

FORT GREENE DREAMS



In spring 1985 I was awakened in my Jamaica, Queens, apartment by a phone call from a young filmmaker I'd recently befriended. His high-pitched voice filled my ear.

"Nelson, this is Spike! Loved your piece on Russell Simmons in the *Voice!*"

He was referring to my profile of Rush that had run in April of that year. I thanked him, and we chatted. I told him I was moving to Brooklyn, to an area called Fort Greene.

"That's where I live!" he told me excitedly. Turned out I was moving right around the corner from him. I didn't know it at the time, but the publication of the Simmons profile, and moving from Queens to Fort Greene, was the end and beginning of two eras for me.

Moving from my Queens apartment with Rocky took me out of daily contact with the business of hip-hop and, happily, ended my long-ass E and F train rides into the city. I was back in Brooklyn, but to a very different 'hood than the one I'd grown up in. Until I moved to Fort G I'd been in the area only once before.

176 After picking up a girl at a disco on my eighteenth birthday, I took the subway back to Brooklyn with visions of horizontal enrichment dancing in my head. However, during the ride I noticed

that she had healed cuts on both wrists. She told me that she'd attempted suicide twice. In addition, she revealed that she had a male roommate, and was in a quasi-romantic relationship. I just walked her to her door, kissed her on the cheek, and got lost trying to get home. I now realize that this woman lived just two blocks from my current address in Brooklyn, but in '85 Fort Greene was a foreign land.

I had no connection to the area. I had never had any friends who lived there. After that weird experience, I never dated any girls who lived there. All I knew was that Fort Greene was just east of downtown Brooklyn, where I had spent my whole childhood going shopping with my mother. When I did my internship at the *Phoenix* I actually worked just blocks from Fort Greene. Yet streets such as DeKalb, St. Felix, and Carlton were as foreign to me as avenues in Staten Island. I knew that the Fort Greene projects had produced the basketball greats Bernard and Albert King. The area was also always regarded as a hotbed for gang activity—first in the seventies, with the Tomahawks, and in the eighties, with the Decepticons.

Fort Greene, and my new place at 19 Willoughby Avenue, were easy to love. In contrast to where I'd grown up in Brownsville and lived in Queens, Fort Greene was very close to Manhattan. On almost every major subway line, Fort Greene was no more than two or three stops into Brooklyn, so going out, especially anywhere below Fourteenth Street, was made very convenient. The streets were lined with tall, thick trees fronting magnificent brownstones. There was a picturesque park with rolling hills and tennis courts, and in the fall it filled with hard, brown, fallen acorns that I used to collect and on occasion toss at friends. Fort Greene was close

enough to Manhattan that I could leave my apartment at 7:30 P.M. and catch an 8:15 P.M. show at the Bottom Line in Greenwich Village, which made my life infinitely easier.

Plus, the apartment itself was a marvel. It was a duplex with wood floors, two bedrooms, twenty-foot-high ceilings, a large kitchen, exposed-brick walls, and a large backyard. I vowed when my family moved out of the projects that I would never live in a large apartment building again. However, I never imagined that I could live in a place this spacious.

I was able to afford this place because my quickie bio of Michael Jackson had been a bestseller. For the first time in my life I had disposable income, much of which I would squander on wine, women, and vinyl. But whatever I wasted in riches came back to me threefold in experience.

My first month in 19 Willoughby I actually slept upstairs in the long living room, in awe of all the space as I thought back to the bedroom and cramped closet I'd shared with my sister. I calculated that you could have fit our entire public housing apartment in my upstairs. I would live in 19 Willoughby from 1985 to 1992, the most important years of my life in terms of my immersion in music, film, writing, and sex. In 19 Willoughby I wrote five books, including my breakthrough work, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. I invested in *She's Gotta Have It*, and a couple of other movies, and wrote two produced screenplays. I fondly remember blasting Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain* in that huge living room, having his muted trumpet fill the air as I made love with a girlfriend on the red carpet placed before the fireplace.

Having my own place, especially one with a working fireplace, was great for my sex life, but it wasn't what ultimately made me a

bad boyfriend. It wasn't that I was unfaithful with other women. It was that now I was just in love with creativity. That's what truly turned me on and turned me out. At night I'd dream of sleeping in a bed filled up to my neck with my books. I saw myself as being warmed and comforted by my prose, the ink and paper sticking to my body like sweat. That was a passion with which no woman, no matter how sweet or sexy, could compete.

Alone in this large apartment my ambition grew, as if I had to think bigger to fill the space I was now living in. Sometimes it ate at me at night, forcing me out of bed, back to my legal pad to grind out one more record review, and to jot down ideas for books I was sure would change the world. It's likely I was overstimulated by all the vitality of that period's black culture. It was absolutely true that the talent around me was inspiring.

Going out to pick up take-out soul food at a basement spot on DeKalb, walking to the tasty Italian restaurant Cino's or to Junior's on Flatbush Avenue for thick chocolate cake, I'd stroll past the apartments of Spike Lee, writer Thulani Davis, a slew of jazz musicians (Lester Bowie, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Cecil Taylor, Betty Carter), and other not as well known but vital writers, designers, musicians, and actors. The crackle of creative energy animated the air, as black folk made art all around me. It was a tactile, tangible feeling, and I adored it. With my take-out food in a bag I'd hurry back to 19 Willoughby to wolf down my meal and get back to work, anxious not to be left behind.

It's not that Fort Greene circa mideighties was paradise. One reason all these great brownstone apartments were affordable by young artists was crime. Just a long block from my apartment were several public housing projects, which bordered the park on the

Myrtle Avenue side. They weren't quite as grim as the Tilden projects I'd grown up in, but they were plenty tough. When crack began running amok in Brooklyn's streets, these projects were a center of trafficking, spawning a wave of dealers and addicts that had you keeping your eyes open at night.

My first week in 19 Willoughby I'd set up my office in the back bedroom, which had big gated windows looking into the backyard. I was sitting in front of my first laptop seeking inspiration when a man appeared in my backyard with a TV in his arms. He'd somehow hopped my neighbor's fence with it, and was preparing to do the same to mine to escape onto the street. I was about to call the cops when, over the fence abutting the street, two policemen hopped over and snagged the thief. I felt like I was watching a live theatrical version of the reality show *Cops*. Welcome to Fort Greene, I guess.

In all my years in Brooklyn I've never been mugged. There's only been one robbery at one of my places in Fort Greene, and it was my fault. As I was leaving one morning a FedEx package arrived. I got distracted as I was signing, and left my door open. When I got home my VCR was gone. Much worse, my satin *Soul Train* jacket, with my name embossed on the lapel, was stolen too. Somewhere out there is my personalized *Soul Train* jacket, a loss I mourn to this day.

The scene in Spike's 1992 film *Jungle Fever* in which Halle Berry's crackhead offers Wesley Snipes a blow job in front of his daughter was inspired by a real incident, when Branford Marsalis, in a kiddie park with his young son, was approached by a crack addict with a similarly repulsive offer. Branford subsequently left Fort Greene, as did many of my wave of black artists.

After *She's Gotta Have It* (which I'll get to in a bit) was released in 1986, Fort G became internationally known as home base to my generation of artists. What Spike's film did was expand that early community, and attract other artsy black folk. Chris Rock, Rosie Perez, rapper Daddy-O of Stetsasonic, Living Colour's Vernon Reid, actress Alva Rogers of *Daughters of the Dust*, saxophonist/bandleader Steve Coleman, and Def Jam executive Bill Stephney were among the wave that moved to Fort Greene post-Spike. The *New York Times* was among the many publications that profiled the area, making Fort Greene synonymous with a "Brooklyn boheme" vibe. Spike was very much the mayor of that moment, being the most celebrated artist, the biggest employer of local talent, and a buyer of real estate. At one point he owned five buildings in Fort Greene.

This mix of youth, creativity, and proximity meant parties were a regular staple of Fort Greene. I'd roll into the house of actor Wesley Snipes or cartoonist Barbara Brandon for food, drinks, and dancing. There are folks I saw at those parties who married each other, had kids and, in a few cases, are now divorced. There was lots of sex to be had, and lots of cheating too.

One tangible document of the creative ferment in Fort Greene, and the overall New York black community, was a photo taken by Anthony Barboza for an unpublished *New York Times Magazine* piece on the "new black aesthetic" by Trey Ellis in 1989. It was taken at the then new offices of Spike's 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks on DeKalb Avenue across from Brooklyn Technical High School. Most in the photo were residents of brownstone Brooklyn—Spike; the writer Lisa Jones; her sister, the art historian Keli; visual artist Lorna Simpson; guitarist Vernon Reid; Bill Stephney; Chris Rock; and myself. In addition, there were fellow travelers from Harlem,

Warrington and Reggie Hudlin, and downtown Manhattan icons like theater director George C. Wolf, Fab Five Freddie, and Russell Simmons.

While living at 19 Willoughby I learned what kind of writer, what kind of lover, and even what kind of son I was. But the most surprising revelation was that I was a mentor and, like my mother, a kind of teacher. Not only did I write about artists and hang with them, but I found myself being a kind of one-man support network for people—mostly aspiring artists—I believed in. During the mid-eighties they tended to be my peers, gifted folks who needed some contacts or an introduction to someone to move forward. This dynamic was at work with Russell, as well as with Andre Harrell, a so-so MC who'd go on to form the signature rap label Uptown, and the indie filmmaking brothers Warrington and Reggie Hudlin in the years before they broke through with the hit comedy *House Party*.

Over time I grew more settled in the role, and I became a more hands-on mentor, either collaborating with younger artists or critiquing screenplays, essays, or recordings with tough love. My attorney used to tell me I was a natural producer, but at first I wasn't sure if that was a good thing. Producers in film and television seemed more businessmen than artists, and I always saw myself as a creator.

Yet, as I came to understand the place where mentoring, criticism, and producing overlapped, I moved into that sphere more gracefully than I'd ever imagined. Somewhere in my makeup—perhaps from my mother—I had a nurturing gene that first manifested itself at 19 Willoughby, and that would blossom in the years

ahead, and would, in fact, define my life, and self-image, as much as writing.

A few of the people I helped became household names, but, like the majority of ambitious folks who use the city as a springboard, most either went on to humble careers or didn't make it at all. Sometimes they were too insecure to survive the disappointments and rejection. Others allowed their egos to blind them to their limitations, and sometimes, despite immense talent, never learned to play well with others. Whether these artists won or lost, I found being close to their struggles exciting and drew lessons from them that I applied to myself.

The most important lesson was to measure myself not by sudden success or rapid failure but by my body of work. My dream was to write a bookshelf of volumes, so many that one day I might drown in them, paper and ink suffocating me in an ocean of my own thoughts. More practically, I wanted to have a full, active life, and being productive seemed the way to ensure that.

Many writers aspire to be Ralph Ellison, to write a starburst of a book that would light the literary sky forever. I was more interested in emulating Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, or Gordon Parks, all of whom had long, varied careers that produced many works and embraced many disciplines. This philosophy gave me patience and a perspective on success (or lack of it). So many folks I met burned out on early success and early failure. If you were in it for the long haul, rolling with the highs and lows was easier, knowing it was all part of a larger whole. Jimi Hendrix may be a deeply romantic figure in our culture, but I'd rather have the body of work of Prince and Stevie Wonder (not to mention the life span).

Achieving sustained excellence is what I preached to others and sought for myself.

One of my favorite stories from that period in the eighties revolves around Prince and, partially, 19 Willoughby. I'd been an early fan of Prince Rogers Nelson, seeing him with a group of college pals at the Bottom Line in fall 1980, just before the release of *Dirty Mind*. I did my first interview for *Record World* with him in January '81, and wrote about him a lot in *Billboard* throughout the 1980s, developing a relationship of sorts with him and people in his camp.

One day at *Billboard* I got a call from his road manager, Alan Leeds. Prince wanted to give me a personal preview of his *Parade* album. I felt as though being an early advocate was paying off. Not only was I flattered, but I was hopeful that I could weasel an exclusive interview out of him, so I sat at my desk at 19 Willoughby on that Saturday as instructed.

A couple of hours went by, and I was beginning to feel a little foolish, when the phone finally rang. A young woman's voice, quite childlike and breathy, told me to come to an address near the United Nations. On the subway ride into Manhattan I scribbled down possible questions, and made sure my tape recorder was working. At a doorman building just a block or so from the UN I was directed to an elevator that ascended to the penthouse. The door slid open, and a fluffy white poodle strolled in and inspected me.

As I stepped into the living room, Prince was nowhere to be seen, but my disappointment was short-lived, as a tall, platinum blonde with big eyes and red lips came toward me. The tall, big-boned woman in the tight black dress and white pumps was Jill Jones. Prince fans will remember her for her small role as a waitress

in *Purple Rain*, for taking off her panties in the middle of the street in the only highlight of the horrid *Graffiti Bridge*, and for a late-eighties solo album filled with recycled Vanity 6 riffs.

On this afternoon, however, Jill was my gracious host at what was clearly Prince's New York pad. The living room was dominated by a white piano located strategically under a large round skylight. The remnants of dead candles were scattered atop it. Next to the piano was a sofa buried beneath a mountain of purple-and-gold-leafed pillows. I sat in a white cushioned armchair facing a component set that featured a reel-to-reel tape player. As Jill brought over red wine and cheese, I heard *Parade* for the first time.

This may have seemed very cozy. Yet the whole time I sat listening I had this weird feeling I was being watched. Whether he was stashed in the darkened back rooms to my right, or had small cameras or mikes hidden around the room, I felt his presence. I knew Jill would report back how I reacted to the music (and to her), but I figured he'd have some more hi-tech tools. He was Prince, after all.

My listening session over, I chatted a bit with the adorable Ms. Jones. She was in New York studying acting and taking voice lessons and tending to her puppy. The silly part of me wanted to invite her out to dinner. The smart part of me headed back to Brooklyn. My next *Billboard* column was about my private listening session, which meant Prince had gotten what he wanted—great press without having to answer a single question.



I saw August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984 on Broadway, and would go to see every one of his ten plays, and not just

on Broadway, but in New Haven; Boston; Washington, D.C.; and Los Angeles. Like a Grateful Dead-head I traveled around America, watching how Wilson rewrote his plays, finding inspiration in the work of my great literary obsession.

On opening night of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, March 26, 1988, I sat in the front row in the right aisle seat. Wilson's drama of a haunted man and his daughter, searching for their lost wife and mother in Pittsburgh circa 1911, was rich with African mysticism and the burdens racism imposed on its former slaves. In *Turner's* climatic moment Harold Loomis and Martha Pentecost, played by two then unknown thespians, Delroy Lindo and Angela Bassett, struggle with the past, God, and a knife.

When the lights came up, Bassett stood before me onstage, the stage lights twinkling off her eyes and reflecting off those now legendary cheekbones. Between the play's end and the after-party at Sardi's, my date headed home—she'd just gotten in from a convention, and was worn out by Wilson's epic play—while I headed in.

I found Wilson on the second floor leaning against a wall, smoking a handy supply of cigarettes. Extremely fair skinned, with a thick salt and pepper beard, Wilson had a big, bearish demeanor, friendly and distant at the same time. Ms. Bassett was more accessible. I gushed about how good she was, how attractive I found her, and anything else I could try in an ultimately successful effort to get her phone number. It was the start of a sweet friendship.

I ended up riding back to Fort Greene with Spike, who'd also been at the party, and commenting enthusiastically about Delroy Lindo and Angela. (A few years later both would play key roles in *Malcolm X* and Lindo would eventually play Spike's father in *Crook-*

lyn.) Being toyed with by Prince, and meeting August Wilson and Angie Bassett at the beginnings of their careers, are just a few of the snapshots from that explosion of eighties black pop culture. I'm not sure if that period will have the historic resonance of the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties or the Black Arts movement of the sixties, but that generation, post-soul and mostly pre-hip-hop, both capitalized on existing opportunities and created new models for success.