

LOCAL

The Turf Club, a long dormant Asbury Park musical landmark, shows signs of life

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3-minute read



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ASBURY PARK —

The once raucous Turf Club, an icon of Black music culture in Asbury Park, has grown quieter and quieter since the 1970s.

Civil unrest came to its doors. Ownership changed hands repeatedly. A fire tore through it in the late 1990s.

But there are once again signs of life at the longtime jazz and blues club, which represents one of the last remnants of Springwood Avenue's storied musical history.

"The future of the Turf Club is very bright," said Asbury Park Councilwoman Yvonne Clayton.

The Asbury Park African-American Music Project (AP-AMP) was able to purchase the property in January 2022.

AP-AMP has put on "Tuesdays at the Turf" concert series during the summer for the last two years, with musicians coming in and inviting the community to come enjoy the evening for free. They plan to continue the concert series this summer.

"We are working to make it back into a community music and cultural venue for the Springwood Ave community, and Asbury Park," said Jen Souder of the AP-AMP.

AP-AMP is a volunteer-run, community-driven tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization working to preserve and share the music, stories, and heritage of Springwood Avenue, the heart of Asbury Park's African American community.

The group hopes to raise \$2.1 million to restore the club to fix the roof, exterior, and interior for a comprehensive rehabilitation of the entire venue.

A storied history

The Turf Club originally opened at 1125 Springwood Avenue in 1940 and moved to 1200 Springwood Avenue in 1956, where the building remains today.

In the 1960s, there were dozens of music venues on the Westside of Asbury Park, all along Springwood Avenue.

Springwood Avenue was once the spot for jazz and blues club, as well as many Black-owned businesses and restaurants. The history of the jazz era of the Westside in the past could be likened to the present musical culture of the Eastside.

Clayton remembers being too young to enter the club.

"It was about music. The Turf Club was one of those places where there was music coming out. You couldn't walk down Springwood Avenue back in the day and not hear music, always," Clayton said.

Icons such as Billie Holiday and Count Basie as well as local talent performed along Springwood Avenue. It was part of the Chitlin' Circuit and lined with music venues and African American-owned businesses, many cited in the Green Book.

Since the late 1950s, music was a mainstay of the Turf Club, offering local jazz and R&B acts like Al Griffin, Cliff Johnson, and Dee Holland, and nationally recognized artists like Clarence Clemons, who would later join Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, according to [the Asbury Park African-American Music Project](#).



In 1970, civil unrest and a period of disinvestment devastated Springwood Avenue.

"The street lost most of its vitality as of July 4, 1970. The excitement and the energy that was Springwood Avenue dissipated after the civil unrest," Clayton said.

According to Springwood Avenue Rising, "the activities occurring in Asbury Park between Monday, July 4 – Friday, July 10, 1970 can only be summarized by saying it depended upon who was being interviewed or who was writing the articles as to whether they referenced the event as a riot, revolt, or a civil unrest."

"Depressing. (The Turf Club) was still there and I was so glad it survived but walking down Springwood Avenue (after the uprising) was depressing, I didn't do it," Clayton said. "It took a long time for the city to go in and clean it up."

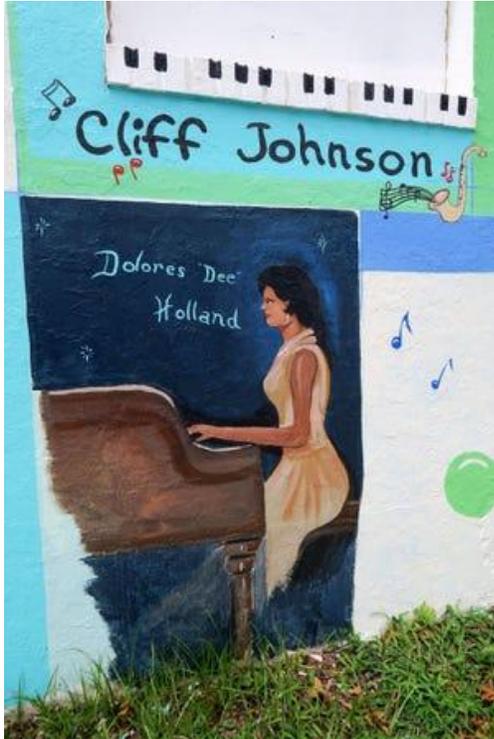
Last of its kind

The Turf Club is the only venue from the period that still remains.



"The Turf Club on Springwood and Atkins speaks to the rich music legacy on the Westside of Asbury Park," said Pamela Major, a member of the the Springwood Avenue Rising committee. "Preserving it allows us to point to what was in the community showing its vibrant history and the beauty and richness of this part of the city."

In 2017, the AP-AMP started by documenting oral histories with musicians and people throughout the community. The focus was on music, as well as African-American history, so the Turf Club seemed "obvious."



"It was a great idea, but we didn't know if we could do that because we knew it was privately owned. So, the goal to preserve and try to purchase it grew out of this desire to both save and uplift all the stories of Springwood Avenue that don't get told as much," Souder said.

She added there is a lot of attention on "other music and wonderful music in Asbury Park."

"But we really wanted to have the African-American influence and background spotlighted (and) highlighted," Souder said.

In January, Diane Shelton, who is part of Springwood Avenue Rising, presented the idea of the Springwood Avenue Plaque Project, a designated walk marking various points in the region's history, to the Asbury Park City Council.

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