

(3200+ words)

The Kennedy Farm From John Brown to James Brown A Place Ringing with Hope and History

(Note: Because of the historical aspects of this article, and with the permission of several senior members of the Hagerstown African-American community, some dated synonyms for "African-Americans" have been employed.)

The year is 1959. Negroes from Hagerstown, Winchester, Martinsburg and Charles Town have traveled over dark and potentially dangerous back-country roads to a common destination in southern Washington County, MD. Unbeknown to virtually the entire white community of the area, hundreds of colored people gather every weekend for a vital mission: to let the good times roll!

Music-lovers spill out of jam-packed cars and stream toward the rhythmic sounds throbbing from a low-lying block building. Paying the cover charge (tonight it is \$3), they duck inside to find the place in full swing. The large dance floor is packed with swaying bodies. Chairs ring the outside of the rectangular room, accommodating groups of young people engaged in lively conversation. The bartenders manning the long bar struggle to keep pace serving all the people eager to spend their hard-earned pay.

At the far end of the long narrow structure, an electrifying entertainer dominates the scene. James Brown is on stage with his background vocalists, the Famous Flames. His instrumentalists, studded with pioneering rhythm and blues musicians from Little Richard's former band, are laying down a funky groove.

Brown's footwork testifies that he once was an accomplished boxer. His sweat-drenched face gives credence to the claim that he is indeed the hardest working man in show business. His rough and earnest voice affirms his title, the Godfather of Soul, as he squeezes out the lyrics to the song, "Please, Please, Please." The year is 1959. The place is John Brown's Farm.

Exactly 100 years earlier, in the fall of 1859, on precisely this same plot of land, the abolitionist John Brown staged his famous raid on the Federal Armory at Harper's Ferry, VA (now WV.) From this rural outpost, also known as the Kennedy Farm after the family who leased the land to Brown and his band of freedom fighters, a bold blow was struck for freedom.

The Kennedy Farm was located four miles away from John Brown's target: the United States Arsenal at Harper's Ferry. The raid would mark the last effort of nearly 150 years of organized slave revolts in America. Brown had hoped that slaves would rally to him as soon as they heard word of his attack in Harper's Ferry. A successful raid was in no the extent of Brown's plans. His greatest hope was for the fire of rebellion to run all the way to Alabama and dishearten slaveholders across the nation. John Brown's raid did not have the immediate effects that Brown hoped for, but big repercussions would follow soon enough. In attempt to stop a train leaving to en route to Washing from taking word to the capital, Brown's gang took the train, but surprisingly let it go after killing a freed black man who was a baggage handler on the train and challenged their presence. On the third and last day of the raid, Lt. Israel Greene stormed John Brown's Fort and ended the raid. John Brown was badly injured by Greene himself, but survived

to be hung for treason little over a month later. After 150 years of revolts, Brown's raid got things going in earnest. South Carolina seceded within three weeks of Brown's death. The Civil War started with the famous Battle of Fort Sumter in April of 1861, not quite six months after the start of Brown's raid. In the efforts to quell the raid, the buck stopped with Lee. On the second day of the three day raid, a spooked rebel bolted from Brown's position and was shot and killed. The black man was shot repeatedly for sport by drunken local citizens. Lee shut the saloons in town down hoping to end the inhumanity and drunkenness.

It reverberated across an increasingly divided America and led directly to the fratricide of the American Civil War and the ending of American slavery.

During the decades following the historic raid, the John Brown's Farm (JBF) property passed through many owners' hands. In 1950, at the urging of Leonard Curlin, a Hagerstown Elk, the property was purchased by the Tri-State chapter of the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks of the World (the Black Elks). The Elks hoped to restore the house and make it a museum and shrine for John Brown, who, Curlin said, "struck the first blow for my people." The IBPOEW describes itself as being among those fraternal organizations "committed to economic, personal, and academic advancement" that "have played a vital role in every phase of the African American experience."

It is gloriously fitting that John Brown's Farm came to be owned by the Black Elks Lodge. During the era of segregation, such lodges were among the few places that black men and women could socialize freely. As such, they held an important and central role in the closed, tightly knit African-American community.

Let's talk about that tight-knittedness for a moment, for it is central to the development of the story itself and of its writing. Upon our family's moving here after twenty years in Miami, FL, one of our earliest Hagerstown happenings (after Krumpe's Doughnuts and before Corsi's Pizza) was to meet Wendell Greene, an African-American man originally from Martinsburg, WV.

As Greene and I began to chat, the conversation rolled around to music. I mentioned that in my youth I had played in a soul band, Eddie and the Sensations, and that we had played the music of the Temptations, James Brown, Jackie Wilson and others. Green began speaking of a place called John Brown's Farm where, among others, Brown, Wilson, Ike and Tina Turner, Jerry Butler, Etta James, Ray Charles, and Otis Redding, the pillars of soul music, had played.

I was eager to learn more about that nightclub that hosted so many of the elite rhythm and blues players and soul singers of the 1950s and '60s. Assuming that the club scene at John Brown's Farm must have been famous and well-documented, I searched for some mention of it on the Internet. I found plenty about John Brown's Farm and the raid on Harper's Ferry, but nothing about the music scene. Same for the Hagerstown Public Library; nothing on the nightclub there either. Everywhere I researched, I was coming up bagels. How could it be that something so wonderful had not registered in the public eye? Well it had, but just not in the *white* public eye.

Perhaps a week later, I went back to lament to Mr. Greene that my search had been fruitless. He graciously directed me to some potential sources such as Leon Brumbach at the Herald-Mail who

grew up in Hancock, MD. Bobby Roland, whom I met at the Hagerstown Farmers' Market one Saturday morning, told me more about JBF and pointed me toward two of the long-standing Elks, Donald Evans and Reginald Keys, promising that he would mention them to me.

A few days later, I parked outside the Jonathan Street location of Elks Lodge 278, gathered up my notebook, and ventured inside. Several people were hanging out – a little surprised, I think, to see some white guy wander in. I asked one woman if Evans and Keys were around. She wanted to know why I wanted to meet them. I answered, “To talk to them about John Brown’s Farm.” Her curt and protective reply was, “Maybe they don’t want to talk to you about John Brown’s Farm!”

They did, however, and in that and subsequent conversations the story began to piece together – both the JBF story itself and the reason why “The Farm” was so unknown to the wider culture.

Remember and appreciate that the heyday of the music scene at John Brown’s Farm was in the bad old days of segregation – the days before integrated neighborhoods and schools. In Hagerstown, for instance, black housing was strictly limited from Franklin to the tracks and Burhans to Potomac. Black students from all over Washington County were still being bused in to the North Street School in Hagerstown through 1956, a couple of years after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* declared that “separate but equal” was a fraudulent, harmful, and ultimately unconstitutional idea.

One of the most notorious instances of local racism occurred in 1950. As the first African-American to play in Hagerstown’s Municipal Stadium in a minor league baseball game, Willie Mays was booed mercilessly, threatened, and called the “n” word over and over again. (To Hagerstown’s credit, Willie Mays was honored there on July 17, 2005, helping to salve a 55-year-old wound on the Hall of Famer’s heart.)

Though there are some notable exceptions, one of the common features of America’s racial segregation was a wall of separation in performance opportunities. Whites tended to have their clubs and musical stars while blacks had their own as well.

John Brown’s Farm was one of the many stops on the old Chitlin’ Circuit, the name given to a succession of venues throughout the southern and eastern United States where African-American musicians and comedians were welcome and safe to perform. Among the other stops were the Cotton Club and the Apollo Theater in New York City, the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C., and the Royal Theatre in Baltimore.

The Chitlin’ Circuit lasted for generations, from perhaps the 1890’s until the late 1960’s. Among the notable earlier performers were Cab Calloway, Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Moms Mabley, Redd Foxx, Billie Holiday, Dorothy Dandridge, and Sammy Davis Jr.. The later artists included Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson, Patti LaBelle, Jimi Hendrix, Gladys Knight & the Pips, the Temptations, Flip Wilson, the Isley Brothers, the Four Tops, and even the Jackson 5.

(Joel, how about a paragraph here dealing with the importance of such outlets – these venues kind of a step down from the big city clubs?)

The physical layout of John Brown's Farm is interesting. Behind the original old farmhouse lies the previously mentioned, low-lying concrete block building. To the best of everybody's recollection, you generally entered at the right end where the bulk of the tables were situated. There was a long bar down one side of the building. Chairs circled the outside walls. There was a big dance floor toward the left and finally, at the far left, the stage itself. Somewhere in there was a kitchen. From there the wives of the Elks would serve fried chicken, potato salad, and other foods to help financially support the club and its activities.

stage was situated off to the left; advertising was principally by posters, using a company from Washington DC and traveling all over – Tyson Corner (PA?), Warrenton, Cumberland, MD, etc. – all the areas with an African-American presence. 400-500 was capacity. In response to my question, "So, JBF was a fun time?" Harris answered, "It was fantastic!"

The Elks frequently ran Saturday afternoon events at the farm that were family-friendly. Some of the younger people, fifty to sixty years old today, that we interviewed remembered being at those events. (Something more here?)

The evening events typically ran from 9 PM – 1 AM, though sometimes they would start after midnight when the entertainers came to JBF following an evening gig in Washington or Baltimore. Crowds of up to 400 and even 500 would squeeze in to see the top artists.

Two principal people driving the music scene were the booking agents – John Bishop of Winchester, VA, and Leonard Harris of Martinsburg, WV. Bishop ran "The Orchard Inn" in Berryville, VA, which apparently was the club used in the movie "Sweet Dreams" about Patsy Cline; he died about two years ago. Harris ran the 701 Club in Martinsburg where he lives today.

Bishop and Harris were owners of small clubs, neither of which could accommodate more than 100 or so people. So, they put their talents and energy together, split the financial risks, and shared the financial rewards of these larger concerts. They rented the JBF property from the Elks and also made the financial arrangements with the artists, usually a 60-40 split, with the artist getting the larger piece.

In order that the concerts were safe and orderly, and widely regarded as such, Bishop and Harris hired two Washington County deputy sheriffs, Frank (Sonny) Keyes and Bill (Sonny) Mason, both black men, as security. Harris, in a recent interview, noted that both officers "had a reputation for not putting up with any stuff. If they had to, they'd bust you and throw you in the back of the car." Probably because of that reputation it was rather seldom that they had to use more than minimal force. As a rule their authority was respected and their presence was simply a pleasant and familiar part of the each evening's event.

Alcohol was present at the concerts. The Elks sold beer. Others, so-called bootleggers, sold hard liquor out on the grounds. A “set up” of a glass, ice, and a soft drink could also be purchased. The drinking seldom got out of hand, however. Harris recalls that characteristically, “They’d get a few drinks in them and have a ball.”

Harris had a good recollection of his relationships with the artists, including James Brown. “To us he was always polite, calling us Mr. Bishop and Mr. Harris. He was wild (Brown carried a handgun, for instance), but he was all business. He had to be. He had bus drivers, musicians, roadies to pay.”

With most artists Bishop and Harris had an arrangement where the money would be counted at the end of the evening and the money split 60-40 between the artist and the agents. With the financially shrewd Brown the money was counted once in the middle of the evening and again at the end of the evening with him getting 70% and the booking agency getting 30%. As Harris puts it concerning the cash split with Brown, “He’d go out with a suitcase and us with a little purse.”

As time went on and Brown got more famous, he asked Bishop and Harris for a \$20,000 guarantee, more than they could hope to cover at the door, so that was the end of that relationship.

Here’s how some of the other frequenters of John Brown’s Farm remember things.

Lola Mosby

Lola (Burnett) Mosby is the co-owner and manager of L&L Classic Clothing on N. Potomac Street in Hagerstown. Lola and her twin sister, Lela (Burnett) Greene, came from a large Hagerstown family whose children shared many chores, but ironing was not among them. Their mother always took care of that task – until one Easter Sunday night.

That was the night that the then eighteen-year-old twins told their mom that they were going down to “Kents,” a local juke joint, for the evening. Instead, they were among a group of young people who slipped down to John Brown’s Farm and had a fun night of dancing and socializing.

When they came home late past family curfew, their irritated mother ferreted out their lack of full disclosure concerning their whereabouts. Lola and Lela spent all the next day and into the evening ironing clothes – with a lot of crying. Their mother’s reasoning: “If you’re old enough to go down there to John Brown’s Farm, you’re old enough to iron your own clothes!”

Leonard Cooper

Leonard Cooper holds court at “Just Us Hair Cuts” on Jonathan Street in Hagerstown. He grew up in Charles Town, WV. When asked of his recollections of John Brown’s Farm, he smiled and exclaimed, “That was the place!” He remembers seeing among other acts, Aretha Franklin, the

Supremes, the Drifters, and especially Chubby Checker. Cooper gleamed, "I'll never forget *that* day! Everybody was twistin' all night long— cats, dogs, even the cockroaches!"

When asked if the scene was safe or rowdy, Cooper recalled, "Mostly safe, but we had our fights. West Virginia people in those days liked to fight – the race track guys against the apple pickers. That sort of thing. But after the fight was over, they'd all become friends and start partying together."

Shorty

Shorty of "Shorty's Kitchen" in Hagerstown is one of those people who, like Madonna or Prince, use only one name. He remembers JBF as being "far enough away from Hagerstown to be considered as kind of exotic. You would almost certainly impress any young woman you took down there." Shorty recalls piling six or more people into a car to get down to JBF back in the day when it probably was a little dangerous to have your car break down very far from home.

Some description here of what the club looked like and how it worked – CF Leonard Harris' interviews.

List and description here of what artists played JBF.

Among the groups that performed at John Brown's Farm

(Maybe here start transitioning to the idea that the very success of black music, that which led to the demise of racial segregation, was also the end of the distinctly African-American music scene – Chitlin' Circuit, etc.)

We have been using the year 1959 as one typical of the race relations of the era and of the music of the era. While white America was singing along with "How Much Is That Doggy in the Window," Hank Williams, Frank Sinatra, and that new kid from Memphis, Elvis Presley, African-American music was quietly and rapidly evolving from its gospel and blues roots into its own, albeit diverse, genre. The black music scenes from New Orleans, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Chicago and New York had all been contributing throughout the 1950s to the new amalgamation of rhythm and sounds, but at the end of that decade one city was soon to eclipse them all.

1959 was the year that Berry Gordy started Tamla Records in the Motor City, Detroit, MI. Its first hit was Barrett Strong's "Money (That's What I Want)" Its first #1 R&B hit was "Shop Around" in 1960 by the Miracles, featuring the outstanding and distinctive tenor voice of Smoky Robinson.

Some of the artists that people said they remembered seeing at John Brown's Farm. Also listed are some of their greatest hits.

James Brown	Papa's Got a Brand New Bag	Cold Sweat
Ray Charles	Hit the Road, Jack	What'd I Say

Ike and Tina Turner	River Deep, Mountain High	Proud Mary
Jackie Wilson	Lonely Teardrops	Higher and Higher
Jerry Butler	Only the Strong Survive	He Will Break Your Heart
Etta James	At Last	Tell Mama
Otis Redding	Respect	I Can't Turn You Loose
Little Anthony		
Billy Stewart	Summertime	
Chuck Brown		
The Isley Brothers	Shout	Twist and Shout
Paul Williams (?)		
Shirley Lee	Let the Good Times Roll	
Lloyd Price	Personality	Stagger Lee

Wendell Greene (Martinsburg, WV) – husband of Lela (Burnett) Greene. A special thanks to him at some point for the initial conversation about the music scene at JBF and for guiding me to several contacts around town. He was the first one that I heard mention

An idea toward the end that music brought down barriers left standing after the Civil War and Brown versus the Board of Education.

What has not been accomplished through the Emancipation Proclamation or the Supreme Court decision known as Brown versus the Board of Education is being accomplished here.

Potential Closing Story

As a young girl from Hagerstown, Irma Branch used to visit JBF where her uncle, Maynard Henderson, was the caretaker/manager of the property. She was never allowed her to go into the club, though. One evening she was sitting on her uncle's porch as the twilight deepened and the music was about to begin. She thought, "Maybe this is the night I'll get to go on in." Her aunt disallowed it, though, and she had to stay on the porch. To this day she's sad that she never got to experience the music scene at John Brown's Farm. So are we, Irma. So are we.

Important connecting ideas:

From the rifle-shots and battle shouts of John Brown's band of 1859 through the rim shots and "Shout" of the Isley Brothers band in 1959, the little farm in southern Maryland (bears proudly the culture of freedom.) *Hey, Joel. Finish this previous sentence. Also, it would*

probably be good to put earlier in the story somewhere the use of “rim shot” so it doesn’t need explanation here toward the end of the story.

Paragraph somewhere toward the end

Surely it is not inappropriate here for two writers, and Christian men, to opine here that the ultimate freedom is not in liberation from the oppression of racial segregation or even the inhumanity of racial slavery. The motivation that guided John Brown and guides Little Richard today is that the way of ultimate suffering, the cross of Jesus Christ, is the path to ultimate liberty – from both the personal and corporate sin of man, which keeps the earth from being what God has in mind for it one day to be: a place of righteousness, brotherhood and joy.

Note: we need to include some fairly short, but good, explanation of John Brown’s Raid on Harpers Ferry.