Radio, talking pictures, and The Great Depression destroyed Black vaudeville.

With the collapse of the Theater Owners Booking Association in 1930, performers were left to their own devices. Black entrepreneurs saw an opportunity and seized it. Promoting acts in dance halls, hotels, high schools, nightclubs, and juke joints in the "Bronzeville" neighborhoods of Indianapolis, Houston, Memphis, New Orleans, and Macon, Georgia, they controlled the Black music business until the 1950s.

In "The Chitlin' Circuit,'' his first book, journalist Preston Lauterbach tells the fascinating – and mostly forgotten – story of this important moment in music history.

Named for a hog's small intestine ("the cuisine of relegation") and run by men who were up to their eyeballs in numbers rackets, dice games, bootleg liquor, prostitution, and money laundering (and almost always one step ahead of the Internal Revenue Service), the circuit was rough and tumble, sometimes violent, and often unpleasant.

Vehicle for great artists

Nonetheless it fostered the development of breakthrough artists, including Louis Jordan, Joe Turner, T Bone Walker, Wynonie Harris, Ike Turner, Little Richard, and James Brown – and unheralded performers like Alvin Luke "Fats" Gonder, aka Count Basic, who taught Little Richard some tricks on the piano, discovered James Brown, and dubbed him "the hardest-working man in show business."

Rock 'n' roll, Lauterbach claims, only a tad hyperbolically, "simply couldn't have happened" had there been no chitlin' circuit.

Relying on a series of one-night stands at each of the promoters’ hubs and spokes, the business model of the chitlin’ circuit, Lauterbach reveals, left little margin for error.

A single cancellation – "and there were always cancellations" – could strand a band. Even a good day left performers "sleep-deprived, sardine fed," and wondering if they would be stopped on the way to the next gig by a cop "who took exception to a Cadillac limo or a flexi-bus full of slick black dudes."

Casualty of integration

In the 1940s, promoters took full advantage of the shift from big bands, which might employ 20 musicians, to vocalists as "the main draw." Even dives, Lauterbach writes, had enough cash to book single attractions (or small ensembles).

And so, top names – as well as fringe players – began to appear regularly on the chitlin’ circuit, sometimes accompanying themselves on guitar or saxophone. This development "catalyzed black pop's modification from swing to rock 'n' roll."

In the '50s and '60s, the chitlin’ circuit became a casualty of integration, much like the Negro Leagues in baseball. Black rock 'n' roll went mainstream, previously lily white venues welcomed African-American artists and audiences, and television allowed virtually all Americans to see their favorite performers without leaving home.

Devastated by urban renewal

Worse yet, according to Lauterbach, the geography of the chitlin’ circuit suffered even more crippling blows than its
business model.

Built around the "stroll" – with community-friendly corners, barbershops and bars, where just about everyone congregated; retail outlets eager to sell tickets; and performance spaces which were a short walk or bus ride from home – the chitlin’ circuit was devastated by urban renewal.

Designed to eradicate blight and fight crime, urban renewal, Lauterbach declares, "often replaced functioning minority neighborhoods" with high-rise public housing and interstate highways.

Unleashing more aggressive police officers, who "hassled every Negro function from craps games and private parties to double dates," the initiative left the streets in Black districts less "culturally vibrant" and more subject to White control.

Recently, Lauterbach suggests, by offering a haven, in fringe nightclubs, for bluesy and erotic music – and then a synthetic sound – the "old spirit" of the chitlin’ circuit has "sauntered ahead." Perhaps. But it doesn’t seem at all the same as the lively world he has reconstructed for us.

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