

CENTRAL AVENUE REMEMBERED

BY JAMES E. TOKLEY

INTRODUCTION:

When you wish for that, which is no more,

Be careful what you're wishing for

& Who you ask to perform the act

of bringing our ancestors back. . .

because sometimes, they wake up wrong

& offer screams instead of songs!

I

But today, I'm willing to ignore

Those ancient ones who were laid down sore

. . .Who warned us never to molest

the sacred places where they rest.

So, with clarinets and balaphones

With shekeres and chicken bones,

I conjure up the memory

Of Majesty & Treachery!

I call up names no one has spoken
Since Black people's hearts were broken,
Down on Central Avenue,
When wrecking balls turned brown eyes
blue!
I pick up pieces . . . reconstruct
The dreams that used to bring Good Luck
With Peace on Earth, Good Will T'ward
Men
& Women (with five cents to spend)!

II

I sing of the Harlem of the South. . .
that would have turned Walt Disney out!
A wondrous place of open mind
That made Ray Charles say, "I'm not blind!"
Then bought a bike & pedaled it, too. . .
All over Central Avenue!

I call on Claxton. . .Silas Green
& His dancing ladies, from New Orleans!
A Hooch-coochie exorcist,
I summon the ones who invented the Twist,
right here, on Central Avenue,
that even Khrushchev learn't to do!

A place improbable, I sing
That welcomed Martin Luther King
& Offered Black celebrities
a place to stay, in luxury
Oasis! Good as white folks' best,
With a five-star hotel called "Frog's Rest!"

II

I sing of the movies that we saw,
at the Lincoln, where ol' big Sack Dog
would get dressed up like Frankenstein
& make us children toe-the-line!

I conjure up the Cotton Club

Apollo, Savoy, Bucket-of-Blood,/ the

Blue Room & Watts Sander-son's

Mose' Whites & the Roger's Dining Room

I bring back ballrooms, beauty shops,

Black doctors, dentists, barber shops,

Rodriguez, Fordham, Z. D. Greene . . .

The Finest Lawyers ever seen

Black cleaners, laundries, printers, too

All here, on Central Avenue

A Black parade that never stopped

But stepped in rhythm, round the clock!/
What

Better symbol could there be

Of a Mecca of prosperity

that staked its claim & did quite well,

on the razor's edge of a Jim Crow Hell

whose hate for all folks brown or black

was eclipsed by its love of a crisp green-
back?

III

I sing of tears that have not stopped

Of grieving hearts like cinder blocks

Weighed down with overwhelming clues

as to what killed Central Avenue!

IV

& Yet, I can't forget the night

When street lamps, liquid as daylight,

Revealed a casket, lugged with glee:

Max Schmelling, mourned in effigy!

I hear the thunderous bass drum roll

Of the Tilt-of-the Maroon and Gold. . .

The tramping of a thousand feet

Down Central's festive, sacred street

I close my eyes & am subdued

By the perfumed scent of barbecue

that's given an extra-added sting

by the guitar licks of B. B. King!

But when I open my eyes, it seems
What once was real is just a dream
What once was life & sought the sun
is buried now. T'is all, but done!

IV

& Yet, the souls I've conjured up,
refuse to leave until their cup
once more is filled with a robust brew:
A reborn Central Avenue!
A place, this time, where Black & White
Can dance together, 'till the early-bright
Can go to the Lincoln, in time to see
Nobody sitting, in the balcony!

V

If Ybor City can survive
& Old Hyde Park can stay alive,
Can we not lift up Lazarus
To walk among the rest of us,
Especially when there seems to be
A need for real apology!

VI

So, a toast, to Central Avenue
Whose Renaissance is overdue!

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