



**MORE THAN**  
*Enough*

The promise and challenge  
of today's Southern cities

by **JOHN SIMPKINS**

*Illustrations by* **DELPHINE LEE**

## A CITY BOY FOUND HIMSELF IN THE COUNTRY.

“We’d be walking on these dark country roads at night,” he said, “and all of a sudden this music would seem to come out of nowhere, out of them spooky-looking trees that everybody said ghosts lived in. [...] That *kind* of sound in music, that blues, church, back-road funk kind of thing, that southern, midwestern, rural sound and rhythm. I think it started getting into my blood on them spook-filled Arkansas back-roads after dark when the owls came out hooting.” Sound marked the place. And the place marked Miles Davis. Got into his blood so bad that he left his comfortable, bougie East St. Louis life for New York City. He was ostensibly going to study at Julliard, but he really was on a quest to find another creation of back-road funk: Yardbird, a fellow Midwesterner, with that Bama-sounding nickname that would be shortened to just Bird. Charlie “Bird” Parker had elevated “that *kind* of sound.” And Miles set about chasing that high, too. What the ghost-filled trees of the country first revealed, The City would polish, burnishing Miles’ ethereal instrumental voice into legend.

That’s what The City can do. That’s what it has done since it first came to be. The City has always been the ultimate destination. Miles might have *found* himself in the country, but he *became* himself in The City. Back then, it was New York. Or Chicago. Maybe Philadelphia. Washington, DC. Each one was imperfect, possessing its own geographic peril, a special terroir of racism that served as a civic identifier. Still, cities were places of possibility. You could get as high as you wanted, as long as you didn’t get too close, a kind of tacit separation agreement, an American apartheid intended to delineate appropriate spheres of racial activity. Nevertheless, opportunity was opportunity. Better to play a club on Lenox Avenue or U Street than some funky-ass backwater juke joint.

As it was with Miles and his music, so it is with Rodney and his food. Rodney Scott—the rarely identified species known as James Beard Award-winning pitmaster—found himself in the drudgery of hog-tending that transformed into a drug. From the rhythm of the dripping fat to the separation of meat from skin, he found himself—and perhaps his purpose—in the wood, the wire frame for the flayed body, and his own “*kind* of sound” in Hemingway, South Carolina, a place in the middle of nowhere. But to Rodney, it was in the

middle of everywhere. Watching airplane contrails overhead, perhaps he dreamed of getting out someday.

He had to go to The City to *become* himself. Or at least to find another version of himself. While Miles left St. Louis for New York, Rodney took his talents from Hemingway to Charleston. And Birmingham. And Atlanta. His destinations are popular these days. Others like him are making the journey to a new version of The City in search of food and beverage fame. Members of the Black professional class, specifically, are reversing the Great Migration and leaving New York, Chicago, and Philly in the hopes of becoming themselves in places like Greenville, South Carolina; Nashville, Tennessee; and Charlotte, North Carolina. One-eyed outsiders enter as kings in The City of the Blind South, where low wages, low or no taxes, and poor education make for easy pickings. The places where, once, you could get as close as you wanted as long as you didn’t get too high, have now become modern repositories of hope. New places of possibility.

For some, these possibilities aren’t new. Greenwood Avenue in Tulsa, Farish Street in Jackson, Morris Street in Charleston, and Parrish Street in Durham have long nurtured their share of dreams.

Hat shops, juke joints, banks, restaurants. FUBU before FUBU. “Black Main Streets” displaying the hidden half of W.E.B. Du Bois’ double consciousness. Here, Black people could just *be*. They could dress up, get to’ down, and live in every shade along the spectrum of sacred to profane.

Those places no longer exist as they were. They’ve been cleaned up, sanitized to protect the sanity—and safety—of some. To retain too much of what they were would only put into sharper relief what they are not. And to explain why they no longer are what they once were requires passage to dark places, occupying a sharp edge of truth on which we prefer not to exist. The behavior that led to the extermination of Black Main Street is so inhumane that no one would claim to have done it or even to have been related to people who would have done it. But somebody must have spit on those students integrating the school. Somebody must have shouted, “Nigger, go home” to the young, trained stoics who were just looking for opportunity. Somebody must have decided that a highway needed to go in that precise location. And those Somebodies are not all dead. In fact, some are still town fathers, community

leaders, shapers of our political, social, cultural, and built environments.

Miles Davis talked about ghosts in the country, but there are just as many in The City. The absence of community is felt in urban areas across the country, but intensely so in The Southern City. What was this neighborhood before the apartment building went up? Who attended classes in this old school building, now a coworking space for start-ups? Urban space holds secrets it won’t tell. The ghosts remain among us, silently reminding us of their presence. Tapping us on the shoulder to say that they were once here.

Modern ruins don’t lie buried in the dust of centuries. They sit, uneasily—perhaps even unbelievably—in the minds of aunties and uncles, granddaddies and Big Mamas.

*Did they really do that to that boy?*

*She just left town and never came back.*

THE COLD SHADOWS IN THE SOUTHERN City have become the Southern version of a similar phenomenon in the American West, where for some, spending only a few minutes in the expansive vistas only highlights the fact that someone else once roamed the land. Other than the occasional bastardized Native American name or



**What was this neighborhood before the apartment building went up? *Who attended classes in this old school building, now a coworking space for start-ups?* Urban space holds secrets it won't tell.**

faux-symbolic gesture, the stewards of the land, the people who worked to maintain the stunning physical beauty of the place, are ignored, erased, best forgotten. Strolling along the streets of downtown Greenville, South Carolina, one gets a similar feeling. The river wasn't always a focal point. Like the Lowcountry marshland, it once did work. People didn't hike in the mountains. They hid in them. Lived in them. Built stills in them before moonshine was available downtown. The physical evidence of historical memory—the statues, street names, and other features of the built environment—only tell a partial story. Main Street statues celebrate the sons of Greenville, all white. The only statues of Black people portray two solemn, nameless students, one female and one male, silently asking for equality. Which surely was given to them...right? Meanwhile, just a few steps away from the serious Negroes, visitors intently search

for darling small brass mice carefully hidden along the sidewalk. Main Street has more sculptures of mice than statues of Black people.

While the physical past is papered over, the pull of The City persists. Whether people are coming from the country or the stunted promise of the North, Southern cities have become a chance for reinvention, beginning a new life at a fraction of the costs associated with remaining in Harlem or Chicago or DC or anywhere else where freedom turned out to be freedom to be put in a cage.

For others, it's a chance to reclaim a legacy, to be rooted in the soil your people once farmed. To go back down there and show those backward-ass crackers that we *been* knowing a thing or two, from a past when we designed and dug the rice canals to a present in which we chart new courses in the worlds of food, culture,



business, and beyond. So the migrants travel, to Atlanta, to Charleston, to Durham, to the opportunity to become themselves.

Parents, siblings, and cousins gleefully greet the returned exiles. The landscape tells a different story. Just like those mice. The physical space still serves as a reminder that you can get close, as long as you don't get too high. It's sliced, diced, and sanitized for sanity in ways both subtle and not so much. In some neighborhoods, you can get thrown in jail for drinking with your boys on the corner or in front of the local spot. In another part of the City, they close off the streets, bring in food trucks, and sell tickets for craft brews and artisanal brown liquor. White girl wasted is cute. Hood drunk might cause you to catch a case. The dope that smart-ass white frat boys used to buy from cats on the corner is now being sold to those same cats on the corner by smart-ass white frat boys. Cannabis entrepreneurs are far more respectable than dope slingers. The times, they are a-changing.

Any newcomer or returnee to the modern urban South is immediately confronted by the Principle of Enough. To be clear, this idea is at work across the country, but like so many things, the Southern flavor is piquant, with pig-meat depth that goes back to 1619. According to the Principle of Enough, all anyone really needs to enjoy life is enough of the things that matter.

Where the notion runs aground, however, is that different people have different notions of

heights of thriving and opportunity. Folk living below the poverty line would do more than aspire to be poor if enough meant a chance to do meaningful work that paid a decent wage. A job that fostered dignity. But the Principle of Enough currently says that would be too much. For them.

Instead, the Principle of Enough creates the gaps in wages, health care, education, and reality that persist in Southern cities. The dazzling public amenities—rails-to-trails conversions, urban reclamation projects—end just before they reach the areas where they're really needed. The built environment now does the work of the color line. Going downtown to see and be seen is great until it becomes clear that some things aren't meant for you. Durham Central Park is a place where you can spend time and you don't have to spend a dime. And that's a rarity among a lot of the spaces we've created for ourselves. Whether we're talking about bars, coffee shops, or restaurants, often the expectation is, you pay for the privilege of using the space. And if you pay for the privilege of using the space, it also means that people who can't afford that opportunity aren't going to show up. Exclusionary signs are no longer necessary, only requirements of payment by credit card, inaccessibility by public transit, and prices that assume more than even a \$15-an-hour wage. You know, enough.

One of the problems of the Principle of Enough is that it presumes that opportunity is equally accessible in The City. Talent is indeed equally

***In some neighborhoods, you can get thrown in jail for drinking with your boys on the corner or in front of the local spot. In another part of The City, they close off the streets, bring in food trucks, and sell tickets for craft brews and artisanal brown liquor.***

what is enough. When some can determine what should be enough for others, the principle becomes systemically corrosive.

Like when some people get to determine what constitutes enough affordable housing. Or enough public transportation. Or enough grocery stores or medical clinics. If "enough" meant as much as others have, then the Principle of Enough might see us through. Indeed, it might send us to higher

distributed throughout the population. Opportunity is not. Much that is new and shiny in revitalized urban cores results from legacy developers and construction companies, many family-owned, and some tracing their origins back to the post-WWII boom in America, when government subsidies made economic and educational mobility a reality for so many white Americans. The resulting accumulation of wealth



and its subsequent generational transfer have caused “enough” for some to be measured in multiple homes, regular new car purchases, frequent vacations, and college football season tickets passed down from parents to children to grandchildren. For others, it’s endless labor just to capture the residue of enough: a place to live, food to eat, clothes, maybe a way to get around. As then-President George W. Bush famously said to a divorced mother of three, “You work three jobs? Uniquely American, isn’t it? I mean, that is fantastic that you’re doing that.” Fantastic.

The Principle of Enough also has a close cousin: The Principle of Talent. According to the Principle of Talent, people in America rise to the level of their ability. Work hard, play by the rules, and you can go as far as your gifts will carry you. It’s American Dream stuff, the promise that draws people from all over the world to come to this country. A different country. One in which all skills will be rewarded. The Principle of Talent is the basis of the shadow truth of meritocracy that seems like—because it is—too neat an explanation of the secret to American success.

Just ask the people who built Black Wall Street in Tulsa, or any other center of commerce, entertainment, artistry, and learning for Black people in segregated America. They had talent, as did others who simply lacked the opportunity to express that talent. Systemic barriers, identified explicitly in the Kerner Commission Report of 1968, add an extra set of often insurmountable obstacles to the expression of Black talent. Like any effective barrier, those constraining talent remain largely in place today. Raj Chetty, a Harvard economist who studies social mobility, has described this phenomenon as “lost Einsteins.” What the data show is that we have missed out on the talents of millions of Americans, just because they never had enough.

“American society proclaims the worth of every human being...Yet, at the same time, our institutions say ‘find a job or go hungry,’ ‘succeed or suffer.’ They prod us to get ahead of our neighbors economically after telling us to stay in line socially. They award prizes that allow the big winners to feed their pets better than the losers can feed their children.” The words of economist

Arthur Okun continue to ring true in the contemporary description of the The City, and, by extension, in the ongoing project of building a market-economy-based representative democracy.

The City values efficiency, not equity. As a result, agency—the right to choose—only belongs to those who determine what is enough for themselves and others and who have the platform to have their talent recognized and nurtured. Control over the direction of your life is based on where you sit. The winners can decide if they’ll take the day off, if they’ll have that extra glass of wine, if investing in cannabis is a smart strategy to diversify their portfolio. The losers are just not smart enough to make those decisions for themselves. Besides, with all this welfare, don’t they get enough already?

Implicit in the Dream of America is that the individual is in control. Hard work is the magic key to unlock the wealth of this nation of gold. So now people head to The City in the South, prospecting for a bigger future than their present. A few flecks show up, but only for those who enter with the armor of money, education, and good health. For the undereducated and poorly paid, The City is just another place where invisible hands shape lives over which individuals have little control. Four of the top five cities with the largest racial pay disparities—Jackson, Baton Rouge, Charleston, and Augusta—are in the South. A woman in Louisiana makes about 68 cents for every dollar paid to men. Alabama and Mississippi aren’t much better. Charlotte notoriously ranked last among major American cities in Chetty’s study examining life prospects for poor children. A poor child in Charlotte only has a 4.4 percent chance of moving into the top 20 percent of income earners. No matter how hard she works.

Frederick Douglass damned America for being “false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly bind[ing] herself to be false to the future.” A century and a half later, the Principle of Enough and the Principle of Talent stand as bulwarks of that falsehood. A shim-sham of shifting goalposts, unwritten rules, and raw power have conspired to create two false choices for what The City can be: one, a return to the days of Black excellence,

but only in cordoned-off areas; or the other, a post-segregation faux paradise built on the lie that the only Black people capable of achieving success are the few who’ve been let in the door. Even DuBois got that part wrong. Talent resides in more than 10 percent of Black bodies. Neither of these choices is acceptable.

Douglass’ condemnation should be taken up as a challenge, especially in the creation or reinvention of new urban spaces in the South. What would it look like for the South to be true to her past, true to her present, and to solemnly bind herself to be true to her future? Y’all might not be ready for that. But it’s time.

The Southern City can be a place of true becoming, but only through acknowledging what built it and who built it. So many of the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts—and indeed so much of the food on our plates—comes from people who have always had talent. They ingeniously stretched what wasn’t enough to magical sufficiency. And they are still there, ghosts in plain sight miraculously capable of being embodied, truly seen for perhaps the first time. In downtown Durham, where I now live, there is a mural of the twentieth-century activist, lawyer, and Episcopal priest Pauli Murray, who spent her formative years in the city. The mural bears her words, “True Community is based upon equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. It affirms the richness of individual diversity as well as the common human ties that bind us together.” In True Community, we become ourselves. Together.

“Every ghetto, every city, and suburban place I’ve been, make me recall my days in the New Jerusalem.” The sanitized, soulless spaces now called The City cry out for the beauty, meaning, and truth that Lauryn Hill sang about. A Thriving South means thriving cities. Thriving cities are equitable cities. Thinking differently about what is enough is one place to start. Seeing talent rather than ghosts is another. Miles Davis found himself in The City by finding music in the spaces between the notes. Sound marked the space. Rodney Scott became himself in The City, bringing the barbecue pit downtown. The now-empty, once-thriving spaces of The City may well be our greatest opportunity to feed our body and soul. 🍷

---

*John Simpkins is the president and chief executive officer of MDC, a Durham, North Carolina-based nonprofit that equips Southern leaders, institutions, and communities to improve economic mobility and advance equity. He presented this piece at the 2021 Southern Foodways Alliance Fall Symposium.*