



### Episode 3: Little Harlem, MS

**Frank Figgers:**

What we are in on earth, as humans, is a protracted struggle. That just simply means that it's something that goes on over a long period of time. When I was young I saw, between '60 and '70, so much change in ten years.

**Alvin Hall:**

From 1960 to 1970?

**Figgers:**

In one decade I saw going from segregation to openness. There were signs telling you: not here, only here, or only there. All of that disappeared in ten years. When I was young, I actually thought that [all happened because of the] work that took place in that decade.

But there were some sustaining moments. Perhaps from 1890 here in Mississippi, up until 1960 everyday people woke up [and wondered,] "Is this going to be the day?" But whether it was going to be the day or not, people said, either consciously or unconsciously, "I'm going to do what I can with what I have, where I am in order to make a better life and a fair deal."

**Hall:**

The voice you just heard is Frank Figgers, a local activist in Jackson, Mississippi, now in his 70s. Frank's considered manner of speaking resonated deeply inside me. His is the voice I heard from many of my older male relatives when I was growing up—their cadence, their word choice, the way they reflected on and survived history. His delivery was heavy with the wisdom he wanted to impart. There was a phrase Frank kept returning to; one that clearly is at the core of his philosophy in all areas of his life. In doing some research, I discovered his

wise words were borrowed from Theodore Roosevelt, who said: “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

Meeting Frank bridges a gap for me. His life spans the era when the communities we are exploring in this podcast were vibrant, sustaining places. He, like many others, carries forth the insights from that time to today—the memories, the laughter, the good times—looking back not with nostalgia but with quiet pride.

This is Driving the Green Book from Macmillan Podcasts, and I’m your host, Alvin Hall. Joining me on the road is producer Janée Woods Weber.

In Jackson, the Black commercial center was Farish Street, and in this episode, we’ll talk to people about what it was like there. But this episode is really about every street in every Black area that represented achievement and pride for Black people—Jefferson Street in Nashville, Fourth Avenue in Birmingham, Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Lenox Avenue in New York City, Walnut Street in Louisville, Kentucky.

Janée and I made our way to Farish Street and were surprised at how desolate it was. Yet on some of the buildings, there were plaques designating it as a historic district. So we decided to read what was on the plaques to get a sense of what the community had been like.

**Hall:**

“This building was erected circa 1900 by Negro masons. This property has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places by its inclusion in the Farish Street Historic District, August 1983.”

And then below that, there’s a plaque that says: “Businesses and family residences: 400 to 418 North Farish Street, 1903 to 1983.”

**Janée Woods Weber:**

Look at all the different kinds of businesses that are here. There’s Lamb’s Cafe, there’s a Home Dining Room, there’s a furniture company, a tailor shop.

**Hall:**

“Frosty Freeze ice cream store.”

**Weber:**

“406 upstairs family residences.” Do you think that was a boarding house?

**Hall:**

It must have been. “Doris Beauty-Rama.”

**Weber:**

“George and Emma Beasley.” I guess maybe even families have their names on here. The names of their family homes.

**Hall:**

“Frazier and Collins Funeral Home and insurance companies.” And right across the street is the same business.

**Weber:**

It’s still there. That's one of the few that is still in operation.

This area was one of the largest economically-independent Black districts in all of Mississippi. 125 acres.

**Hall:**

For African Americans in Jackson and in the surrounding areas, Farish Street was the connection to the best in entertainment, fashion, movies, new products, even though it was a segregated area. For the parents’ generation, it represented the aspirations that were not possible for themselves but that they wanted for their children.

People would come from the surrounding countryside, people like me, who were raised on farms. They came to Farish Street for its vibrancy, its prosperity, and its potential for progress, thanks to the vision of Black business owners, community leaders, and the power of collective action in the face of institutionalized hatred.

On Farish Street people dressed to the nines, they drove shiny cars, and they had money to spend on food, and drink, and live entertainment. Folks we spoke to said that just walking along Farish Street, whose buildings had been constructed by slaves, energized them. Being there alluded to the promise ahead, if they continued to work hard and to believe in their shared strength.

When families came back South, they talked about their lives up North, because they wanted to do two things: to share what they had achieved and to inspire those still there. They wanted to embody the North's possibilities

The businesses that populated Farish Street were built for and patronized by the Black community. Farish Street was a place where people felt welcome, safe, and catered to. It was a refuge. Shoppers, visitors, and locals would mingle on Farish Street as they patronized businesses like The Alamo Theater, The Booker-T Theater, Trumpet Records, Shepherds Kitchenette, Davis Salon, City Barbershop, Paris Cleaners, and Palace Drug Store.

On our walk, we met Tony Dennis, a third-generation shoe repair shop owner, whose grandfather set up the business in 1935 in the very same location. Tony remembers Farish Street at its height when he was a little boy. A time when the streets were so jam-packed with people you had to wait to get inside a business.

**Tony Dennis:**

If you walked out that door, you would have to get in the street to go up there.

**Hall:**

There were that many people on the street?

**Dennis:**

On the sidewalk.

**Hall:**

That's amazing, isn't it?

**Dennis:**

All the way down the sidewalk and around the corner. There was just that many people. And if we ever left home, we lived thirty miles from here, Grandmama or somebody would tell you: "I need you to go to Jackson to pay my bills." So you would come over to Jackson, take care of your Grandmama's bills, and when you get back home all your friends would ask you, "Where were you at yesterday?"

"I had to go to Jackson and take care of my grandmama's bills."

“Did you go to Farish Street?”

“No, I ain’t get Farish Street.”

“You ain’t get to Farish Street? You didn’t go to Jackson. You went somewhere else.”

You wouldn’t come to Jackson and not come to Farish Street.

**Hall:**

While Farish Street was the heart of the Black community, there were businesses located on streets nearby that were equally famous, like Summers Hotel and the Edward Lee Hotel. Frank Figgers remembers frequenting these places for nightlife.

**Figgers:**

Well, it was not far from where we are now on Pearl Street. You know how they redo streets? It’s the Dr. Robert Smith Parkway now. They took out two or three streets that were traveling east and west in order to make the parkway. But it was there.

**Weber:**

What do you remember about the Summers Hotel?

**Figgers:**

What I remember are two things more than anything else. By the time I had gotten in college, it was known for a man named Jimmy King who ran it. Now, if I remember right, Jimmy King was a musician, a high school band director or something like that. And at night he’d run what they call the Subway Lounge in the basement of it. I remember in college going there. He was known for jazz and then later he expanded from jazz music to blues and jazz.

**Weber:**

What were those nights like?

**Figgers:**

So, I always liked the nightlife, but my wife was a church person. But her attachment to me kind of put her in the nightlife.

**Weber:**

So you would go out to the nightclub on Saturday and go to church on Sunday?

**Figgers:**

Yeah. The nightlife at that time really didn't begin until nine or ten o'clock at night and being a church person she could go to church on Sunday night. So we'd steal out in time to go to Summers to hear some music. But being a morning person—even now, after over forty years of marriage, she's still a morning person, which means that she's early to go to bed at night, like nine or ten o'clock. But to be with me that sweet soul would put on shades and sit up in Summers Motel. I'd be bipping and bopping to the beat of the music and she'd be sitting with these shades on hiding her eyes and she's sleeping.

**Hall:**

When we return from the break Frank shares more stories from his teen years spent on Farish Street, hanging out with friends and spotting celebrities.

**[AD BREAK]**

**Hall:**

We're back with Frank Figgers, a local activist in Jackson, Mississippi who is now in his 70s. Frank was holding a copy of the Green Book as we spoke with him, and as he flipped through the pages, his memory lit up with stories from his teen years and the nights he'd spent on the town.

**Figgers:**

I had a much younger experience at the Edward Lee Hotel. It was on Church Street. It's a vacant lot now, but it was between Farish and Mill Street on Church Street, which is a street that also goes east and west. It was on the right side about middle ways down the lots there. There may be a historical marker there. It was less known for entertainment, but more known for restaurants and the hotel.

Now, what I remember most when I was in middle school was that not far from the Edward Lee Hotel was the George Washington Carver Library. Every week the George Washington Carver Library did this book review and some young person

would be allowed to review a book and talk about it. So that was a place to go. I didn't live in that neighborhood, but it would bring me there. So in 1961, when I was eleven years old, coming to Jackson were The Supremes, The Miracles, The Contours, Martha and the Vandellas, and a couple of other groups.

**Hall:**

The Marvelettes?

**Figgers:**

The Marvelettes! That's right. They come to Jackson and they stayed at the Edward Lee Hotel. So we got news of that—my partners, my guys—and instead of going to the library that particular evening, we go over to the Edward Lee Hotel and get these stars' autographs. We went there and sat around there with them stars. And they would come from their rooms and eat. That night it was called a Starlight Revue. And that night they performed in this very building in the Masonic Temple.

**Hall:**

One of the most amazing things about the Green Book is the confluence of people that it brought together: artists who were on tour with residents for whom it was a special occasion to come to town and see the shows.

The very artists that Frank went to see on stage at the Masonic Temple promoted their music across the U.S. Two of the best-known musical reviews to tour the country were created by Dick Clark and Motown Records. Fans would have used the Green Book to find out where in the Black communities to stay when these musicians came to town.

Before we set out to drive the Green Book from Detroit, Janée and I met former Motown musician, arranger, and producer McKinley Jackson, who is now in his 70s.

**Weber:**

You were very young when you started working with Motown and you got the opportunity to go on tour. What was it like to leave Detroit for the first time and go see the world?

**McKinley Jackson:**

Some people might say mind-blowing, but it was enlightening. It was expansive to see in many ways. [For example] the language. When I got down South and heard the Caucasians talk and heard the Blacks talk, and with my correlation from England and the British Caucasians talk over there—things like that were interesting to me.

And then to see the different scenic routes and the country, the mountains and the blue skies without burned-out homes or that type of thing. And then to see [things like] where people lived on hills and shacks leaning to the side.

**Hall:**

McKinley is typical of the first generation of African Americans whose parents participated in the Great Migration. This younger generation was not fully aware of the codes of the South or the depths of racism. For entertainers like McKinley, the first trip to the South was often eye-opening. What they mostly became aware of were all the behavioral codes throughout the South that clearly divided Black people from white people. And even with their stardom, they would experience how these codes applied to them.

**Jackson:**

There were occasions where we'd be driving down the highway and some of the wagons would come by with hay on them, and four or five white guys or Caucasians, or whatever they're called. But they would have rifles and shotguns pointed at us on the bus. And then about ten windows on the bus would come up, and about two guns [would come] out of every window on the Motown ship, because you had The Temptations, you had The Four Tops, you had The Spinners—and these are all Detroit guys. It wasn't a big thing for them to produce guns. So these guys [in the wagons] would take off and we never had too much trouble.

**Weber:**

How old were you during this time?

**Jackson:**

Probably about 16 or 17. Did I mention earlier that I dropped out of school to go to Motown to record?

Motown is a universal music. We had more or less a universal acceptance, too. Sure there were incidents now and then, but for the most part, people loved it. I mean,

what was not to love about Martha and the Vandellas and all the acts, Stevie Wonder and that type of thing?

**Hall:**

Listening to McKinley, it is not lost on me that while the music he and his fellow musicians played was universally accepted, their skin color was not. The fans' reactions to the music made them think and feel that the culture at large was embracing them fully. And then reality would strike.

**Jackson:**

We did have one occasion in Florida, I believe with Frazier, who was the valet for The Four Tops. What we would do is while The Temptations were on the stage, The Four Tops would keep watch as security and get dressed, and vice versa. While The Four Tops were on stage, The Temptations would be changing and watching guard. We didn't have any guards. But then somebody attacked Frazier and knocked him in his head. That was very bad, and I understand that he had to have a plate [installed in his head]. I'm not even sure if he's still alive now, because this was a long time ago. We're talking about '64 or '65.

I know most of the guys that I was in the band with have passed. But it was a very good learning experience for me because it was like school in the back of the bus. I would sit with the guys and they'd show me about arranging.

**Hall:**

This recollection shows that even moving North and raising their kids in northern cities, the reality that parents sought to protect them from would eventually catch up to them. While McKinley and his fellow travelers were using music to integrate the culture, there were people in cities across the South on the ground working to affirm their dignity, to ensure their prosperity, and to assert their full rights as Americans.

Frank Figgers helped us understand what this work was like on the ground in Jackson.

**Figgers:**

When I was young in the early 1960s, in the neighborhood that I grew up in, the big boys—boys that were getting ready to finish high school or had just finished high school—began doing the work that Freedom Riders were coming to Jackson to do. Many people think that people from outside [of Jackson] did a lot of [civil rights

actions] in Jackson, but I'm here to bear witness to the fact that there was a huge number of people on the inside of the state who weren't waiting for a piece of policy or a group to come in. They were taking matters into their own hands. So guys in my neighborhood were getting arrested for doing stuff that Freedom Riders who were coming to Jackson would do. One was right across the street from me. The guys that were doing that became my heroes.

**Hall:**

One Sunday, Frank was listening to a song and had an epiphany. He felt a rush of insight about how the words of a song captured the real meaning of what was occurring, not only in Jackson, but in every city, town, and neighborhood where the Green Book was being used.

**Figgers:**

I came out of a funeral service about three or four years ago, and that day I had two funeral services. But when I got in the car and was headed to the next service this song come on. The song was by Percy Mayfield. He wrote it and recorded it in 1951. The song was called, "Please Send Me Someone to Love."

**Hall:**

I know the song.

**Figgers:**

This song was played constantly. People loved it. Coming out of that church and headed to the other church, I discovered the lyrics to the song. It's a prayer. It has little to do with bumping and grinding and love, [and has more to do] with conditions.

So the struggle continues today. But people should realize that you wake up every day, do what you can with what you have, where you are in order to bring about a better life and a fair deal for people.

**Hall:**

Thank you so much. This has been a touching and brilliant summary of what brought about the Green Book, how we survived that period of time, and what we need to move forward.

## **Hall:**

In every town and city we visited along our road trip, we found an area just like Farish Street. Looking through the listings in the Green Book, it's clear this is true all across America. Each city gave rise to a place for Black people that had its own rhythms, distinctions, special hospitalities, and entertainment.

One important distinction about Farish Street that makes it so memorable is that many buildings along it had been built by and for the descendants of slaves as a place to be in community and be treated with dignity.

These areas across the U.S. show us the good life that African Americans created for themselves during segregation. These were oases of freedom. In these places, Black-owned businesses thrived, people paraded, entertainers performed, and people enjoyed the pleasures of gathering together to spend some of their hard-earned money and to have a good time with friends. Here, local leaders, ministers, and activists met away from the white gaze to strategize and plan upcoming campaigns and rallies. These spaces were vital, providing a refuge for undisturbed Black American life.

Tony Dennis told us, "If you didn't go to Farish Street, you didn't go to Jackson." When you visit today, you can still catch glimpses of the area's former glory and understand exactly what he meant.

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. When we come back next week we'll hear about how a strong support network, street smarts, and mother wit protected Black travelers.

## **CREDITS**

Driving the Green Book is a production of Macmillan Podcasts. It is created, narrated, and produced by Alvin Hall and edited by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Sound design and original theme song by Cedric Wilson at Lantigua Williams & Co. Field production by Oluwakemi Aladesuyi. Janée Woods Weber is the associate producer with additional production support by Jasmine Faustino, Michelle Margulis, Morgan Ratner, Emily Miller, and Becky Celestina. Kathy Doyle is the Macmillan Podcasts Vice President.

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Safe travels.