz styles performed on Hastings, bebop was an avant-garde idiom popular among a small, but devout, group of followers. In smaller ensembles, modernists experimented in extended improvisational



sections, often incorporating Afro-Cuban rhythms and modern European harmonic structure. Arising out of New York's Harlem club scene, bebop symbolized an artistic reaction against the commercial efforts of white jazz musicians during the swing era. Led by pioneers, such as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, alto-saxophonist Charlie Parker, pianist Thelonious Monk, and drummer Max Roach, modern jazz brought about a new school of Detroit-born musicians and listeners.

But because blues and popular jazz ballads remained the preferred music among Black Bottom listeners, modernists found few venues in which to display their talents. "Detroit, unlike most cities, is a blues tavern-and-beer-garden town," explained local columnist Roy H. Stephens. "You need only to play the blues to be successful." Similar to most patrons and club owners, Stephens viewed the bebop craze as only a "passing fad." This attitude forced modernists to create a subculture within the Black Bottom music community--a movement which even brought bebop to a small number of clubs on Hastings.

In the late forties, the Forest Club featured both jump blues and modern jazz. Though most big-name acts played the Graystone Ballroom and the Paradise Theatre, numerous nationally known jazz groups performed on bills at the Forest Club. During the forties, Wilson brought the Nat King Cole trio to the club for its first engagement in Detroit. The club was the gathering spot for celebrities like Joe Louis, Jackie Gleason, Errol Garner, and Pearl Bailey. Regular performers at the club included Louis Jordan and T-Bone Walker. When Walker fell on hard times during his visits to the city, Wilson often lent him money, as he did a host of other artists, or allowed him to stay at his hotel without charge. His generosity earned him the reputation as "Detroit's congenial host."

The bebop craze also prompted Wilson to book Charlie Parker and shows headlined by Dizzy

Gillespie. When Woody Herman's band played the Forest Club in 1949, Wilson blocked off the street, and set up skylights. Taken by Wilson's promotional exploit, Herman expressed his appreciation by exclaiming, "Sunnie Wilson, goddammit! This is Hollywood."

Bebop also could be heard at weekly jam sessions in several Hastings clubs. Called "Blue Monday parties," these open sessions, or amateur contests allowed modernists to perform more advanced arrangements, generally not part of the repertoire of blues-based trios and small jazz ensembles dominating the Hastings scene. When not employed in swing and society bands playing downtown theaters, hotels, and dance halls, modernists came to Hastings to perform at Monday jam sessions held at the Corner Bar, "The House That Bop Built," at Alexander and Bill Rouzer's Ace Bar at Livingston. Among the patrons at these corner drinking establishments were black comedian Bill Murray, and his close friend, Berry Gordy, the-later impresario of Motown Records who came to Hastings for the sounds of modern jazz. Vibraphonist Milt Jackson recalled Detroit's music scene: "The environment of the 40s in Detroit was very similar to the environment of 52nd Street when I first came to New York...You could go at nine and at four when the nightclubs closed and you couldn't catch it all."

As the sounds of modern jazz signaled new attitudes and cultural tastes within the Hastings district, the changes wrought by the advent of cold war were reflected in Paul Robeson's visit to Wilson's Forest Club in October 1949. Traditionally a welcome figure in "motor town," Robeson's communist party affiliation left him alienated within a city whose auto unions, under the leadership of Walter Reuther, had recently underwent a purge of all left-wing elements. This, coupled with anti-Soviet sentiments and events of the Peekskill riot of the previous week, resulted in a very negative public response to Robeson's visit. Unable to secure a hall for

Robeson's visit, communist supporters turned to Sunnie Wilson who had a reputation for renting his facility to various organizations.

Approached by communist members, Wilson agreed to rent the hall to Robeson, upon the stipulation, as he later stressed, "That the he make the ticket price affordable for the black folks of Hastings Street." A pragmatic man and without ties to the left, Wilson sought to bring Robeson upon the principle that it was undemocratic to block the appearance, pointing out to angry city officials that his hall remained open for rent to any organization that spoke out for the rights of the black community. Soon after Wilson received several anonymous phone calls threatening his life. The night of the performance an entourage of personal bodyguards assembled to protect Robeson. Outside, the club police stood guard around the building, just as they had during the AFL's meeting eight years earlier. One thousand bluecoats waited the guest's arrival.

When he got to the Forest Club, Robeson not only saw a vanguard of policemen, but lines of enthusiastic supporters. In the club's meeting hall, he spoke on the theme of alienation. His speech, printed in the pages of the communist Daily Worker, took the title "I am Still the Same Man."

When I came here many times for concerts, I got the finest reviews from the press. When Joe Louis and Marian Anderson and I came here to speak and sing at bond rallies during the war we were given a civic reception, greeted by the mayor and governor. What has happened? I am still the same man. I still speak out for peace like in those days. Just what has happened is that I am still fighting for it now, that's how much the atmosphere has changed.

As Robeson supporter Erma Henderson recalled, "The predicted riot never happened. An enthusiastic crowd stood in awe as Paul Robeson sang song after song and spoke elegantly about his tragic experiences which subsequently led to his banishment from the concert stage."

The changes in the political climate, as described by Robeson, were the early signs of a city undergoing a transformation. The lack of postwar employment for black workers and the advent of desegregation with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, had a profound effect on the black business community as well as its music scene.

With desegregation, Hastings could no longer compete with the newer clubs appearing on Oakland Avenue, Russell, and the "Vegas-like" strip along John R. Once restricted to venues on Hastings and outlying streets in Paradise Valley, black musicians were allowed by desegregation to find work in white-owned lounges in hotels and nightclubs throughout the city. Others relocated, along with black residents and businessmen, on the once Jewish-dominated neighborhood around Twelfth Street, designated the new "Hastings Street" by older members of the community.

Always an "unlovely but colorful street," Hastings, by the mid-fifties, no longer appealed to a younger generation of blacks who associated the area with poverty and degradation. "The sophisticated set and the night crowd were replaced by thugs, junkies, and winos." The once thriving center of culture, business, and music resembled an urban ghost town, soon to be sacrificed to the "dream" of urban renewal.

## CHAPTER IV

### An Elegy For Hastings Street

Freeway taking Hastings away, none of us here to stay

Bulldozer, Bulldozer hold your wrecking ball

This is just the beginning land being surveyed everyday

We can't stay here, there's just no way.

#### *Paradise Revisited*

Sunnie Wilson's sale of the Forest Club in January, 1951, symbolized the gradual demise of the Hastings community. Attracting frontline newspaper headlines, the local black press, announced: "For years one the best known entertainment corners in all of Detroit, Sunnie's—as that section of the Forest and Hastings corner was called—was sold to...a group of 6 Negro and white businessmen. The sale culminated in a big farewell party in honor of "the well-liked and tireless impresario" whose club that "brought history to Hastings and Forest." Able to move beyond the district due to postwar integration, thousands of blacks left Hastings, resulting in the impoverishment of the district. Introduced in 1946, Mayor Jeffries' Detroit Plan selected the Hastings district as the number one site for slum clearance.

When the Detroit Plan was published in its final form in 1951, 140,000 blacks lived in Paradise Valley. Soon blacks moved to more prominent neighborhoods in areas within La Salle Boulevard, Chicago Boulevard, Boston-Edison, Arden Park. For many less economically advantaged blacks, displacement from Hastings led them to take up residence around Twelfth Street, the former Jewish "second front" on the cities northwest side. Many older established Twelfth

Street residents resented the "invasion" by newcomers who associated the lower eastside with poverty and crime. But just as Twelfth Street did not recapture the colorful sights of Hastings for the Jews of previous decades, it failed to engender the character and cultural setting for blacks who once lived in the heart of Paradise Valley during the first three decades of the century.

A sociological study of the Twelfth Street black community reveals that a majority of Twelfth Street residents sought to disassociate themselves from their "lower eastside beginnings." A former resident attributed this attitude to a "new group of blacks who did not experience the Valley in its prime and, consequently, were not interested in keeping it alive." With the advent of integration, younger blacks were no longer confined to living within the borders of Black Bottom as were Detroiters of earlier generations. Without close ties to the community, younger blacks sought to leave the Hastings district in order to acquire better housing and living conditions.

Once known as the city's leading center for vice and prostitution, Hastings lost one of its most lucrative trades to the new westside community. "When people said Hastings moved to Twelfth Street," explained Little Sonny Willis, "what they referred to was not the movement of the music, but the relocation of the street girls." As bluesman Eddie Burns added, "people thought Twelfth Street was going to be the same as Hastings, but it turned sour real quick."

Nearly a decade before the bulldozers began to tear into the earth around Hastings, the loss of business in Paradise Valley crippled the economy and spirit of the community. Black entrepreneurs, like Wilson and Barthwell, contended that integration destroyed Black Bottom's business districts by allowing blacks to shop more comfortably throughout the city. Barthwell, one of whose nine pharmacies was located on Hastings, commented that "Negroes had it made in De-

troit until World War II. We had about everything we needed in the black business community. Discrimination gave tremendous [economic] power because we had been compacted into one small area." Speaking on behalf of the black businessmen in Paradise Valley, Wilson explained that, "We thought integration would be a two-way street, that a partnership between black and white business would evolve, but it didn't turn out that way."

By 1958, hundreds of businesses on Hastings lay vacant, including the Forest Club, Sportree's, and the legendary Brown's Bar. Others were changed by new owners. The Hastings Bar became a poultry business; the Ace Bar, a hardware store. French blues researchers Jacques Demetre and Marcel Chauvard, visiting Hastings in 1959, found the area to be a "wasteland" with its brick and wood structures in utter decay. "Customers look so poor, it was almost heartbreaking," accounted Demetre and Chauvard.

Following the only lead they possessed about the Detroit blues scene, the two researchers arrived at the address of Von Battle's record shop, where they found an old weathered brick building with a hand-painted white sign reading: "Joe's Record Shop. Recordings By Reverend Franklin." With the shift of nightclubs away from Hastings, Joe's remained the last meeting spot for Detroit bluesmen on the street. Inside the shop, lined with posters and promotional pictures of black artists, John Lee Hooker, Little "Sonny" Willis, Floyd Taylor, and guitarist Emmitt Slay often gathered in the afternoons to talk or sometimes to pick up a guitar and strum out a few tunes.

In the years he spent on the street, Von Battle witnessed many changes. With a new generation of native-born black Detroiters listening to rhythm and blues, doo-wop singing groups, and modern jazz, Von Battle noticed the effect these trends had on the sale of blues recordings. Alt-

hough recent releases by electric bluesmen such as Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker continued to sell, Von Battle complained that "I could never sell a record of Blind Lemon Jefferson, not even to older folk. Of course, some of the coloured people really despise the blues."

For many black Detroiters, the blues projected an image of poverty they hoped to escape. Just as the lower eastside became associated with degradation, blues music reflected an era, and the sound of a region related with racial subjugation and abject poverty. During the mid-fifties, young blacks flocked to new venues of entertainment, notably Morris Wasserman's Flame Showbar on John R. With its show-style review backed by a number of talented jazzmen, the Flame catered to black and white middle class patrons. Unlike the small corner blues taverns which supported bluesmen and lone piano stylists, clubs like the Flame attracted crowds who did not exhibit an affinity for Southern folk-style blues. As early as 1949 John Lee Hooker's audition at the Flame was met with little enthusiasm. A local music writer summed up Hooker's performance by stating that although the bluesman's "offerings were good" they nonetheless were "too sad" for the modern tastes of the club's clientele. Other nightspots outside the Valley included Frolic Showbar, and the Crystal Showbar on Grand River. Though few in number there did emerge several black-owned jazz clubs including Clarence Eddins' Bluebird Inn on Tireman.

As Detroit singing sensation Jackie Wilson worked crowds to a frenzy at the Flame Show Bar, and Detroit jazzmen Billy Mitchell, Elvin Jones, and Kenny Burrell backed Miles Davis and John Coltrane at jam sessions at the Bluebird, the once busy clubs on Hastings remained quiet. Except for a handful of corner taverns, hairdressers, grocers, and fish stores, Hastings was but a shadow of its former self.

In 1957, the fate of Hastings was sealed when the City Council voted unanimously to change



the name of the prospective highway route from the Hastings-Oakland to the Walter P. Chrysler Expressway. Harold Hastings, the great nephew of Evortas P. Hastings, for whom the street was named, opposed the city's decision. But by the late fifties, Hastings was no longer a name associated with the eighteenth century Connecticut-born banker and "honest Presbyterian philanthropist." A half century had passed since Detroiters remembered the street as a quaint nineteenth-century avenue lined with horse drawn carriages taking patrons to the City Art Museum. Instead, it connoted images of the ghetto—the decrepit gathering place of poor Jewish merchants, nightclub-goers, gamblers, and prostitutes. "Old timers will recall Hastings Street was the butt of the jokes of burlesque and vaudeville comedians," explained a local newspaper not long before the street's destruction. "Its origins are invested with dignity. Its history should be viewed with admiration."

But sentiment and self-reflection were never attributes of a city built upon the creed of industrial progress. To promote Detroit as a center of modern change, city planners proposed the construction of the Cobo Hall conference center on the waterfront and a superhighway to connect the facility with the northern suburbs. Part of a fifty billion dollar federal highway plan, the construction of the Chrysler Expressway was the first route approved under the program in Michigan. Since the federal government agreed to pay ninety-percent of the building costs, city officials urged the immediate construction of the project. The city's chief engineer told the press: "We do not expect any problems in construction. There is always the problem, however, of moving people and relocating businesses."

Hidden from the pages of the city's newspapers, there remained the problem of relocating thousands of blacks from the district. The proposed expressway and the building of a medical

center in the Hastings community threatened the destruction of 3,321 dwellings and the removal of 3,471 families. In the construction of its first three-mile stretch, the expressway claimed four hundred and nine businesses, including forty-nine eating places, sixty-eight markets, twenty appliance and furniture stores, fifteen drug stores, eighteen bars, and twelve churches.

In January 1959 at a ceremony held at the corner of Hastings and Macomb, Walter P. Chrysler's twelve-year-old grandson blew the steam whistle signaling the earth movers to begin construction. Within three years, as the expressway expanded northward, signs on the lots around Hastings bore the foreboding words: "City of Detroit Urban Renewal Lands For Sale Commercial Parcels. Detroit Housing Commission." A great number of parcels were purchased by J. L. Hudson and Detroit Receiving Hospital. Faced with multi-million dollar interests many families took compensation by receiving new housing elsewhere. One by one, the famous landmarks of Paradise Valley fell to the machinery of construction crews. Hundreds of blacks turned out to attend the "wake" of the Gotham Hotel, the former meeting place of the "entertainment world's elite."

As bulldozers began turning the heart of Paradise Valley into an earthen trench, Joseph Von Battle took his young daughter to catch a last glimpse of the former thoroughfare. Years later, Von Battle's daughter told how her father "walked me across the street...to this gigantic pit that was in the ground. I looked like a canyon to me. He looked at me and said, 'This is where Hastings Street used to be.' All my life, as a little girl I didn't know what it was. I just had the memory of this pit. As I got older, I realized that it was the initial diggings for the 1-75 freeway. What my father so graphically understood and expressed with that a way of life had been totally destroyed. The street of Hastings just no longer existed."

Others in the community also expressed opposition to what many residents termed as the "take over of Paradise Valley." Reverend Albert B. Cleage branded the building of the expressway under the Detroit Plan as a policy of "northern-style" segregation. "We look at the Urban Renewal Program and we see that urban renewal means Negro removal," charged Cleage. He viewed the plan "to clean all Negroes out of the inner-city" as an effort "to attract white suburbanites." In an effort to "alleviate human suffering involved in relocation," the Booker T. Washington Trade Association formed the Fellowship of Urban Renewal Churches. An alliance of over ninety churches, the association stood "for the right of each church to determine its own destiny." Promoting the fight for human equality, the fellowship urged citizens and organizations to provide information in order to help the resettlement of black families.

Relocation also aroused resentment among black citizenry. Although their views were not represented in the white press, many blacks believed the plan for relocation was "doomed to failure." The city's lack of concern for dispossessed families and businesses outraged many who, as Wilson explains, were "mad as hell." Wilson's meetings with young residents to dissuade them from selling their property proved futile. Without a long-term vision and no vested interest in the area, younger blacks moved without protest. "No one brought them up to respect their heritage," said Wilson. "No one taught them" the values and strides made by blacks in Paradise Valley in previous decades. Assessing the situation years later, Wilson told how younger residents "sold their birthright" to the interests of white corporations.

In 1962, amid the rumbling of bulldozers in Paradise Valley, nineteen-year-old Detroit singer Mary Wells landed a number one hit on the Motown label with the song "The One Who Really Loves You." The young star of Berry Gordy's burgeoning recording empire on West Grand

Boulevard represented not only a new pop music trend, but the changes in a city determined to remain at the forefront of modern industry. In the following decades, the world would come to associate the "Motor City" with innovative automotive design and the music of singers like Little Stevie Wonder and Diana Ross, who grew up in the Brewster-Douglas housing projects near Hastings.

Only in the memories of an older generation and the recordings of long-forgotten bluesmen would the remembrance of Hastings survive. Gone were the clubs, businesses, churches, and homes of those who recalled Hastings when thousands rushed into the street to celebrate a victory by boxing champion Joe Louis—a time when limousines brought people dressed in tuxedos to watch stage shows in the Valley. Symbolizing the destruction of Hastings, Detroit Count died a decade later in abject poverty with his "feet wrapped in plastic bags." Expressing the decline of the city's black business and music community, bebop vibraphonist Milt Jackson lamented: "It was a beautiful environment...I wish they could have kept it and enhanced it...It was something completely unforgettable and something I never figured would be destroyed like it did."

To date, no placards or historical markers have been erected to honor the street that once served as Detroit's colorful crossroad of culture and business. Only three blocks of Hastings remain, an industrial stretch lined with weathered factory buildings from West Grand Boulevard to and dead-ending at an earthen barrier at Harper. In a city where architectural fashions change as fast as the styles of its automobiles, the rise and fall of Hastings is a reminder of how, in the course of less than a century, Eastern European Jews and black migrants gained an economic foothold in the city by creating an environment which attracted business from the larger outlying population.

Because of the important role Hastings played in the development of the city, a renewed interest in the legendary thoroughfare has emerged. In 1972 Detroit jazz musicians, in tribute to the musical legacy of Paradise Valley, formed the Hastings Street Jazz Experience, a large aggregate of artists including pianist/arranger Teddy Harris Jr. and singer Kim Weston. Twelve years later, Beatrice Buck produced the musical "Paradise Lost," a stage show which honored Hastings and other famous streets of the Valley. Among the show's star-studded cast were the legendary blues singers Alberta Adams and Jimmy Witherspoon. A former resident of the Valley, Ms. Buck expressed her disappointment over "the take over of Paradise Valley." Buck told an interviewer, "I guess my love for Paradise Valley came because I was angry. I was angry after waiting all of those years to go to Paradise Valley and the Club 666. I never got a chance to go there, because when I got old enough it was gone." Raised in the Valley during the 1920s, Paul B. Shirley lamented, "Hastings Street—there will never be another street like it, and it's known all over the world. I've felt pretty bad about it, because I played up and down as a child, and it wasn't anything that could be done about it 'cause they were putting the freeway in anyway."

For a half a century the Hastings music scene produced a biracial atmosphere—its black--and-tan clubs and afterhours spots attracted audiences of diverse class and racial backgrounds. The study of the African American population of the Hastings Street district reveals the vital, and often inextricable relationship between music and the economic condition of the surrounding community. Industrial employment along with the development of black and Jewish businesses provided a favorable economic environment for the emergence of a thriving music scene. Supported by legitimate and illegitimate business operations, blacks in the Hastings Street community created their own entertainment scene featuring two forms of music: urban blues and

jazz, the former a popular music idiom among southern-born working class blacks; the latter a music representing the aesthetic taste and cultural identity of middle class African-Americans. The music culture of Hastings Street serves as a mirror of its times, reflecting the prosperity, community spirit, and creative expression of Detroit's African-American population during the mid-twentieth century. In tribute to his former home in Paradise Valley, poet Robert Hayden wrote that it is time to "Let Vanished Rooms, Let Dead Streets Tell"—to resurrect in memory a place which served as the heart of Detroit's cultural world for over four decades.

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