


# “I’ll Let That Be My Last Note”

Closing night at the Bradfordville Blues Club

by *RAVI HOWARD*

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THE SMALL SIGN THAT MARKS THE WAY TO the Bradfordville Blues Club (BBC) was easy to miss, but the signifiers fit the destination. Drive past the sweet potato house, a cinderblock building with a metal roof. Follow the rutted dirt road to where Sams Lane and Moses Lane meet. Take a left through a narrow canopy of trees that leads to an open field with an equally open sky that frames the wide crowns of the live oaks.

The club is within the Tallahassee city limits but deep in the woods. No neon sign marks the


building. On a Saturday night in spring, the club was lit only by the moon, a bonfire, and the lights strung in the trees.

The BBC manages to look like both newcomers imagine and regulars remember. The metal-roofed building sits beneath live oaks on the Henry family land, Black-owned for more than a century. Since 1964, the little cinderblock club has been a part of the landscape.

The show on the evening of April 1, 2023, would be the last.

Patrons gather outside the Bradfordville Blues Club between sets on the club's last night in business, April 1, 2023.





MOSES HENRY JR. STOOD ON THE GRAVEL path at the end of the road named for his father, Moses Sr. He handed out cigars to clubgoers waiting near the door. He visited with family and patrons, old and new, all eager to hear his own memories and the stories of his ancestors.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Henry Jr. made road trips south for family gatherings, part of the Great Migration of Black Southerners who stayed connected to their Florida roots. He remembered the time before the interstate, turning west on US Highway 90 toward Tallahassee. Meanwhile, cousins from Detroit and Jacksonville journeyed back to the farm for a Henry family tradition each December.

“We would have what they called the Twenty-

Sixth, the day after Christmas, that they’ve been celebrating well over 100 years. And they would beat drums right down here,” he said, motioning toward the bonfire pit under an oak tree easily 150 years old.

“It was about having good food and listening to the drums, listening to the old folks talking a whole lot of noise.”

The Twenty-Sixth celebration outgrew the family’s houses, and Moses Henry Sr. joined siblings Inez Haines and Allen Henry to build the cinderblock country club, nicknamed the CC, in 1964. In the years that followed, Moses Jr. remembers helping his aunt serve soft drinks as guests played pool and hits blared from the jukebox.

Moses Henry Jr. of Jacksonville, FL, returned to the Bradfordville Blues Club for its last night in business. Henry's family owns the land on which the club sits.





EVENTUALLY, THE CC DREW CROWDS BEYOND the extended Henry family.

One of those visitors was Dave Claytor, a transplant to Tallahassee who'd grown up in Pennsylvania and upstate New York. In the 1980s, he migrated south when his father joined the business faculty at Florida A&M University. Claytor found work as a FedEx courier and met Elizabeth, a graduate student in library science at Florida State University, who would become his wife.

Claytor remembered the older dancers who were mainstays on the CC's dance floor a generation ago, showing off the buck-dancing style they'd grown up with. "It would allow you to connect to the blues in its most spiritual way—through dance, where your feet are off the ground and hovering, overcoming gravity and the physical," he said.

During a Twenty-Sixth celebration in the early 1990s, Claytor says, his affinity for the blues evolved into something of a spiritual calling. While he stared



Dancers hop to the blues of Johnnie Marshall, left, during the final night of the Bradfordville Blues Club in Tallahassee, FL.

at the building, which had been shuttered since the early 1980s, a man walked up behind him with a simple question: *What do you see?*

Claytor's answer: *A blues club.* When he asked the man who owned it, Allen Henry said, "I do."

"I said, Mr. Henry, I don't have much money, but I have a lot of heart. You give me a chance. Yes, I'll bring this place back."

Dave and Elizabeth Claytor reopened the club as Dave's CC in 1992 and ran it until 2001. The

financial ups and downs of operating a music venue contributed to their decision to move on. "Sometimes we had enough people coming to pay the band, and sometimes we had to go in our pockets," Elizabeth said.

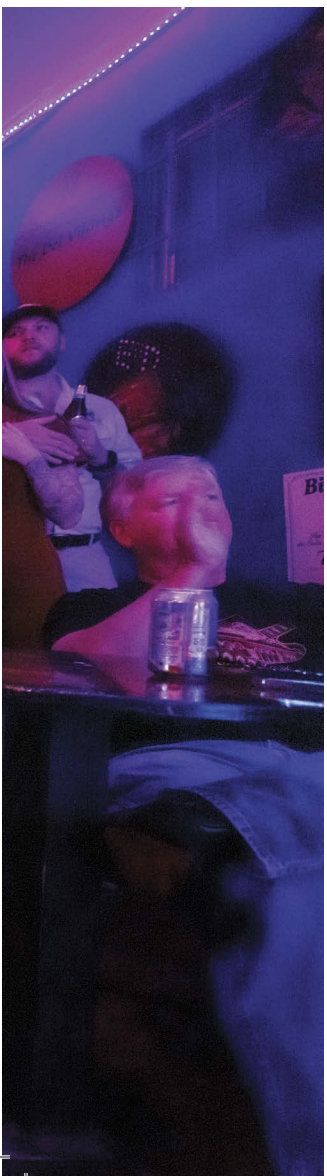
On the night of the last show this spring, the Claytors returned to the club to witness the culture they helped enshrine. "The blues was created, not just to keep to ourselves, but to sustain us and share with the world," Dave said.

*“Sometimes we had enough people coming to pay the band, and sometimes we had to go in our pockets.”*





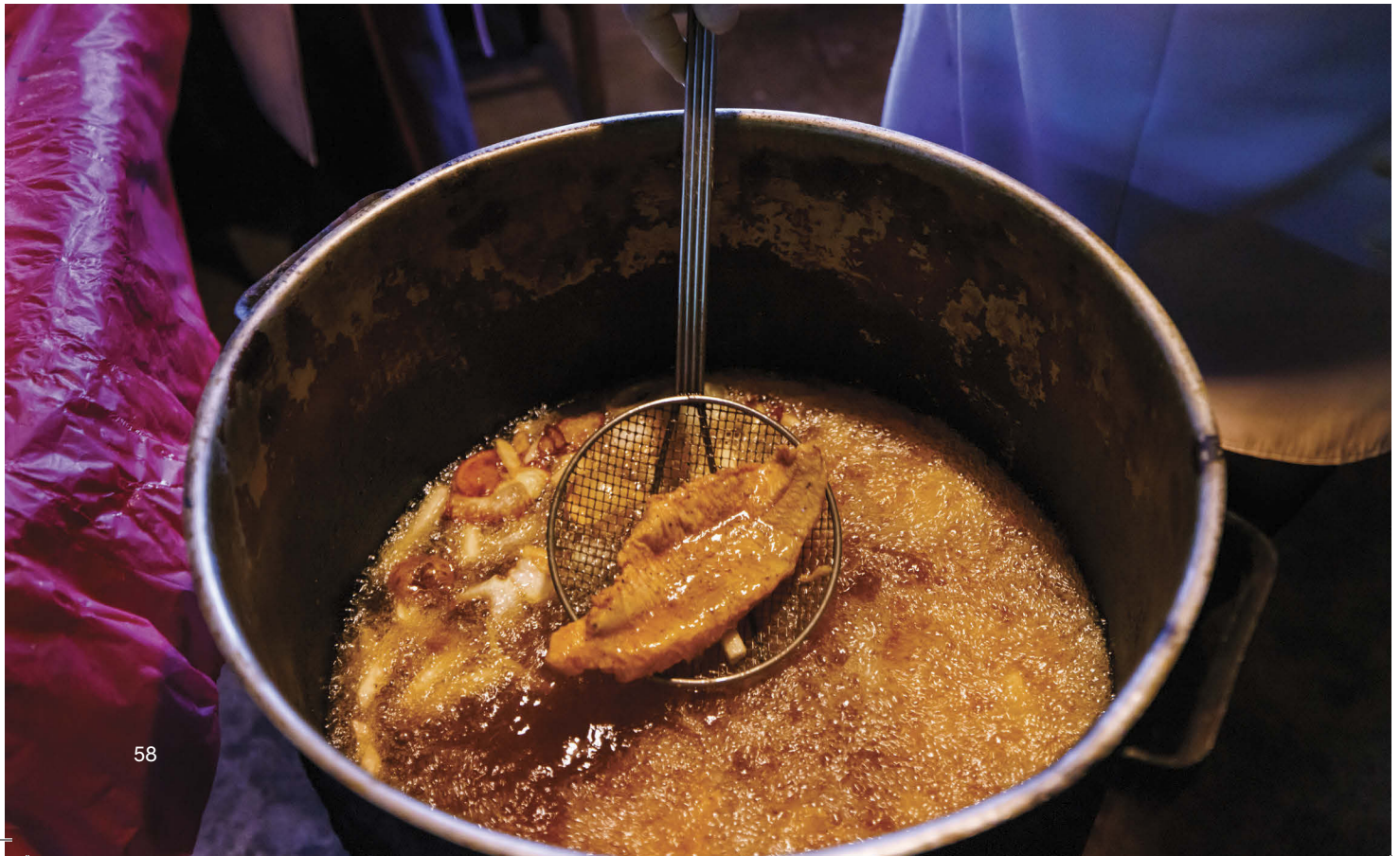
ABOVE: Former club operators Elizabeth Claytor, center in red, and Dave Claytor share a dance during the Bradfordville Blues Club's final show. The Claytors ran the club, then called Dave's CC, from 1992 to 2001. LEFT: The house erupts as the Johnnie Marshall Blues Band performs.



AS A TEENAGER IN SOUTH FLORIDA, GARY Anton found the Mississippi blues through the British Invasion. For him, bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones became a gateway to the artists whose songs they covered—Mississippi Fred McDowell, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon. Anton moved to Tallahassee to study at Florida State University and stayed to practice law. As an adult, he was thrilled to find the music of his youth alive on a local stage.

“I fell in love with the place and never left,” he said. He and his wife, Kim Anton, bought the club in 2002, renaming it the Bradfordville Blues Club. It was under the Antons’ watch that the club was officially named the only Florida stop on the Mississippi Blues Trail in 2010. A sign outside the club marks the achievement. Now, after more than twenty years, the Antons were finally ready to retire.

RIGHT: Kim Anton wraps her arms around husband Gary as they watch the Johnnie Marshall Band perform during the final night of the Bradfordville Blues Club. The Antons have operated the club for 21 years.





SUNSET COVERED THE CLUB IN THE KIND of darkness unspoiled by city light. During breaks in the music, patrons drifted outside, pulling up chairs around the bonfire. Others moved toward the glow of the cooking shed, where Ernestine Fryson prepared orders with her sons Toby and Robert Fryson and her daughter Charlotte Reddick. The shed walls carried photographs of artists who'd performed at the club over the years, and multicolored holiday lights hung from the ceiling. The menu was straightforward: French fries, sausage, mullet, and catfish, all fried in the same pot. Bottles of ketchup, mustard, and hot sauce waited on the ledge of the service window.

“That pot is seasoned,” said Toby Fryson as he and his siblings fixed plates. His mother, known professionally as Miss Ernestine, used the same pot for decades to cook the gameday meals she sold to tailgaters at Florida A&M football games.

After the first set, a long intermission slowed the evening. No one was in a rush for the night to end. The break between sets gave time for food and conversation. Under live oaks strung with lights, around the bonfire, and back inside the club, many of the exchanges were sprinkled with optimism that this night was itself an intermission, not a farewell. Maybe three acts of club ownership—Henry, Claytor, and Anton—would inspire one more.

LEFT: Outside the Bradfordville Blues Club, Toby Fryson pulls catfish and fries from the well-seasoned pot his family has been serving food from for years.

*The BBC manages to look  
like both newcomers imagine  
and regulars remember.*



Moonlight and stars shine down on revelers outside of the Bradfordville Blues Club on its final night.



THE NIGHT'S HEADLINER, JOHNNIE MARSHALL, got his start on the same stage he would close out. As he greeted the audience, he told them the cover charges he used to pay were his music school tuition. Acts like Bobby "Blue" Bland and Percy Sledge had graced that stage over the years.

"The more I got into it, and as the local musicians trained me and taught me, that's when I really understood that—hey, man, you got a gift, a talent, for the blues," Marshall said after the show. "That's when it really hit me that okay, man, I'm not a just observer. I'm a part of this thing."

At the end of his set, Marshall offered a simple benediction: "And I'll let that be my last note."

Then the applause. Then the house lights. Then the end of the road. 🍷

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ABOVE: Johnnie Marshall plays his last set at the Bradfordville Blues Club. RIGHT: Lights out: Gary Anton reaches for the light switch as he leaves the club.



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