

Jazz Road

THE MAW BERRY TREE ON JASPER St.

“Washington was different in elementary school.”

Billy Russell Boulware, Booker T. Washington Elementary School classmate. Circa
1942

I'm not sure when I first heard the drums, or how I knew to scurry down the tree, but I did. I probably just followed the rest of the “Mawberry Tree Gang,” as they dashed to the corner of Greenwood and Jasper streets. Obviously I knew what was happening; the parade was coming!

I ran in our small shotgun house and asked momma if I could go to the corner, with the rest of the gang, and she said yes, and off I went. The parade was a great lure and the music... the most exciting thing that happened to us, at our young age. The parades are something I will never forget. I love the parades, and I loved to march in parades with the bands.

The sound of the band music, cascading down the Greenwood corridor, was the signal for the whole neighborhood to come alive. All the folks, the young and old, would rush to the corner, and listen to the musical sounds, and to watch the Booker T. Washington's High School “fighting Hornets Band, and other bands, marched down the main street. They were headed to Carver's Stadium. On every corner, along Greenwood, you could see kids, and the old folks, dancing to the John Philip Sousa Marches, so popular of that era. There on the corners, you would see old men moving their heads to the beat of the band, patting their feet, snapping their fingers, and all. You'd see old ladies who wouldn't be caught dead, dancing in a night club, with

swaying parasols, shaking pocket books, and walking canes, bouncing crutches, keeping time, to the beat of the band. Some of them put wrinkled arthritic hands, on old crooked hips, and pranced in place, right where they were standing, just like the young pretty majorettes, who led the bands. The old folks would be high stepping and smiling as bright as the morning sun. For many of them, this was the only time that they celebrated like this and they loved it. The music surely took the old timers back to the old days, probably, around the turn of the century, in the late 1800's. For us it was just an exciting time to march alongside the bands.

The parades were the highlight to the end of summer, and signaled the start of autumn, in the black neighborhoods. The bands marched down Greenwood on the west side, and down Lansing, on the east side of town. These two major streets were the main streets, of the then "Negro" side of Tulsa. The parades also let people know that it was the beginning of the school year, and the start of football season.

By the time I got to the ground, the rest of the "Mawberry tree" gang was half way up the street. We'd usually reach the corner just as the first band topped the "Brick Yard Hill." The sight of the tall orange plumes on the black hats, swinging from side to side was like a mirage. The shiny instruments, played by the musicians, blasting against the background of the clear blue clouds, made it all so real. It looked like the bands were marching right out of heaven itself! The music shot down the narrow Greenwood corridor, like it was being fired out of cannon. The whistling musical sounds only made us run faster; we didn't want to miss a single note. What a thrill for us.

Sometimes, we'd run up a couple of blocks, to the bottom of the "Brick Yard Hill", so that we could march along with the band, on past our street, and down to Latimer

Court. Back then, the Brick Yard Hill seemed as high as Mount Kilimanjaro. Early on we learned to march with the band, on the right foot... the right way. We were "Second Lining" long before we knew, what we were doing had a proper name. We heard the very beats that would later turn into the back beat, of the blues songs, that I would later cut my teeth on. I'm a jazz musician. I play music to make people want to dance, or to listen to, in the quiet of a jazz night club, or a concert hall. Back then, I was just another kid running to see the parade, marching all the way. Little did I know that this would be my life's calling: playing music.

We were a motley looking crew. We put the 60's hippies to shame, with our berry-died clothes. We looked a mess; a bunch of maw berry stained kids, bare foot, and dirty, with nappy heads, wearing short pants, and all covered, with the very "fruits" of our existence... maw berries. We proudly wore the sweet juices, from Miss Ollie's maw berry tree, as our badges of honor, all over our clothes and bodies.

These high school band musicians were the first real exciting thing in our young lives, off of Jasper Street. Oh, we looked at the pretty majorettes, as they pranced along, but our focus was on the music and the bands. Music has a way of getting into your very bones, no matter how old or young you are. The grown folks, (and us), were in the same boat, even though we were three or four year olds at the time. For us, the music was a unifying force. We were just the latest bunch of kids, who ran to the corner of Greenwood and Jasper to march, and frolic along with the bands. I had no idea that Tulsa had such a rich history and a direct connection to the very foundation of the blues and swing music of the times. It would be years later that I came to realize the importance of my hometown, in the history of black music in America.

MAWBERRY TREE

The members of the “Mawberry Tree” gang were all Miss Ollie’s kids, save me, Clifton and Ernestine. We all grew up around the tree. Most often, we were joined by many other kids from Independence and up Jasper streets. It was called the “Mawberry Tree” for as long as we could remember. Years later, I discovered it was really a Mulberry Tree. No matter, we started our lives together on this planet around that tree. Our entire lives revolved around the tree in the summers, long before we started to school. It was a symbol of strength and beauty. It stood majestically behind Miss Ollie’s house, and on the front side of ours’. The tree was our everything. It was our umbrella shade, from the hot sun of summer, rooted tables, on which we caught berries, council room, jungle gym, and a snow house in the winter. Its wide top covered a big area and parts of our house. At noon, in summer, you could stand under it and not be able to see the sun. And if it rained, you could stay dry, simply by standing underneath its long branches. All the kids in the neighborhood came by, during the summer, eating the sweet berries, til their stomachs popped out like balloons. For them, it was a way station, on their way to King Street Park, a block over. But, for us... it was home. The Mawberry tree was the first thing we saw in the morning, and the last thing we saw at night. It is my first point of reference to life itself. The maw berry tree, Doll, Joe, Junior, Ernestine, Clifton and I, go back to when I crawled out of momma’s womb.

We lived in the back house, momma, my older sister, Walterene, and me. Momma probably put me out there under the

tree with Miss Ollie's kids, as soon as I could hold on to one of the uprooted branches at the trunk of the tree. I would not be surprised if I got out there even before I could navigate the roots. Junior, me , Clifton and Ernestine, are the same age. Clifton and Ernestine lived on the even side of the street, while we lived on the odd side of Jasper, our address was 623 ½ East Jasper. But Clifton and Ernestine were close enough that they too, were charter members of the original "Mawberry Tree Gang." Long before we came along, the first half, of Miss Ollie's kids, kept watch over the tree. But, they were grown and gone, by the time we came around, so, now it was our turn.