

Black Eden: The Idlewild Community

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A small, rural town in north-central lower Michigan, Idlewild is barely a wide spot on U.S. Highway 10, with very little to separate it from the blur of other near-ghost towns on the upland of the Manistee National Forest: a shuttered convenience store here, ranks of jackpine there, a house or two with a Ford Tempo in the driveway. It looks like just another ruined lumber depot, perhaps, or a stop on a long-abandoned rail-line. Idlewild, though, is something more: it is the skeletal remains of a small network of “black” resorts, part of the string of stage venues for black entertainers, called by them the “Chitlin’ Circuit.” Blacks were excluded by segregation from “white” resorts, and the ghosts of Idlewild tell this story with unique clarity.

The book is in large measure a ghost-chronicle. In an age where the entertainment expectations of nearly every cultural and ethnic group in America have been raised to heights unimagined even twenty years ago, it is difficult to imagine twenty thousand nightclub patrons on a holiday weekend queuing up anywhere (let alone an avowed “black” town in the scrub-land of northern Michigan) to simply have a drink, listen to the music, and dance. But that is exactly what happened in this now nearly abandoned town in the early 1950s. Idlewild was hoppin’ place, and the town’s clubs and resorts were packed. America may have been in the midst of her worst experiment with apartheid, but Idlewild, for a season at least, was an Eden of sorts.

The authors are at their best when reveling in the long-past folklore of this once-famous resort. They breathe life especially into the nearly sixty biographical vignettes of the performers who graced the club stages and enjoyed the resort amenities in Idlewild from the 1920s to the mid-1960s: Louis Armstrong, BB King, Earl Grant, Jackie Wilson, Della Reese, Etta James, and many others. Less strong are the digressions into a formulaic and bureaucratic prescription for what ails Idlewild today. The fun and sometimes moving prose about the foundations of Idlewild here devolves into jargon-speak about Action Plans, State Economic Development Grants, and Direct Loan Participation. Toward the end, the word “community” is painted on the pages by the gallon, and the history of the egalitarian experiment that was Idlewild ends with a sigh, when it more rightly deserves the crash of cymbals.

This is a small criticism, though. *Black Eden* seeks to craft a broad historical view of Idlewild, and it lands at times on the anthropological. It is a very important book, one that should be commended not only to interested historians and African Americans, but to anyone who seek a measure of what has been lost to Multi-Plexes, Digital Cable, and Universal Studios.

JOHN ARENS (July / August 2002)

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