“East Boogie”: As American as Cherry Pie

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In 1960, a young, charismatic president by the name of John Fitzgerald Kennedy inspired America and, with his elegant wife and young family, ushered in the age of “Camelot” (at the White House) and, along with it, a sense of hope and optimism. His was the classic “American story”; born the heir to a political dynasty, a Harvard graduate, a war hero, his father a former ambassador and multimillionaire. Yet, and equally as American, was the unspoken Kennedy legacy: wealth gained as the result of patriarch Joseph Kennedy’s days as a bootlegger and a not-so-public reputation as a philanderer, a trait that the Kennedy men all seemed to inherit from their father.
But, tragically and just as publicly as President Kennedy was worshipped and admired, his life was just as publicly snuffed out on the streets of Dallas, Texas, by an assassin’s bullets.

In a parallel universe, East St. Louis, Illinois was as synonymous in its reputation as an all-American city as the Kennedy’s were in their reputation as aristocrats.

In fact, in 1960 Look magazine and the National Municipal League named East St. Louis as an “All-America City”.

And as anyone who lived in, frequented, passed through, or migrated to East St. Louis during that period will tell you, that reputation was well-earned.

In 1960, East St. Louis (or “East Boogie” as she has become affectionately known) was a community of hard-working and family-oriented blue-collar workers.

East Boogie was home to an abundance of profitable businesses, solid schools, strong, close-knit neighborhoods, and churches.

An industrial giant, East St. Louis was home to the Swift, Armour Company and other meat packing plants, National Stockyards (so famous that John Kennedy made an obligatory stop there during his presidential campaign) and Aluminum Ore Corporation which, at that time, was the world’s largest aluminum processing center.

It was the reason that my grandfather, my father, and other poor black southerners migrated to East Boogie, knowing that within a few days of their arrival, they would be assured steady and gainful employment; a far cry from their slave-like existence in the deep south.

It was the epitome of what white America defined as successful: steady jobs, homeowners with white picket fences, men working while the women, by and large, were housewives and homemakers. Everyone knew their role and stayed in their respective lanes.

Racially, the lane for African-Americans (prior to the mid 1960s) was the south end of East Louis, while whites lived wherever their wallets could afford.

Much of that was the residue of America’s segregationist legacy and exacerbated by the legacy of America’s most savage “race riot” (or massacre) of July 2, 1917,
in which blacks were slaughtered by whites for daring to displace disgruntled white laborers.²

The aftermath was horrific, with black men, women, and children ruthlessly murdered simply for having the audacity to be black and the temerity to be in the path of white outrage.

That travesty was further exacerbated by the racism of President Woodrow Wilson, whose benign neglect was captured by myriad national newspapers of the day.

This is the post-riot legacy that, to this day, exists in East St. Louis and served as the catalyst for the eventual mass exodus of whites (from East Boogie) to the surrounding communities of Belleville, Fairview Heights, O’Fallon, and Shiloh during the 1960s and 1970s.

And that exodus was the beginning of the erosion of East St. Louis “All-America” status and emergence as a depleted, deteriorated, shell of its former self, replete with corrupt politics, next to a non-existent tax base and a reputation as the violent, forlorn epicenter of hopelessness for its, nearly, all-black residents.

Nothing better personifies that deterioration than “downtown” East St. Louis, Collinsville Avenue, a collection of check cashing facilities, wig shops and hair supply joints, typical of urban decay; with the highlight being the once prominent Spivey Building, a 13-story boarded up, crumbling, eyesore (and the city’s tallest building).³

Once upon a time, Collinsville Avenue was the fulfillment of a shopper’s dream, with stores selling everything from furniture, clothing, music, pharmacy items as well as entertainment at the ornate Majestic Movie Theater. Today, that is as much ancient history as the Egyptian Pyramids or the Sphinx.

That’s because all of these factors, seemingly, took East St. Louis from boom to doom overnight and, over 50 year later, time and changes in leadership and racial demographics have produced zero results or progress toward a real solution.

But, “violence is as American as cherry pie”, as former Black Panther H. Rap Brown once stated.⁴

America exists because of violence: from the American Revolution to the slaughter and displacement of the Native American population, to the capture and enslavement of Africans who were used to build this country and create her wealth. From the assassinations of President Kennedy to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, violence has always been America’s legacy and, de facto, change agent.

So, in a real sense East St. Louis, Illinois, has learned her lesson well, all too well, consistently leading the state, the metropolitan region (and, on occasion, the nation) in violence and murder statistics and infamy as a “most dangerous” city.

Yet, and equally as American, East St. Louis, per capita, is unmatched in terms of producing excellence on a national and international scale.

Who is the world’s greatest female athlete of all-time? That would be East St. Louis native and Olympian Jackie Joyner-Kersee. Oh, and I’d be remiss in failing to mention that, just by mere coincidence, her brother Al was also an Olympic medalist.

Their example would, later, inspire another East St. Louisan, Dawn Harper, to win gold at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

NFL Hall of Famer and legendary San Diego Charger, Kellen Winslow, never played football prior to gracing the halls of East St. Louis Senior High. Left to his own devices, he would have been an elite chess player. But he now owns the distinction of being one of the most prolific tight ends in professional football history.

Darius Miles, former NBA star, leaped into the professional ranks fresh out of East St. Louis Sr. High, parlaying his acrobatic dunking style into a lucrative career.

Unfortunately, that promising basketball career later became more associated with run-ins with the law, drug violations and a propensity for being in the wrong place (with the wrong people) at the wrong time.

Still, “only in America” (to quote boxing promoter Don King) could a Darius Miles be catapulted from the depths of the ghetto to millionaire status in the blink of an eye, then (with the same speed) squander his golden opportunity.

Perhaps, Miles should have consulted with another prominent East St. Louis native, sports sociologist Dr. Harry Edwards, who completed his PhD at Cornell University and is a widely sought after author, speaker, panelist and consultant for professional athletes and sports organizations. But, in Miles’ case, that would mirror responsible behavior, which
would be out of character with the troubled ex-NBA star.

And East St. Louis’ athletic dominance even extends to the world of tennis, with the verbal ferocity and longevity of the original “bad boy” of tennis, Jimmy Connors, who (despite his claims of Belleville, Illinois as his “home”) was born in East St. Louis on September 2, 1952.  

Connors’ regular, profanity-laced outbursts, foul temper and courtside tirades were his calling card. Yet it’s interesting and, yes, hypocritical how tennis star Serena Williams was criticized over her use of profanity during a much publicized outburst, when Connors’ potty-mouth was accepted as par-for-the-course.

The only distinction: Connors is a white male and Williams is a black female. That sort of hypocrisy is as American as the legacy of slavery.

Then there’s the world of music, and few musicians can rival the style, the swagger and artistry of East St. Louis great and international jazz icon Miles Davis. From East Boogie to Paris, Davis’ reputation as the personification of “cool” is unmatched and unquestionable.

In the world of politics, East St. Louis (before I deal with her shameful past and present) has been a producer of world class leadership.

Donald Franchot McHenry, who grew up in East St. Louis, was the 15th United States Ambassador to the United Nations (from 1970-1981) under President Jimmy Carter, after serving as a member
of Carter's transition staff at the State Department. Senator Dick Durbin, born in East St. Louis and a graduate of Assumption High School, is the 47th U.S. Senator from the state of Illinois. The senior senator holds the seat which was formerly held by his mentor, the late Paul Simon and, at this writing, serves as the Assistant Majority Leader or "Majority Whip", the Senate's second highest position. But it doesn't stop there.

Even in the world of Hollywood, the Hudlin brothers (Reginald and Warrington), Harvard and Yale graduates, respectively, learned much of their flair for depicting "the hood" and African-American culture in such colorful terms, from their own East St. Louis upbringing, only to showcase it in such classic Hollywood films as House Party, Boomerang, BeBe's Kids, and Serving Sara.

The roll call could go on, but the point is clear; that it is virtually impossible to name any significant field of achievement or endeavor, on the American (or world stage) without there being some significant contribution by someone with East St. Louis roots.

Now, I began with all of these East St. Louis paragons of achievement, realizing that even an element as precious as a diamond begins with humble roots, first as chunk of coal subjected to immense pressure which, ultimately, results in a sparkling gem of extraordinary value and beauty.

I've always maintained that it is this humility, day-to-day pressure and "underdog" status of growing up in East Boogie that has (aside from my parents) been the motivational and driving force in my life.

Yes, I grew up in an East St. Louis nuclear family with 3 siblings and parents married over 52 years (at this writing), with grandparents who were married nearly 60 years.

Our family activities were traditional: Shopping for groceries at National Food Store or the A&P with my mother and grandmother, followed by browsing for sales at the old W.T. Grant's department store at the now defunct Shop City.

Mornings near 23rd and State Street were hectic affairs, with the delivery of diapers to new mothers. Milk, butter and cheese were delivered fresh daily and I vividly remember my grandparents having their farm fresh eggs delivered to them every week.

Mr. Foggy, their neighbor, made his own pork sausage and was the "Jimmy Dean" of East St Louis, with rolls of his sausage prominently displayed in every market and corner store.

Family entertainment (for us) was at the old Cahokia Drive-In on Saturday nights. I joined the Okaw Valley Cub Scouts, Webelo Troop, then Boy Scouts. Recreation consisted of bowling at Shop City Bowl or skating at the Skate King Memorial skating rink. Sundays were spent in Sunday school, youth choir, and usher board at my church. Cardinal games with my friends, with earnings from my paper route, became a personal passion and diversion from my academic endeavors.

My neighborhood was eclectic, with parents who ran the gamut from school teachers and principals to blue collar workers (like my parents). My peers and I would eventually go off to college. Some would attend engineering school at places like Northwestern, Boston University, and Rolla. Others went on to become teachers or entered the military.

Yet, on that same block, were mentally challenged children and one particular household which produced a pimp, a Marine (who just happened to be gay), and a felon. Unfortunately, two other neighbors became overwhelmed by drug addiction; one an honor student and the other a once immaculately dressed pre-med student at Howard University who, later, became homeless and, finally, succumbed to his addiction.

There were also three white families living on our block, as my family played our role in integrating our neighborhood. One of those families, the "Gleeson", was a large family with kids who were, roughly, in my age range. One of the Gleeson kids became a frequent playmate of mine and, years later, (after moving away to Belleville) became an attorney and is now, an Associate Judge for St. Clair County, Illinois.

Our next door neighbors Lillian Moberg, a Jewish palm reader, and Albert Phelps, a self-employed upholsterer, played the role of surrogate grandmother and grandfather figures who provided my siblings and me with intricately decorated Easter baskets and Halloween bags loaded with candy. They remained in that neighborhood until I enrolled in college, at which time the crime in East St. Louis was becoming a major concern.
That was my neighborhood: diverse, progressive (despite the circumstances), yet as dysfunctional as are most "All-American" fairytale characters.

Yet, despite these Norman Rockwell-like descriptions of various aspects of my coming-of-age in East St. Louis, I also vividly remember being robbed at gunpoint after collecting the money from my daily *Metro-East Journal* paper route.

The robber, donning a stocking cap, waited patiently until I had collected my last dime, and then instructed me to lie face down and count to 200 as he fled. Interestingly enough, to this day I know who this lazy imbecile was, a fact made easy to discern by the gleaming gold tooth that betrayed him from beneath his mother's old stocking.

It was so devastating (but not surprising), that my father insisted upon escorting me (packing his trusty pistol) for quite some time following that experience.

Maybe one day my robber will have the opportunity to read these words from prison, which is where he has resided for most of his worthless life. That's provided, of course, that this miscreant can read.

Unfortunately, my robbery wasn't my first (or last) exposure to East St. Louis criminality. From having my first car burglarized outside of the old Regal Room nightclub to having a bullet shatter my bedroom window (at my parent's home), lodging itself in a wall where, normally I might have been sitting, were other instances. Such was life in East Boogie.

However, my understanding of historical criminality in East Boogie was the product of actually reading the *Metro-East Journal* before delivering it to my paper route patrons.

So, even at the age of 15, I wasn't oblivious to East St. Louis' reputation for violence, from actual gangster-like activity to her many political criminals (white and black) who had contributed to the demise of a once stellar community.

*Stately house on Bond Avenue, 2010  Powell Photo*
From indictments at city hall and the board of education, unlike many of my young peers, I knew the names of East St. Louis’ movers, shakers, the famous and the infamous.

Like Charles Merritts, the once powerful black political powerbroker that was groomed under the tutelage of Alvin Fields (East St. Louis’ last white mayor), John T. English, Tom Lewis and Esther Saverson (one of the early black political big shots in East St. Louis), Merritts eventually become school board president, but was later crushed in his bid to become East St. Louis’ first black mayor by James Williams, who would rob Merritts of his greatest political ambition.

Compounding that loss was Merritts’ eventual indictment for allegedly taking kickbacks as president of School District 189, as well as for allegedly putting out a contract for the murder of Clyde C. Jordan, publisher of the East St. Louis Monitor and a fellow school board member.

There were other names as well: Elmo Bush, Mayor William Mason, et al., some felons, others unindicted co-conspirators and, yet others, social climbers and “society” celebs. I followed their records, achievements and misdeeds in the same way that my teenage friends followed the St. Louis Spirits (of the old ABA), the “Big Red” (Old St. Louis football Cardinals) and the St. Louis Cardinals.

Then, I was, also, equally aware of the legacy of Frank “Buster” Wortman, Al Capone’s counterpart in East St. Louis, who monopolized everything from nightclubs, illegal gambling to prostitution from the 1940s -1950s after the demise of the Shelton brothers crime family.8

And what’s more American than the good old fashioned romanticizing of organized crime? From Al Capone to the modern-day mafia, in the person of the John Gotti, America just loves a good gangster tale.

That’s why movies like The Godfather and Goodfellas and the TV series The Sopranos will go down in history as American Hollywood classics.

East St. Louis is no different in its recollection and embellishment of folklore regarding Buster Wortman and the gang. Wortman’s Leavenworth and Alcatraz pedigree
may as well have been Harvard and Yale degrees if you listened to the old timers; but isn’t that the case with most American gangster tales?

And, while the East St. Louis criminal status quo may no longer be the exclusive domain of the white mafia types, the present-day African-American leadership (in East St. Louis) seems to have learned their deviant lessons from those who once ran East St. Louis’ political and criminal plantation.

Take, for instance, Charlie Powell, who was East St. Louis’ most recent political boss. Two years removed from a federal prison stint, Powell was once the head of East St. Louis’ democratic machine (and a city councilman) before being sent to prison for a conspiracy to buy votes in the 2004 general election.

Another, recent department head, Kelvin Ellis, a felon who originally served prison time for extortion, was returned to East St. Louis city government, upon his release, only to return to prison after running a prostitution ring from city hall and attempting to have a federal witness murdered (which turned out to be one of his prostitutes).

And despite the fact that the city of East St. Louis reports to a financial advisory authority and the school district was under oversight only a few years ago, public outrage seems tepid at best.

The street mantra of “don’t hate the player, hate the game” is the rule of thumb in East St. Louis “politricks”. It’s a slogan that discourages whistleblowers and those who would expose the bloodsuckers of the poor.

As a columnist covering the East Boogie political scene for nearly 20 years, I can always identify those who benefit from East St. Louis political dysfunction, because they tend to be my only critics.

In general, words of appreciation and “thanks” (for my columns) invariably come from either those who don’t live in East St. Louis or from those who are victims of the politics of East St. Louis.

Unfortunately, despite my exposés and journalistic rants, seldom do those victims make their presence known at the city council meetings or school board meetings, where their very presence is the one thing that would create real and lasting change.

Yet, even their indifference and apathy are all-American in that, with the exceptional voter participation experienced in the election of President Barack Obama, most local, state, and national elections reflect the mass indifference, frustration, and apathy of the American public by the absolute lack of voter participation at the polls.

So, what do we do in America (and by extension in East Boogie) when corruption and ineptitude are rampant and public apathy has become the normal coping mechanism for dealing with the poverty and decay that has become an overwhelming reality? In the fictitious 2004 graphic novel, *Birth of a Nation*, by *The Boondocks* cartoon creator, Aaron McGruder and East St. Louis native and Hollywood writer/director Reginald Hudlin, the authors pose the question: Would anyone care if East St. Louis seceded from the Union? The authors create an imaginary plot in which the national election hinges on East St. Louis’ electoral votes. Subsequently a black billionaire and mayor of East St. Louis devise a plot to secede and arrange an offshore bank (albeit in America) to finance the new “Republic of Blackland”, whose national anthem is sung to the tune of “Good Times”.

The satire, while absurd and hilarious, in many ways mirrors the hilarity of East St. Louis city government, its schools, its bufoonery and the almost cartoon-like manner in which East St. Louis leadership has mismanaged this very American slice of reality for over 100 years, while her citizens sit on the sidelines as spectators to their own demise. The same scenario played out after George W. Bush, with the help of the U.S. Supreme Court, literally stole the American presidency in 2000. Filmmaker Michael Moore, in his 2004 film *Fahrenheit 9/11* did a brilliant job of exposing that fact; but Americans returned the inept Bush to the White House in 2004, allowing him to lead America to the brink of near financial ruin.

So, the answer to East St. Louis’ woes (as is the case for America’s ills) lies not in the politics or the leadership, but in the people. When America, when East Boogie, when the people become “sick and tired of being sick and tired”, then all of these “American” problems will become a distant memory. The real question is when will “America”  (which includes East St. Louis) FINALLY become “sick and tired”??
End Notes:


8. Ibid, 143.