



OBAMA MUSIC

Some Notes From A South Sider Abroad

Bonnie Greer

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Independent Book Publisher

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To my deeply missed late father, my uncles, my brothers, my brothers-in-law, my male cousins and nephews and great nephews, to my husband, and to all those men who have been and still are brothers and fathers, friends, and other good and kind things to me...and to the old brother with the cane on Michigan Avenue, Chicago, who told me to go ahead and do my book.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Prologue](#)

[The Blues](#)

[Slipping, Sliding, Tones](#)

[The Devil At The Crossroads](#)

[King Bee](#)

[The Name](#)

[The Summer of '08](#)

[Snob Appeal](#)

[The African 500](#)

[Regular](#)

[Cat-Eye](#)

[Hyde Park Loop-de-Loop](#)

[Black And White In Colour](#)

[Hound Dog](#)

[Everybody Comes From Something](#)

[Crossing Over](#)

[Backwater Blues](#)

[Watch The Lights](#)

[Alone](#)

[Gospel](#)

Take My Hand

Going To Meet The King

The Weaver

A Message From Munich

On The Hill

Son Of Man

A Change Is Gonna Come

Soul

Memphis Soul

Watching Water

The Closer

Beauty

The Du Bois Moment

Ooh, Child

Pride and Joy

The Broken Boy

The Flood

Destination

Don't Get Lost

Wall Of Sound

Higher And Higher

Jazz

OS vs. NS

Club DeLisa

Guiding Light

[The Estate](#)

[Sitting By The Door](#)

[All The Things You Could Be By Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother](#)

[Ancient To The Future](#)

[Frank](#)

[Prepare To Do Something Else](#)

[Obama Music](#)

Acknowledgements

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Prologue

I was born and raised on the South Side. It has a particular musical landscape and history that helps to fill in part of the picture that is the 44th President of the United States.

To understand, at a deeper level, the phenomenon that is Barack Obama, it is necessary to know something about the community that he made his base, where his wife and children were born and raised, where he began his career and where his private home is located: the South Side of Chicago.

Obama Music is a mixture of tales of my own life growing up on the South Side, mixed in with stories and observations about Obama, linking all of this in with the music, the musicians and the music scene, beginning in the past and moving forward. Obama writes in *The Audacity Of Hope*: 'I've always felt a curious relationship to the sixties. I'm a pure product of that era...'

And so am I.

Now, *Obama Music* is made up of all kinds of music: hip hop; country, classical, rock and roll, all of which were heard on Inauguration Day.

But it is also the blues, gospel, soul and jazz, especially from the golden eras; when the people of the South Side began to build the great institutions, and the great solidarity, that enabled Barack Obama to become the most powerful person on the planet.

Living away from the place you were born, living 'abroad', sometimes means that you get the details badly wrong.

I wrote in *The Guardian* at the beginning of Obama's Presidential campaign:

'The truth is that I just can't warm to Obama.

'Maybe I'm just too working-class, too old-school, to trust black people who look that slick, outside of show business or the church. Maybe I distrust someone who allows others to compare him to JFK or even MLK. I was around when they were alive. He's not them.'

This book will show you how I moved from there, to this point in *The Telegraph* at the end of his campaign:

'In his triumphant election campaign of 1984, Ronald Reagan declared: "It's morning in America. If that is the case, then the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States, and the first African-American to hold that awesome office, represents high noon, the moment at which the light is at its brightest and strongest. America has stepped away from its robust, too often reckless and romantic youth into maturity.'

But living abroad, being an expat, can make you so out of it that you have a kind of analogue edge.

Sometimes you can see bigger shapes, deeper patterns.

You use old-fashioned, maybe even 'incorrect' words and ways of looking at things because they better describe how you feel, what you mean.

I use the word the word 'black' in this book instead of 'Black' or 'African American' because for me 'black' speaks of triumph and perseverance, it links me to my rural ancestors and to the South Side and the time that I grew up in.

It is the word that Barack Obama uses most often to describe himself.

I can see from my vantage point across the ocean that being born black in America at the beginning of 1964, having intelligence and energy, the support and encouragement of a loving, supportive, and hard working family was a very lucky thing.

This is because 1964 was arguably the most important date in black American history since the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

Michelle Obama was born in January, 1964 and these are just a few of the things that happened during her first year of life: when she was two months old, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King met for the first and last time, signalling a major shift in the Civil Rights Movement; when she was six months old, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act effectively beginning the process of ending segregation and ushering in other measures like Affirmative Action, paving the way for bright black kids to attend elite universities.

1964 was the year that Nelson Mandela made his defiant speech before being sentenced to prison, sending the antiapartheid movement to another level.

A month before Michelle's first birthday, Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Oh, and 1964 was the year that Dionne Warwick had one of her greatest hits: *You'll Never Get To Heaven If You Break My Heart*. A big breakthrough for her.

It becomes clearer and clearer to me as time passes that jazz and soul are hybrids. They are the complex, urbanized offshoots of blues and even gospel. And because they are hybrids they are 'open systems' able to influence easily other kinds of music while they themselves are open to change.

From my perspective, jazz and soul are also responses to electrification and the experience of the city. Their open systems make them fluid, malleable, forever mutating into genres and portals such as hip-hop.

This is a South Side Presidency.

It is about the music of that train that brought my people up from the South to the South Side. They brought with them their blues, their gospel, soul and jazz. They deepened these musics, thereby changing not only themselves but the city and the nation and the world.

They are reflected in a poem, copied down by Zora Neale Hurston, the great Harlem Renaissance writer, from a sermon she heard at the end of the 20's.

*I heard the whistle of the damnation train
Dat pulled out from the Garden of Eden loaded wid cargo
goin' to hell
Ran at break-neck speed all de way thru de law
All de way thru de prophetic age
All de way thru de reign of kings and judges
Plowed her way thru de Jordan
And on her way to Calvary when she blew for de switch
Jesus stood out on her track like a rough-backed mountain
And she threw her cow-catcher in
His side and His blood ditched de train.
He died for our sins.
Wounded in the house of his friends.*

Everybody has their own *Obama Music*.

This is mine.

THE BLUES

If My Hands Could Get What My
Eyes Can See

Slipping, Sliding, Tones

There is a moment in *The Audacity Of Hope* when Obama is questioning his very essence: his restlessness, his need to keep moving.

The question I ask is this: had he been attracted to Chicago because of this restlessness, this desire to keep moving?

Chicago has always been a centre of transport, of moving.

One of its nick-names is 'The Go'.

The railroads were and are in Chicago because it was and is still considered to be the crossroads of the country.

Massive interstate highways cut right through.

Chicago has itchy feet.

Like the blues.

His chief advisor at the White House has stated that the President likes to slip out and walk around a bit, be on his own.

To my mind, that natural restlessness, that need to break out, is the essence of the blues.

The blues are said to have a 'slippin', slidin' tone.'

The improvisation beneath the careful exterior.

'If my hands could get what my eyes can see,' the great Chicago bluesman Lonnie Brooks sings in *Eyeballin'*.

'Eyeballin' – the refusal to look down when your 'better' is speaking to you; the 'yes, we can' to fate and the way things seem to be – is what embodies the Chicago brand of the blues, and the South Side itself.

'Eyeballin' invites re-creation. Looking someone in the eye can enable you to see yourself.

It is said that the President is pre-occupied with how others see him.

'Eyeballin' lets you see the reflection in someone else's gaze.

If you can do this, then you can get busy.

You can improvise. Re-make.

Obama set out to get what his eyes could see.

Obama feels this as a constant process on the South Side.

Chicago is his place.

Check it out:

There are numerous bluesmen who called themselves 'Son', 'Guitar'. This is not an act of plagiarism or ripping off somebody's else's act (although some might have done it for that reason, that's for sure), but to 'name' that part of them that had to move on, that had to believe in the vision that they had seen on that crossroads where they first took up the blues.

Obama writes of several crossroads in his life.

The notion of the crossroads is integral to the blues, and to the Chicago blues.

The Devil At The Crossroads

The crossroads is a Yoruba concept, from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, cousins of the Africans in the New World.

It is believed that at the crossroads, usually in a heavily wooded area, there lies in wait the Yoruba god or orisha Elegba, the Trickster, or the Devil to Christians.

You could be just walking along, minding your business, and step on what you think is a rock, and suddenly a laugh emanates from it. It is Elegba.

Elegba, the Trickster, usually has something in store.

Or, he can grant a wish.

You can hear Elegba lurking in the ice-cold, death-confronting blues of Robert Johnson.

You can hear him in the archetypal character of 'Jody', the guy who slips into your house and take your place in bed next to your wife while you're at work doing something back-breaking and demeaning and soul-destroying.

He is one of the faces of Elegba.

Above all, the orishas simply appear, shaking the dust off their feet and set about their work.

You can justify what is happening to you when one appears. You can call it madness; hallucinations; luck; fate.

But even the most rational among us have to stop for a minute and ask ourselves if an orisha is amongst us and exactly who it might be.

Because it is possible that it was the orishas who kept us alive, and who, from time to time, show themselves in human form.

And they are always present in the blues

You can cross into gospel-land and pray to Jesus but when an orisha makes itself known, you can't justify it, even to the Lord.

You can call it madness, hallucinations, luck, fate; getting 'happy' and suddenly jumping up in church and 'talking in tongues'. You can go into 'testifying' – a sometimes made up on the spot rambling monologue.

'Testifying' would bear witness to your truth.

Much of classic soul has a blues underpinning, but overtly takes a page out of the gospel playbook and often lets the lead singer 'testify.'

(Listen to the exquisite lead singer of The Four Tops – Levi Stubbs – as he steps off into his own zone of testifying, leaving the world behind during his solo riff on that soaring hymn to unrequited love: *Bernadette*.)

There is many a Mississippi legend from down in the part of the state that my father and his people come from, in which a not-so-great guitarist goes into the woods and comes out a virtuoso.

They would say that 'he done met the devil at the crossroads'. Elegba.

You have to watch out.

You can play like the devil – sublimely – but you sometimes have to pay for it.

The immortal Robert Johnson sings of the 'hellhound on my trail', and he was found poisoned to death, some say in payment to that very hellhound that gave him the gift of the blues.

Who is to say?

Traditional blues is not about analyses and codification. It is about signs and portents, deeply felt emotion plainly spoken; forbidden sex; doomed love; intuition; chance; and a world without the God you were given when they threw you off the boat after the Middle Passage.

Pretty frightening stuff at the high tables of the West.

The real blues is about feeling when to come in, feeling when to do it.

The Delta blues – named after that region of the state of Mississippi located on the delta of the Mississippi River, one of the ancestral homes of South Siders – is father of the Chicago blues sound.

This Chicago blues sound would have permeated all of the places Obama worked and lived in, saturating what many would have seen as his rather laid-back West Coast-Honolulu ambiance.

Twelve-bar blues would have knocked the ukulele for six.

At first, twelve-bar existed only in the playing and the feeling of those who sang it and heard it and lived it.

Later, like everything natural, it came to be written down, its elements codified, books came into being; orchestras took it up; sects developed.

It became accessible to outsiders. Then it became ‘respectable’.

But no matter what, feeling is always there in the blues.

This feeling could be first heard in what were once called ‘race records’.

Race records were a product of the rigid segregation of American society.

They were marketed exclusively to the black community, had their own stars and charts, existed in their own world.

Black people brought the records with them to the North.

In a strange way this very musical segregation, part of the general apartheid was made useful. This is the Entropic way, that way in which negative or seemingly useless energy is used and forged into something strong and positive, bristling with power and the power of change.

It was used to create institutions, philosophies, approaches to religion and culture and education and government that created networks and alliances.

Inner fortresses were built, full of pride and direction and focus that made something whole and of itself.

This Something could, in time, have the power to make a black man mayor of one of the most segregated cities in the US.

This Something could give the world the most powerful person on earth.

It could.

And it did.

Look at this for a minute:

See the faded sepia colour of Okey Records' 'Race Records' covers with the photograph of the guitar-guy, a very anthropological-looking cover, his happy grin and jaunty air guaranteed to bring only good memories of back home; see the dirty-orange coloured cover of Victor Records with the line drawing of the black man and the guitar – very 'authentic' and melancholy – the man sitting down, his back against a sack of something, his head back.

Check it.

Don't you get the feeling that he is 'hobo-ing': riding the rails illegally, moving toward freedom, and the hell with the consequences? Kind of. Because nobody wants to die. Not really. Who knows what's on the other side?

If there is another side.

See the subtitles: 'vocal blues', 'spirituals', 'red hot dance tunes', 'sermons', 'novelties'.

Billboard Magazine published 'race records' charts between the years 1945 and 1949, starting with what was played on various juke box 'plays'. From 1948 it included a record of the sales from those juke boxes.

All of the great blues musicians and vocalists – everyone you would have ever heard of – would have been marketed under the 'race record' label. And paid accordingly.

No prizes for guessing that the words 'blues artist' and 'rich' do not exist in the same sentence, except if that sentence also includes the name of the record label that gathered the profits!

Blues men and women plied their trade up and down the 'chitlin' circuit', a touring route of halls and clubs, bars and cheap motels where you could spend the night, because there were no places on the road where black people were allowed to stay except where they owned their own.

Chitlins' are chitterlings, a delicacy made from the entrails of the pig (poor folks made food out of every last part of an animal), that our father used to boil slowly in a large pot on Sundays, and whose smell drove me far away from the house whenever it was bubbling away, but which (served with a particularly piquant hot sauce) was Daddy's Numero Uno comfort food and Sunday afternoon's *raison d'etre*.

In other words, 'chitlin'' means down-home-no-bullshit-you'd-better-know-how-to-play/sing. This ensured that the circuit was vibrant, and a real testing ground.

That line in *New York, New York*: 'If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere' was understood by anyone who stepped up on a stage and survived.

Chicago's South Side with its majestic Regal Theatre was one of the capitals of the circuit, one more reason for musicians to head north, confident that Nirvana awaited.

My mother (whose middle name she only recently deigned to tell us, very typical of black Southerners of a certain vintage who seldom let anyone know their real name for fear of a hoodoo whipped up against them, by an enemy using their full name as a key to the curse!) was born in Nashville, Tennessee, but grew up in Chicago.

A city girl through and through.

Our late father, however, had fled in his teens out of the depths of Mississippi where he had had the

unfortunate and potentially fatal habit of speaking his mind too often and too forcefully to white people for him to remain where he was born and hope for a long and peaceful existence in this world.

He also brought his music to Chicago, because, after all, what was the point of it all without books and music, and in time a good woman and a family of your own?

I can recall the '45's and '78's that he had collected, the names of the musicians are like the list that Shakespeare gives Henry V to recite in that rousing St Crispin's Day speech: Big Walter; Howlin' Wolf; Magic Sam – King Of West Side Blues (behind Muddy's Emperor); the great Otis Rush; Luther Johnson (Guitar Junior); Sunnyland Slim.

Dad's books included those of that late, great Chicago chronicler of the common people, Studs Terkel which he would read while listening to the immortal Otis Spann, Sonny Boy Williamson, and James Cotton.

And Bo Diddley.

Everything has been said about Bo Diddley, including how his revolutionary riff has been ripped off – I mean borrowed or one of my favourite words: 'hommaged' – on numerous occasions without acknowledgment; his songs recorded by the likes of: Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, The Stones, The Who, Springsteen, U2, The Jesus and Mary Chain, the Smiths, Eric Clapton, George Michael, Elton John, David Bowie, The Police, The White Stripes, the Clash, and Black Eyed Peas, plus loads of descendants of these bands who probably don't know they're even channelling Bo Diddley.

Can I say that they don't know 'Diddley' as we say on the South Side (and probably everywhere else), a statement of the highest stage of ignorance.

But for me, well those early blues days are all about 'Slim Harpo'.

I don't know why, but the name 'Slim Harpo' still puts dread in my heart and a chill down my spine, a frisson runs through me like ice.

I first heard that name as a little child when my parents were talking about something I wasn't supposed to be listening to.

And, being a very curious, even nosey kid, I didn't go away, but kept saying over and over in my mind: 'Slim Harpo, Slim Harpo, Slim Harpo'.

Slim Harpo.

This was the stage name of James Moore, his last name after the word 'harp', slang for the blues harmonica.

His name and his music evoke in me all of the terror of the Mississippi woods where a black person could meet his true love or the Ku Klux Klan, both within seconds of one another.

This primal terror, with its accompanying reticence and outright 'clamming up' is in the bones of South Siders, making some of them not actually say anything of real use while all the while talking away a mile a minute.

You can walk away from a South Sider and realize after a few minutes that they were, in the immortal words of one of James Brown's songs: 'Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothin''

Folks are polite, but distant. And they neither talk to nor pay attention to strangers.

Which is why, when I was a critic and I got word that someone was angry with something I had said on air or had written, I would be perplexed.

I was a stranger to them.

What did what I have to say really matter?

Slim Harpo would have laughed

Finally, the great day arrived when I got to hear my dad's crackly record with the yellow label Slim

Harpo's the immortal *King Bee*.

You can hear it yourself on You Tube.

It still gets to me.

As far as I'm concerned you can forget The Rolling Stones' version on their first album; likewise The Floyd, The Doors, The Dead, and especially John Belushi's piss-take. Kick them all to the kerb.

Listen to Harpo himself, a true Devil's-Son-In-Law, the highest accolade that can be attributed to any male blues musician (don't know what the female equivalent of this could be...)

Listen:

First comes that stomping blues guitar, hard and dark like the Mississippi woods.

Then Slim arrives, sounding like a malevolent bee:

'Yeah, well I'm a king bee, buzzin' around your hive...'

He goes into his riff on the wings of: 'well, buzz awhile; sting it then...' and the guitar pings with kind of an acidity, very, very spare and silvery, and after that Harpo implores the women all over the world to become his Queen Bee.

A dubious invitation especially when he plays his harp like a siren.

It all ends with old Harpo, malevolent like the guy who's going to take all of your stuff and I don't mean your packet of crisps singing the way a cobra must sound: 'I can buzz all night long.'

There he is, ladies and gentlemen, especially the ladies: Slim Harpo, slim as a knife blade, skin as black as two in the morning in a blackout; looking like he's seen things that he cannot say, but can certainly sing about, Slim Harpo is the man your mother warned you about; the guy you bump into in a bar and decide to runaway with; the one who doesn't give a hang about anything, and mostly that includes you.

After all, hypocrisy is his enemy.

Slim's blues are not for the faint-hearted.

They are the Way Of The Cross – and with Slim Harpo, it's you who carries the cross.

South Side doom and desire is a long way from the beaches of Waikiki.

The Name

From time to time, television likes to dig up old footage of Obama – ‘At The Beginning’:

There is a restaurant review (!) that he did that aired once on a local station in Chicago.

From what I can recall he is talking about a local restaurant – soul food, I think – with all of the elevated dinner party chatter expertise that we sometimes displayed on *Newsnight Review*, in other words, not exactly expert but relatively harmless and fleetingly entertaining in that everybody-has-a-right-to-have-a-go pseudo democratic spirit.

One of my favourite ‘At The Beginning’s is of the future President somewhere – it looks like backstage at a convention-standing pretty forlornly, while a reporter is writing impatiently on a small white pad what Obama is spelling out for him: ‘B-a-r-a-c-k-O-b-a-m-a’.

Obama is leaning into the reporter, checking that his name is spelled correctly After that he assists the reporter in pronouncing his name.

The poor reporter can’t get his head around it.

Obama repeats his name slowly.

Finally the reporter gets it right. There’s a look of triumph on his face.

Obama flashes that million dollar smile.

Good, isn’t it?

The first time I ever heard the name ‘Barack Obama’ was while walking down Greek Street in Soho on a rainy Wednesday afternoon in the autumn of 2006. I was with Alan, a friend from Boston, Mass.

I was helping to put together – for the following spring – a two hundredth anniversary commemoration of the Abolition Act for the British Museum, and was mentioning the need for another speaker as Alan was busily telling me about his flat in Mayfair.

Sometimes I think that there must be some kind of scam aimed at New York, LA, and Chicago in which Americans are lured to London and told that they will be living in Mayfair, when they are really being rented places on the edge of Soho, or Islington.

Which was my friend Alan’s situation: living in Soho and trying to convince me that the apartment we were both standing outside of on Greek Street was located near Hyde Park.

To get him off that tack, I wondered aloud who we could get from America to keynote the event at the BM.

Suddenly he mentioned a friend who was on secondment from Harvard Law and interning in the Commons – which he had found to be a strange and dizzying mixture of shambolic and ruthlessly efficient (in the backstabbing and pub-crawling-after-work) departments.

He texted the friend who got back to him right away with a name: ‘Barack Obama. Great spkr.’

Who was that?

Alan explained that his friend was a member of an association called the Black Law Students Association Alumni or something like that at Harvard and Obama was pretty active in that so everybody kept in touch.

And oh, yeah, Obama happened to be the junior senator from the state of Illinois.

My home state!

I blurted out: “Illinois elected somebody called ‘Barack Obama’!”

Because, frankly, I didn't buy the name.

Back in the day, when I was growing up on the South Side, it was the fashion for us young bloods to adopt African names, or names that sounded African to us.

Well, a famous hair oil company based in Chicago – 'Afro Sheen' – had a commercial then with the jingle: 'Wazu, wazuri, use Afro Sheen.'

If they could say that, we could rename ourselves.

Some people went the whole nine yards, came up with these names and insisted that they be called by nothing else.

Their old 'slave name' was dead and buried.

It didn't matter if their old name had been the name of a beloved matriarch or patriarch, or someone who had held the family together through thick and thin.

It was gone with the wind. *Verboten. Fini.*

Courteous little boys I had known from primary school, neat and eager in their little suits and bowties, had become dashiki-wearing spouters of 'New Africa Speak' with names a yard long and attitudes to match.

A handful of them cobbled together a few half-understood tenets of Islam and Judaism and used the new philosophy to basically amass a lot of women under one roof, and under their control, along with getting loads of money from followers who were sick and tired of white folks oppressing them.

They were ready for some good old black oppression!

"At least he's a brother," one of my high-school friends explained as she disappeared into a commune further South, under the direction of an ex-altar boy who, when we were kids, everyone had tipped for the priesthood.

'At-least-he's-a-brother' had done more than his bit to go forth and multiply. He had dozens of kids, and soon my friend ceased speaking to me, ceased speaking altogether to anyone who had anything to do with white people.

I had tried to explain that I did not actually know the Italian guy who collected the rubbish from outside my flat on campus, but that cut no ice with my former friend, or her cult.

My mission was to get somebody black to do the job and run the white guy off the block.

Then I did toy with the idea of changing my name.

I had had my right nostril pierced and wore seven earrings – three on my left lobe and four on my right – so what was a name change?

Besides, I had wanted to demonstrate my 'consciousness', show that I was part of the new movement sweeping all of us young people along, a movement which rejected the Martin Luther King ethos – at least what we knew of it – to embrace the ethos of Malcolm X (what we knew of that).

I silently called myself 'Abena', an Akan name from Ghana which means 'woman born on Tuesday.'

I stress that I called myself this silently.

My parents would have laughed to death if I'd tried to change my name to something African.

My devotedly Royalist mommy had named me after Prince Charles.

So what more could I want?

The name 'Bonnie' as in 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' was what the new royal baby was being called in the newspapers, and by naming me after him, my mother felt that she could be a part of the party.

She had truly hated – she told me once – that the word 'negro' had been stamped on my birth certificate.

I wasn't a 'negro', or anything except her daughter, her first child.

She had wanted it off.

My father, who had seen Dachau shortly after its liberation, had told her that he had seen the word and had hated it, too, but had seen worse.

Much. Much worse.

Mamma fell so sick that she had had to go to hospital.

The combination of the cold house that the three of us shared with other families in extremely cramped conditions, with very little privacy; plus her new duties involving a newborn in such a cramped space with an overbearing landlady who kept all of the doors closed, soon sent her there with a case of pneumonia when I was a few months old.

I know that you can't recall anything before one year of age – the most common age when memory develops is three – but at any rate, the separation from my mother must have been so traumatic to me that I can recall snapshots from that time. My grandmother's room, small, with soft light; she darker than my mother, closer to my father's complexion. My mother, big-eyed and fragile, clad in a bright yellow bed jacket with a ribbon hanging from her neck, propped up in bed; the smell of the room which was comforting to me.

We had had no choice but to live where we did.

Housing was restricted for black people on the South Side then.

I was recalling all this as I stood in that Soho street all those years later.

We met Alan's friend the next day.

He explained excitedly that Obama had been the first African American President of the *Harvard Law Review*, the most prestigious law journal in the country, and had always maintained a keen interest in his fellow black alumni, as well as the students, etc.

It all sounded good but I just couldn't accept The Name...

I mean, this had to be some brother named Alvin Jones – great name, by the way, I'm just making point here – who had changed his daddy's name to... 'Barack Obama.'

Then the friend showed us a photo that he carried with him, of Obama, and himself.

I thought that there was something just too smiley, too fey, too 'corporate', too 'buppie', too un-'regular' about this 'Obama' guy.

At any rate, Alan's friend had a hotline to him and was sure that he could get him over to take part in the ceremony.

He was my senator, after all, and I was kind of enthusiastic about that. Somebody to shoot the breeze about Chicago with during the speeches.

Lots of work was done to make it happen.

And it almost did.

Obama's office was kind and responded to everything, but in the end, the decision was made that it was best that he stay in the US for the moment.

I thought it was sad that he couldn't make it, nothing more.

But Alan kept saying to me, over and over, that his friend really rated Obama and that I had to get on board the love train because it was leaving the station.

I just didn't get it.

Too far away.

When Alan got back to Boston, Mass. he sent me a copy of *Audacity*, but I just put it on the shelf.

Alan said that Obama was going to run for President.

~~Come on, the guy looked super-vain, hardly 'regular'; hardly 'down'; more like some Abercrombi and Fitch ad.~~

Ralph Lauren, I decided, must be after him.

In other words, this was not someone who could be seriously considered for the Presidency. This was NOT the first BLACK President.

The first black President was going to look like Sidney Poitier or Denzel Washington. Or some blues musician like Son Seal or Otis Clay – hard, clued-up, 'bad'.

And this 'Obama' had created a father who had been an African intellectual, too?

Right.

Besides, 'Obama' had to have an attitude, taking such a pretty elegant African name. He had to have chosen this name because he knew that once upon a time, even in the bad old days, a white person could walk into a white Southern church accompanied by an African in full regalia and that would be ok.

But if he brought the black guy from down the road, they could be both swinging in the wind after sundown.

You had to be the blues to be the African American President.

Especially if you're talking about coming from the South Side.

I was clear about that.

The Summer of '08

I came back to Chicago for the first time in three years to represent the British Museum at the opening of the Benin Exhibition. At the Art Institute of Chicago.

We stayed near the Art Institute of Chicago, in the Loop, and on the surface, I had never seen the city more glorious.

It was summer and the living was easy.

For some.

The day after I arrived, I took a taxi home to the South Side.

The sprawling housing estates that had practically straddled the expressway were gone. They had been buildings so huge and all-encompassing that they were simply impossible to explain to a European.

Inside they were everything a dismal sink estate was here in Britain but multiply that by stories, and numbers of people, and misery.

In Britain there is no culture of the summer fire-hydrant display.

You'd open a hydrant on a blazing summer's day so that people could cool off.

In the bad old days, if you ventured down to the lake front you could be attacked by white gangs... and killed.

If you were black you followed that old admonition and 'stayed back', and at sundown, if you were a little kid, you sat in your wet underwear – the only bathing costume most folks could afford – and listened to somebody pick out the blues on a guitar or a harmonica.

The blues was Chicago style, electrified and naughty and wry.

As a kid you could not understand the nuance, the innuendo, the double entendre, which – like Calypso – can be a devastating comment on the times.

What you did was sit in the wet and listen to old folks sing and something inside you knew that the base of this singing was loss and yearning, but for what you could not be sure.

Swimming was not an activity black people excelled at because, traditionally, we were denied access to the beaches and the public pools. But my sister's husband managed to become a champion swimmer back in Nebraska, teaching black folks at the public pool reserved for them and known as 'the inkwell.'

My California nieces and nephews are hearty surfers.

Never thought we would have swimmers in our family.

Our mother had been too frightened to take us regularly to the beach.

That summer, as we came off the highway near the little red bungalow where my six brothers and sisters and I grew up, the house where my father died, and which my mother still occupies, I saw an old lady – and I mean old – standing on the side of the street, selling small bottles of water.

The blues were crackling out of an old radio that she had at her feet.

Vietnam vets were at the exit of the highway, begging for handouts. Other guys who should have been enjoying their retirement ran up to cars offering to wash the windows, with a dirty rag and who knows what in their spray bottle.

The American flag flew big and loud over everything – even the funeral parlour – as if the people were telling themselves over and over who they were and where they were.

The liquor stores and taverns and churches and cleaners were still there, side-by-side, Saturday night and Sunday morning in that usually easy alliance that occurs in black communities, but there was something in the air, in the people, something I had never seen before, a kind of fed-up-to-the-eyeteeth-despair.

Folks were tired and fired-up at the same time.

Downtown, Obama's image was everywhere, there were even life-size cut-outs of him in one shop

Everybody I saw had an Obama something on their person. They wanted, needed him to win.

People gave small donations often, they canvassed, they made sure that everyone was prepared to go out and vote in November.

The 'blues people', as I always consider black Chicagoans to be, had gone inside themselves to make the last big effort.

I'm not talking about the young who were out there in droves and organized, but sceptics like me who just couldn't ever-see-it-happening so-spare-yourself-the-heartache-and-don't-get-too-involved.

'08 had a doomsday feeling to me, but there was something quite simply dogged about it, too.

It was like it must have been when people made the decision to leave their rural roots and come North, no matter what happened.

It was as if folks had gone back to that, back to some ancestral urge. They were going to get on that train once more and ride to freedom.

You couldn't doubt or hesitate about Barack that summer of '08.

I couldn't bring my British scepticism to the table. There was no place for it.

I knew that people had made a shift.

Obama had told them to deal with today and not yesterday, that he could fix today and maybe tomorrow.

But the blues is very much about yesterday, sifting through it, analyzing it.

That is usually what the old time blues guys did.

Blues Queens, well, they were different.

Ma Rainey used to say – as she put on her rhinestone gown and ostrich feather head dresses – that the folks wanted her to dress up, put her diamonds on, do her hair, if they had wanted to see someone poor and raggedy they would have stayed home and looked in the mirror.

The Blues Queens were about now and living now to the hilt, facing trouble but knowing in your heart that you could overcome it.

“Yes We Can!” was what Ma Rainey, and the late Koko Taylor – Queen of the Chicago Blues – and Bessie Smith sang every day of their lives.

That slogan was always in the very air over the South Side if you just stood and listened.

Barack Obama just came along and plucked it down.

Snob Appeal

Halsted Street is a long, north-south artery. As it enters the South Side it enters 'Bridgeport', traditionally Irish and Italian working class. It is where five mayors have come from, including our current one, and also the home of the infamous 'Regans Colts', a gang that was prominent in the riot of 1919.

Continuing south, Halsted snakes along the borders of Canaryville which housed the mighty Union Stockyards, the meat center of the US. The Stockyards became the battleground for working class blacks and whites after World War One. Then the artery flows alongside Englewood, one of the many black communities in the city. It is one street away from my home on Ruby Avenue and was the racial barrier when we first moved there in 1960. No blacks crossed it without fear.

It continues south to Chicago's limits at the Little Calumet River, into a town called Chicago Heights, where it ends.

North and South, it is the main road that all of the ethnic communities in Chicago have in common.

In Chicago, I grew up near it on the South Side and attended university near it on the North Side. It is a big part of my life.

I had not wanted us to move to the South Side from the West Side.

The South Side sounded snooty.

Just as I suspected, our new life on the South Side was full of snobbery.

There was a club on the corner of Halsted, 'a nightclub' – said in disdain – where the blues was played, mainly to men who were known as 'Players'.

The 'Players' were very Elegba-saturated men: those skinny, shiny bright suits, even in the hot, humid summer; those skinny brims; the canes; the attitude.

When I went to the shop next door to pick up my mother's daily fags, I could hear the music coming from behind the barred window.

The players were very naughty and would begin to assess the local female talent at a rather early age, although they never laid a hand on anyone.

They just complimented you on your progress in the realm of womanhood, in many cases accurately predicting how things were going to turn out.

It was embarrassing, but it was also something deep and wild from a people who lived in a part of town that I didn't understand.

I had heard that some of the players had come from way down South – from the notorious Altgeld Gardens area. Putting people way out there, my Daddy used to say, was a convenient way to get black folks killed.

Polish and Irish working class lived out there, too, the only thing separating them from the bottom of the heap was the colour of their skin, and they fought to maintain that ascendancy.

You had to be hard as nails to live there, and hard as nails to grow up out there.

In our neighbourhood, all of the fathers were blue-collar workers, i.e. working class, i.e. they worked on assembly lines.

These men literally wore sky blue cotton shirts to work, hence the name.

Mom and I dutifully ironed Daddy's shirt every day and prepared his lunch pail with his beloved pork chop sandwiches, which he liked fried and nicely spiced.

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