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Asbury Park African-American Music Project preserves and celebrates Springwood Avenue's legacy

AP-AMP is restoring the historic Turf Club to create a community venue for music and culture





The Turf Club is the last remaining structure that housed one of Springwood Avenue's celebrated music spots.

Courtesy of Shilpa Iyer

By Alissa Deleo

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ASBURY PARK, NJ — The [Asbury Park African-American Music Project \(AP-AMP\)](#) plays a vital role in preserving and celebrating the music, cultural heritage and stories of Springwood Avenue.

Through community events, oral history interviews, concerts and efforts to revitalize the historic Turf Club, AP-AMP keeps the legacy of Springwood Avenue alive and thriving.

"Before we were a nonprofit organization, we were a group of volunteers in Asbury Park who all were very committed and interested in documenting and sharing the stories of Springwood Avenue," Jennifer Souder, co-founder and president of AP-AMP, said of the group's beginnings in 2017.

The Turf Club is the last remaining structure that housed one of Springwood Avenue's celebrated music spots; now, AP-AMP is in the process of restoring it with a vision to create a community venue for music and culture.

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

It represents the last chance to preserve a physical piece of Springwood Avenue's music history.

Springwood Avenue was once home to a thriving music scene. 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 and nationally-recognized

jazz and R&B acts, including Al Griffin, Cliff Johnson, Dee Holland, and Clarence Clemons.

In 1970, civil unrest and a period of disinvestment, which led to the closure of many businesses and clubs, devastated Springwood Avenue; however, its vast history remains.

One of the ways that AP-AMP preserves the history of Springwood Avenue is through its [oral history project](#).

Since its beginning, AP-AMP has filmed dozens of interviews with local musicians and community members who were integral to the music scene on Springwood Avenue.

AP-AMP has interviewed people of all generations, including musicians now in their 80s and 90s.

"It's a gift to be able to sit down with people and hear them share their stories," Souder said.

"We've built a lot of trust in the community over the years, and we wouldn't do it otherwise – the whole point is to have a space for the Westside," she added.

Souder noted that one of AP-AMP's happiest accomplishments was having the opportunity to interview musicians Al Griffin, Dee Holland, and Cliff Johnson, who performed at The Turf Club throughout the 1940s.

"We were able to have the city honor them that year at the Black History Month event," she said, adding, "It was the first time they were all publicly recognized in that way, which was amazing. Families came, some of which hadn't seen each other in decades."

These interviews have been archived and made available to the public, providing a valuable resource for anyone interested in learning more about the history of Springwood Avenue.

"One of our main goals is intergenerational learning. We really want the knowledge, and the wisdom and the experiences and memories of the older generation to be transferred to younger generations," Souder said.

Other research activities include recreating historic maps of Springwood Avenue and collecting original photographs. AP-AMP's oral history interviews and

photographs are held at the Bruce Springsteen Archives at Monmouth University and online through the organization's [Digital Museum](#).

In 2020, AP-AMP partnered with the City's Quality of Life Committee and the Shade Tree Commission to host a community event to clean out the Turf Club.

AP-AMP was able to purchase the Turf Club in January 2022.

"The Turf Club came up so many times as a key memory for people," Souder explained. "The intersection of Atkins and Springwood Avenue has come up time and time again in the oral history interviews. To us, it was super important to preserve the actual building, not take it down and have some other music venue – we wanted those walls, that building."

For the past three summers, AP-AMP has hosted "Tuesdays at the Turf," a weekly free evening concert series welcoming musicians and the community to gather at the Turf Club.

"It became a thing where we had our community core group, and each musician would bring their own audience as well. It would really vary from week to week, which was cool," Souder said.

"For me, it's been so much fun," Souder said of the community impact of hosting live music on the Westside. "I love being able to see the musicians come back together. Some people haven't seen each other in years."

Souder estimates the full restoration of the Turf Club to be \$2.5 million dollars.

They have raised about half a million dollars thus far.

The organization's first large sum of funding was from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which is a privately funded, nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., that works in the field of historic preservation in the United States.

With this funding, AP-AMP was able to begin the first phase of construction on the Turf Club, which is to install a new roof.

"We're working on updating the exterior first and then the interior," noted Souder.

The Asbury Park African-American Music Project (AP-AMP) recently received a \$100,000 grant from the New Jersey State government, sponsored by State Senator Vin Gopal (D-Monmouth). This grant will help AP-AMP install new

windows on the Turf Club.

Souder noted that Asbury Park Council Member Yvonne Clayton is instrumental in leading AP-AMP toward the future of preserving and restoring the historic Turf Club.

For growing up in this neighborhood and getting people involved has been a big part of this as well," Souder said.

AP-AMP is always accepting volunteers, and there are many ways to learn more about getting involved on the organization's [website](#).



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