

**MUSIC**

How Black music history of forgotten West Side of Asbury Park is being rediscovered

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Published 5:00 a.m. ET Oct. 18, 2021 | Updated 3:52 p.m. ET Oct. 18, 2021

In Asbury Park, music fans come from around the world to see the sights and venues made famous by Bruce Springsteen and the musicians who came of age in the '60s and '70s.

But on the West Side of Asbury Park, an African-American musical and cultural legacy was all but lost.

It's now being rediscovered.

The hope by residents is that the new interest in the former music and cultural scene on Springwood Avenue, and the stirrings of new music there, will generate the interest of residents and out-of-towners alike.

“Young people in the community, they don’t really understand the history of their hometown,” said city resident Nina Summerlin of the city’s West Side Citizens United group. “We’re talking for 50 years there’s been nothing on Springwood Avenue. Our kids don’t understand what used to be there. As long as I’ve been growing up, there’s never been anything there.”

Reclaiming history

In the past two years or so, community groups have organized with the mission of reclaiming the West Side's history. Cultural landmarks are being recognized, and

Springwood Avenue Park hosts weekly concerts in the summertime.

In the shell of the former Turf Club at 1200 Springwood, the last remaining club on the strip, the Asbury Park African-American Music Project is seeking to renovate the venue, partly with revenue from their “Tuesday at the Turf” summer series.

“In each session there’s a core group of people who come no matter what and all of a sudden you see a handful of new faces so it’s growing with different groups hearing about it,” said Jennifer Ward Souder, president of the Asbury Park African-American Music Project, or AP-AMP.

On 8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 22, at Asbury Lanes, the city's We Star Productions is hosting a benefit show for AP-AMP featuring area hip-hop musicians. Dane the Beautiful Monster, Bulletproof Belv, Chris Rockwell, Jason Dmore, Drea and Ryver Bey will perform. DJ Ronny Rayz will provide the beats.

“You need to have a sense of history, you need to know where you came from, and I believe that music feeds your soul,” said Yvonne Clayton, a member of Asbury Park City Council who is on the Board of Directors of AP-AMP. “Can you image what life would be if you didn’t have music?”

A magnet for music

Springwood Avenue was formerly a vibrant center of music in Asbury Park where greats like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Fats Waller, Sonny Greer, Lenny Welch, the Broadways, Bobby Thomas of the Orioles, Clarence Clemons and more either came up in or played the avenue’s clubs.

The music scene on the West Side of the city, which would become a component of the Sound of Asbury Park as performed by Springsteen and others, came to an abrupt halt during the summer of 1970 when civil unrest tore apart Asbury Park and specifically Springwood Avenue.

Looking for help: Miller Lite wants to hear from Asbury Park's LGBTQ community

It was the end of a dynamic music and cultural scene, the roots of which coming partly from Asbury Park being founded in the 1800s as legally segregated city, said music historian Charlie Horner.

“When you have a city that was de facto segregated, it doesn’t have to be legally segregated like Asbury Park was, a society has to develop on its own,” said Horner, author, with wife Pam Horner, of the vital “Springwood Avenue Harmony: The Unique Music Legacy of Asbury Park’s West Side, Volume 1 (1871–1945)”, published in 2020. “So Springwood Avenue had to develop its own separate society and in developing its own society, it developed its own culture and part of that was music.”

The city, partly due to its location, became a magnet for African-American greats of 20th century music.

“What is unique about Asbury Park is that it was a resort city,” Horner said. “Springwood Ave. is only 10 blocks long but so much great music come out of there. Also, top Black acts playing Philadelphia, Atlantic City, on their way to New York would stop over at the West Side and play a gig there. Lots of big stars came though.”

Typical is the story of band leader Claude Hopkins coming down Springwood Avenue in the mid '20s.

“They heard music coming out of a club. It was the Smile Awhile Inn,” Horner said. “So they said, ‘Let’s try to get a job here.’ ”

Hopkins and his band took over the stage.

“ ‘You guys are great. I’m hiring you tomorrow after I fire the band up there,’ ” said the owner, as Horner tells it. “They said ‘That’s great, we really need the job but we feel bad for the band you just fired.’ The owner said, ‘Oh no, that’s a local kid, he’ll get by — that’s Bill Basie.’ ”

Basie of Red Bank, of course, became one of the greats of American music as Count Basie.

Asbury Park music: Legend Lenny Welch would like to come home, walk up Springwood Avenue

Big things were done on the West Side of Asbury Park. They include:

West Side nightclub owner Reese DuPree is credited as the first male African-American to sing on a blues record with 1923's "Long Ago Blues" and "O Saroo Saroo" for Okeh Records, Horner said.

Vivian Eley began her professional career in the Springwood Avenue clubs before she played on Broadway.

Duke Ellington decided to rededicate himself to piano after spending a summer on Springwood Avenue.

Fats Waller came the West Side in 1929 and wrote "Honeysuckle Rose" with Andy Razaf, whose mom owned a home on Atkins Avenue, two doors from Springwood. Later, Bobby Thomas would sing doo wop in the West Side clubs before joining the Orioles, who are now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Lenny Welch would become the first music star from Asbury Park in the rock 'n' roll era with early '60s hits like "Since I Fell for You" and "Ebb Tide," and the Broadways were the top group in the city when they landed a recording contact with MGM Records in 1964.

"Jeans wasn't even a known word, everybody was dressed," said Leon Trent, a member of the Broadways who still performs on the Jersey Shore and played at Springwood Park in August for his first performance on the West Side in 50 years. "Come the weekend on Friday, everybody got dressed after they got off work and they'd go out again on Saturday, and Sunday were the matinees in the bar. Then you went home and sobered up and eat something and come out for the evening show. You could walk the strip from Highway 35 to the railroad tracks and there be a million bars you could run into."

Unknown creativity

In the late '60s, musicians Clarence Clemons and Garry Tallent would regularly perform in the Springwood Avenue clubs. They would later join Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band and bring the Sound of Asbury Park, a rhythm and blues-based rock sound not far removed from the R&B and soul of the West Side scene, to fans around the world.

“Southside Johnny and Bruce Springsteen used to go to Asbury Park’s West Side and stand outside the clubs and listen to the music that came out of the clubs,” said Eileen Chapman, a member of the Asbury Park City Council and the director of the Bruce Springsteen Archives and Center for American Music at Monmouth University. “There was jazz, R&B, soul, gospel — and you can see how when they formed their bands, there was that influence in the sound.”

Yet, the creative happenings on the West Side of Asbury Park were largely unknown to those outside of the area.

“So many musicians never got the credit they deserved,” Horner said. “The newspapers generally did not cover too much of what was going on on the West Side because their readership was all white. So when you try to go back to research this, it’s not easy.”

Asbury Park civil unrest: Residents recall a painful chapter of the city's history

Despite thriving through the '60s, the West Side scene came to an abrupt halt during the summer of 1970. That’s when a civil disturbance tore apart Asbury Park and specifically Springwood Avenue, the center of the scene. Blocks of Springwood Avenue that were not burned down during the riots were bulldozed over in a failed attempt at revitalization.

Many of the blocks remained empty for decades.

“So much was lost in 1970 when they had the civil unrest and everything burned down,” Clayton said. “It’s been 50 years and people were just trying to hold on to their lives and hold onto to their families — they weren’t thinking about music. All they were thinking about was 'Where can I get a place to live?' or 'Can I work?' ”

The current generation of city musicians do not have a ready knowledge of the West Side’s musical legacy.

“For a long time I rode past this building and didn’t notice it,” said singer Alexander Simone, the grandson of Nina Simone, outside the building on Springwood that used to be the Turf Club.

Slow but steady renewal

A rediscovery of the West Side began in 2011 when the musicians from the '50s and '60s era of the scene convened for an article on the forgotten legacy by the Asbury Park Press. The musicians were later included in a city concert affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution's New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music exhibit in the city.

Asbury Park music history: New marquee unveiled at Turf Club on Springwood Avenue

'Shuffle Along' turns 100: Remembering the first Black Broadway hit

The next month, the Asbury Park Historical Society presented a panel discussion on the history of the West Side scene, and Bruce Springsteen and Southside Johnny showed up. Later that night at the Wonder Bar, Springsteen joined the West Side musicians Billy Brown, Ronald Coleman, Robert Conti, Bobby Thomas, Nicky Addeo and more for an evening of music that made national headlines.

“The West Side guys had a strong influence on what became known as the Sound of Asbury Park,” Springsteen told the Asbury Park Press at the Wonder Bar that night. “There was a moment when the scenes (rock, doo-wop and R&B) crossed over and I opened for the Broadways.”

The past 10 years have been a slow but steady period of renewal for Springwood Avenue and its cultural legacy. The Horners have staged exhibits on the scene in the city and county, and the new Springwood Park is host to a music series that presents national and local musicians. The community groups AP-AMP, the Asbury Park Museum, Interfaith Neighbors, the Asbury Park Arts Council, Springwood Avenue Rising, West Side Citizens, and the Asbury Park Music Foundation are forwarding the cause.

Springwood Avenue Rising recently unveiled a music-themed mural on the Turf Club by city artist Larry Walker. AP-AMP created a virtual West Side museum via www.asburyamp.org that includes oral histories from the elders who remember.

“The project mushroomed because when we talked to seniors we realized how important it was for the soul of a community to let them know what their history was,” Clayton said. “Most of the young people have no idea of the importance of this street. In our research we found that Springwood Ave. in Asbury Park was in the Green Book as a safe place for African-Americans to come and find food and places to stay and for entertainment.”

'Moving in the right direction'

The new interest in the area is part of a current national reckoning and rediscovery of Black American history.

“There are similar stories, all with their unique aspects but with similar narratives, being played out all over the country to varying degrees after being buried or communities being displaced,” Souder said.

The more notable examples include the “1619 Project” of the New York Times and the recognition of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre on its 100th anniversary earlier this year.

“I think there is, in a positive way, a growing recognition of the value of these stories in themselves,” Souder said, “and in the places that they’re tied to.”

PopCon: Rae Sremmurd, Jxdn headlining big 2022 music festival coming to Toms River

For some, the word about Asbury Park isn’t getting out fast enough.

“The city of Asbury Park is the tale of two cities and since the so called Renaissance of the 1990s,” said Teretha Jones of Neptune. “All of a sudden we have all these white folks who have discovered Asbury Park and in their minds and according to their myths, they think it’s all rock ’n’ roll.”

Her father, the late Walter Jones, owned several nightclubs in Asbury Park.

“The city revival has done crap for the quality of life for the majority of people of color. They are not included in the restaurants, unless they’re working, and you don’t see a major mix when you’re talking about beachfront activities,” Jones said. “The clubs, the culture is

not addressing our kinds of music. We're pretty much written out and removed, forced out because of the segregation and gentrification."

Yet, there is momentum on the ground, city leaders say. The construction of Springwood Park in 2016 brought live music back to the Ave after a 40-year absence, and the Renaissance at Asbury Park apartments were opened in July 2019.

Housing and retail are also part of the city's Springwood Avenue Redevelopment Plan.

"One of the success stories that came out of the Music Mondays concert series at Springwood Park is that it brought people from the East Side to the West Side of Asbury Park for the first time and there shouldn't be barriers," Chapman said. "Everyone should feel welcome in the entire city."

"We got some great momentum going on. We've still got a lot to do, but I think we're moving in the right direction, and I think it's important for people to see what came before this."

'Wasted Days': New Bruce Springsteen, John Mellencamp music video filmed in NJ

Broadway is back: Broadway in 2021 will 'have so many Black voices.' Theatergoers, pros say it's about time

Many are hopeful that the word will continue to spread.

"People forget in the '60s, Springwood Avenue was a thriving, thriving, thriving community with lots of music, lots of good music that came through and it was a very, very thriving Black community filled with Black culture," Springsteen told the USA Today Network New Jersey. "So some attention on who was there and who came out of there, it's about time."

The Circuit Series: All-Star Hip-Hop Event, a benefit for Asbury Park African-American Music Project, Dane the Beautiful Monster, Bulletproof Belv, Chris Rockwell, Jason Dmore, Drea, Ryver Bey and DJ Ronny Rayz, 8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 22, Asbury Lanes, 209 4th Ave., Asbury Park. \$15 in advance/\$20 at the door. www.asburylanes.com.

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