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South Side Story

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Starring Barack Obama, Emmett Till, Richard Wright, Mahalia Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr., Muddy Waters, Harold Washington, Richard J. Daley And a Cast of Thousands

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CHICAGO

The figures are stilled in lovely black-and-white portraits along the walls of Josephine Wade's soul food restaurant here on the South Side. There's Lou Rawls. And Aretha Franklin. "I do all of Aretha's cooking when she comes to town," Wade says.

There's the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., from 1966, sitting next to the Rev. A.R. Leak, Wade's godfather. Both men are in suits and thin ties and grinning broadly. There's Harold Washington, the city's first black mayor, who died in office in 1987 and remains a mythic figure across this city.

The Captain's Hard Time eatery, despite its name, is a swanky place, with pink napkins and white table linen. A waitress in soft-soled shoes glides by -- slowly, no need to rush -- carrying a plate of chicken wings, collard greens, candied yams and corn bread.

"A good many of the judges elected in Chicago got elected right here in my dining room," says Wade. She's talking about the schmoozing, the dealmaking, the quest for endorsements and votes that draws aspiring pols here come election time.

The South Side never had the silky ties to whites and international celebrities like Harlem and its famed literary renaissance. But building on the once-plentiful jobs at the city's meatpacking plants, it developed its own economic, cultural and political muscle and launched a who's who of black American achievement. Richard Wright, Lou Rawls, Mahalia Jackson, Albertina Walker, Harold Washington, comic Bernie Mac and "Dreamgirl" Jennifer Hudson all came of age here.

But it is a sad fact, too, that many South Side dreams do not come true. For this is a place haunted by urban nightmares and the weight of entrenched poverty. It's a place where a community organizer looking for genuine challenges might come and get down to work. The vast area -- it covers about half of Chicago -- feels like an edgy, screechy film with that silvery El train looping around it like an electronic snake. It's a community that struts -- and yet starves for a break. It has an urban Northern vibe, yet sings the Southern song of the gospel and blues.

"When I was a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago," Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama will often say not long into his stump speeches. And then he leans into a narrative about job losses and poverty. It becomes a tale about the things that are redemptive about the South Side. And the things that continue to draw blood.

Novelist Richard Wright described those living on the South Side as "characters in a Greek play." Study the populace if you wish, he warned, but added: "You may have to wrench your mind rather violently out of your accustomed ways of thinking."

A Clarion Call to the North

In 1905, Robert S. Abbott, using his landlord's kitchen as his workspace, launched the weekly Chicago Defender. Abbott -- Georgia-born and a college graduate -- had hoped to become a lawyer but gave up that aspiration for newspapering. The Defender encouraged Southern blacks to come North, especially to Chicago, and Abbott proclaimed his newspaper "the mouthpiece of 14 million people."

No one benefited as much as Abbott from what would come to be known as the Great Migration. Newspaper sales rose, and he became a wealthy man. In 1910, Chicago had 44,000 blacks. In 1920, that number swelled to 109,000. By 1930, 234,000 blacks were residing in the city.

But so many arrived that overcrowding became a stark problem. Shacks were thrown up along the edges of [Lake Michigan](#). Men hustled into pool halls to keep warm during the fall and winter months. Crime grew.

But the growing populace also ignited a political awakening. Figures from the South Side would shape the hard muscle of 20th-century black political strength in America. In 1928, Alabama-born Oscar DePriest became the first black congressman elected outside the South. Arthur Mitchell, also Alabama-born, defeated DePriest in 1934. William Dawson, Georgia-born, followed Mitchell. It wasn't until the election of Harlem's Adam Clayton Powell Jr. in 1944 -- 16 years after DePriest -- that the North would have a black congressman from outside of Chicago.

Today, Chicago has three black U.S. representatives -- [Jesse L. Jackson Jr.](#), [Danny K. Davis](#) and [Bobby L. Rush](#) -- and Obama, the only senator in the 43-person [Congressional Black Caucus](#).

The Influence of Geography

Like so many inner-city American sagas, a crucial part of the history of the South Side angles back to the 1950s and 1960s.

Mayor [Richard J. Daley](#) ordered the Chicago Housing Authority to build low-income high-rise projects -- and keep building them. The hulking cement structures began appearing in the mid-1950s. In 1962, the Robert Taylor Homes was believed to be the largest public-housing edifice in the world. It consisted of 28 buildings, each 16 stories. They were built to house 11,000 residents, but that figure would balloon to more than 27,000. The project sat at the edge of the Dan Ryan Expressway, and many activists would come to believe that the expressway, coupled with the housing configuration in the city, only deepened segregation.

Today, about 1.1 million of Chicago's 3 million residents live on the South Side, a population comparable to that of Dallas or San Diego. Nearly 60 percent of the South Side is black and about 24 percent white, but despite its diversity and size, it can be an insular place. Many residents elsewhere in Chicago rarely venture to the South Side, save for a [White Sox](#) game.

[Hyde Park](#), where the [University of Chicago](#) is located and where Obama lives, is considered a kind of crown jewel of the South Side's many neighborhoods. But nearby areas are struggling. In Englewood, at least half of households make less than \$25,000 a year. Nearly 50 percent of the residents in Oakland have incomes under \$15,000 a year.

"There's something on the South Side called 'food deserts,' which means there are whole areas on the South Side where there are no grocery stores," says Tina Sacks, 36, a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago who is studying poverty and health issues. "The corollary is that there are a lot of people on the South Side who have poor eating habits -- eating [Fritos](#) and drinking colored [Kool-Aid](#). They have corner stores to go to instead of grocery stores, so there's no fresh produce. Healthwise, there's no primary care. There's an epidemic of asthma on the South Side that is just awful."

These are well-entrenched problems. In 1966, [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) moved to Chicago determined to attack its segregated housing policies. South Siders, abetted by a contingent of Black Panthers and college students turned civil rights activists, rallied behind him. It was called the Chicago Freedom Movement. The Daley machine and police officials assailed King and his lieutenants. Riots broke out in 1966, then again in 1968. In 1969, Black Panther Fred Hampton was shot in his sleep by police. An independent investigation would later call his death "an act of official violence."

City officials began tearing down many housing projects across the city in the mid-'90s. New developments, on a much smaller scale, are rising in their place. But the path out of poverty will be a long one.

"Because of the absence of institutional actors -- financial institutions -- the development of the South Side will have to be more of a bootstrap thing," says Garth Taylor, head of the Metro Chicago Information Center, a public policy research group. "The capital will have to come from local sources."

A Man and His Record Shop

This is the dream of a garbage truck driver:

Gregory Pitts, 52, whose family came from Mississippi, has driven a waste truck for years. But what he really wanted to do was to open a record store. He wanted to sell Sam Cooke and Bobby Womack, the Stylistics and the Chi-Lites, Stephanie Mills and the Temptations. He'd drive and dream. Seeing fellas in their pork-pie hats and just knowing they'd be better off with some vinyl Shirley Murdoch.

When he was driving his waste truck, he spotted a vacant storefront. Over the years, he had been going to closeout sales, buying and hoarding vinyl albums and 45s. "My wife would say, 'What you gonna do with this stuff?' And I'd say, 'Gonna open me a record store someday.' She just couldn't see what I saw."

South Side winters came and went.

Then that community organizer from years back went to the Senate, announced a run for the [White House](#), became the Democratic nominee. It blew Pitts away. "Obama is one of the reasons I started this," he says, standing in his just-opened record store on 79th Street. "You got that hope of a better tomorrow. You want to start stuff all the time and then you think of a million reasons not to."

He named the store Fire Sound Records. He shows off a barely remembered Jermaine Jackson album. "A classic," he swears.

A long-forgotten Curtis Mayfield album -- "Also a classic," he says. "All of it vintage -- but new. Lots of old soul, blues, jazz, of course. Trying to educate the kids about the blues."

A Young Life Taken

Many South Side kids know the blues all too well.

This past Labor Day, 10-year-old Nequiel Fowler, nicknamed Nee-Nee, was walking near her home along South Exchange Avenue, looking forward to school starting the next day. Her 5-year-old sister, Valerie, who is blind, often trailed her up and down the street -- skipping, jumping rope, playing games. That afternoon a car drove by, slowed and someone inside fired a volley of shots. One bullet lodged in Nequiel's chest. She was pronounced dead a short while later, one more statistic in a 15 percent increase in homicides in the city this year from a year ago.

The next day, a makeshift memorial went up where Nequiel was shot: five pink teddy bears and a drawing of a little girl on a piece of paper. On the paper someone had scrawled in a childlike hand: "Sorry about your lost. It only happens when your getting your wings. You are still with us little angel."

Police quickly arrested four reputed gang members. During a court appearance, prosecutors talked about a battle between the Latin Kings and the Latin Dragons, and about Nequiel being an unintended victim.

[Ben Jones](#), 32, lives on the ground floor of the two-family house that Nequiel called home. Two days after her death, he was standing on the street near the site of the shooting, on Latin Kings turf. He was shaking his head.

"She didn't ask to be in this ruckus out here," he was saying, peering into the cars that slowly rolled by, nodding now and then in their direction. He was proud that arrests had been made. "The biggest of gangsters was gonna give those cats up. You don't be killing no kids, man."

Two little girls -- South Side dreamgirls -- who were near Nequiel when the shooting took place sat on a stoop.

"I heard the shooting and started running," one says, her voice chirpy like a windup doll.

"Me, too," the other says, her voice just as babyish.

Truth be told, it seemed a little chilly to be without shoes. But they were.

And it seemed heartbreaking to suddenly be without their little friend. But they were.

"It happened right there," the first one says, pointing to the spot where Nequiel fell away from the small hand of her sightless sister.

The Legacy of Emmett Till

They have long cried for the children on the South Side.

They cried for Emmett back in 1955.

Of course he's not just [Emmett Till](#) anymore. Now he's a martyr. And even if it was all those years ago, the tale can still chill: Emmett, 14 years old, was visiting relatives in Mississippi. At a grocery store, he allegedly whistled at a white woman. That night he was taken from the home where he was staying, pistol-whipped, shot through the skull and then tossed in a river.

The accused cackled in court that they would be acquitted by the all-white jury. And they were right.

But it was Mamie Till, Emmett's mother, who seemed to have the last word. The body came north by train. Emmett's body, in the casket, was a sight: swollen, bruised and eternally childlike. The owners of A.A. Rayner and Sons funeral home suggested a closed casket. But Mamie Till said she wanted the world to see what Mississippi had done to her Emmett. She wanted the casket open.

Today, you can take the El from downtown, cutting over the rooftops and land right in the neighborhoods that young Emmett knew so well. If you get off at 69th Street, you can walk a block, turn right on Prairie, walk two more blocks, and there it is: Emmett Till Road. The street named after that South Side child runs more than six miles to Lake Michigan.

Charles S. Childs Jr. is a grandson of original funeral home owner A.A. Rayner.

Rayner's son, A.A. Jr., helped to dress the body for the funeral. "My uncle was a Tuskegee Airman," says Childs. "So imagine, he fought in the war and came home. Then, later, this happens."

Hardly a month goes by when someone doesn't mention the Till case to Childs. "It inspired many people to face the facts that bigotry was real, lynchings were real and injustices were brought on because of the color of one's skin."

A few years ago, the [Justice Department](#) reopened the murder investigation, hunting for any remaining co-conspirators. Till's body was lifted from the ground by the Rayner funeral home. No arrests occurred, but many appreciated that the effort was made. The funeral home received a letter of thanks from the [FBI](#); it's framed on one of the walls. "My grandfather received death threats" during funeral plans, Childs says. "He would get anonymous phone calls. I've gotten hate mail myself, to this day. I've turned it over to the police department."

It was all a different world then.

But the crying goes on.

"When we hold these funeral services -- all around the city -- so many of the services are for these young kids," he says. "Women can't raise boys by themselves. It's like some of these kids, because of the tragedies they've witnessed, have lost hope."

The grandson of the man who took Mamie Till's boy off the train when it came north is standing outside on Emmett Till Road. "You can have hope and tragedy on some of these blocks on the same day," he says. "You can see a kid coming out of the house after a graduation, and right on the next block, a kid is killed in a drive-by."

Childs had a South Side dream himself. He thought it'd be wonderful to become president of the Illinois Funeral Directors Association someday. They'd never had a black director. He got his wish in 2006.

But now he only wants, more than anything, for the crying -- the killings -- to stop.

A History of Soul and Blues

So much musical genius has been concentrated in this place: Memphis Slim and Etta James, [Muddy Waters](#) and Koko Taylor, Howlin' Wolf and Johnny "Guitar" Watson and Sonny Boy Williamson. Much of what we know about Chicago's blues is due to brothers Leonard and Phil Chess, Jewish immigrants from Poland, who became transfixed by all the musicians in the South Side's juke joints.

The brothers landed in the city in 1928. They used profits from their liquor business to open the Macomba Club. Mississippi cats fresh from the Delta would glide through the doors looking for a place to jam. And hoping for some dough. The brothers formed Chess Records, headquartered on the South Side, and recorded [Chuck Berry](#) and [B.B. King](#) and so many others. Waters, a onetime plantation worker, would sing "Standing Around Crying" or "Blow Wind Blow," and all the Mississippi hurt that bedeviled so many dreams on the South Side would feel as real as a hungry belly.

The Chess brothers recorded plenty of gospel, as well, although they didn't record Albertina Walker. She went with Savoy Records out of New Jersey.

The gospel legend still lives on the South Side.

"I didn't know I was poor," the legend is saying. "I always had something to eat. Wasn't caviar though."

She grew up on the South Side, attended West Point Baptist Church. Mahalia Jackson took her on the road when she was just a teenager. "Mahalia used to kid me. She'd say, 'Girl, you need to go sing by yourself.'" Albertina Walker did just that. In 1951, she formed the Caravans. Among their early gospel hits were "Mary Don't You Weep," "Tell the Angels" and "Sweeping Through the City." Walker helped launch the careers of Shirley Caesar and [James Cleveland](#), who became gospel giants in their own right.

She's sitting high above the city in a luxury Hyde Park building. There's white carpet and white furniture and a white baby grand. You can see small waves swirling on Lake Michigan out the window. Her Grammy sits atop the piano.

She never had any children. "I had two poodles, and they passed."

She remembers meeting a young community organizer years back. "Met him over at Operation Push," she says of Obama and Jesse Jackson's organization.

Years rolled over both the South Side, the community organizer and the gospel singer. Her awards kept stacking up. "I been invited twice to the White House, got awards from both President Bushes. That's right -- both. Write that down."

When she emerged from one of those White House events in 2005, Obama's staff arranged for a car to be waiting. She was whisked over to the Hill. "My senator had arranged a surprise luncheon for me and 10 of my closest friends. I'm telling you, it was a blessing."

She's tapping her feet.

"Guess what? My sister, Bee, used to work for a family in this building," she says.

"And let me show you how the Lord works. I used to come over here with my sister and I'd say, 'I won't ever live in a high-class building like this!' And here I am. It's a blessing. Big-time people live in this building."

She just turned 79.

"Lord have mercy, Jesus," she says.

She shows her appointment calendar. She's got bookings taking her into next year.

Dreamgirls and ghosts.

Little dead children.

Emmett and Muddy.

Peach cobbler and collard greens.

Gospel high above Lake Michigan.

The South Side.

"My signature song is 'I'm Still Here,' " says Walker. "And that's what I tell people: I'm still here."

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