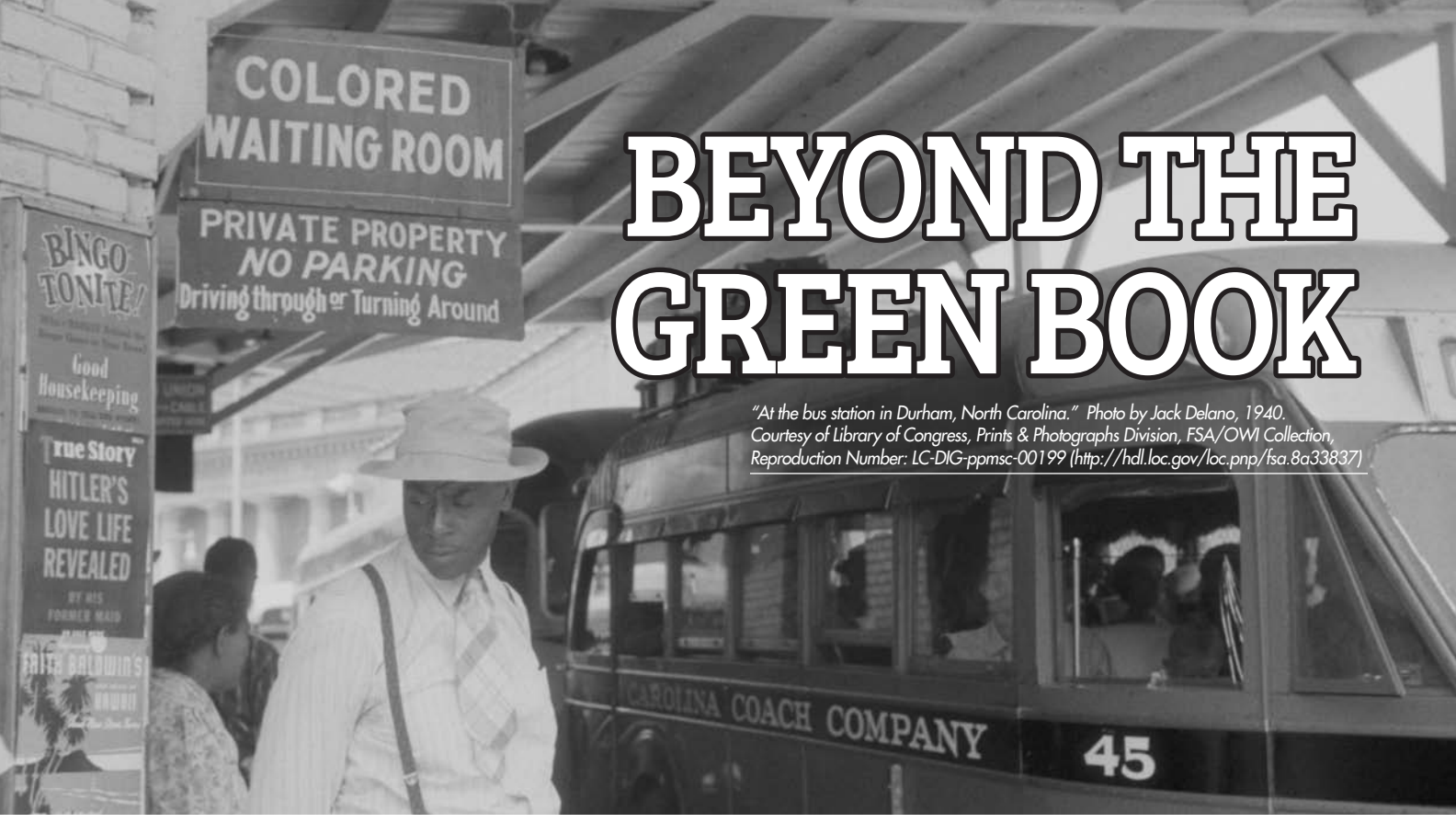
BEYOND THE GREEN BOOK



"At the bus station in Durham, North Carolina." Photo by Jack Delano, 1940. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsc-00199 (http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8a33837)

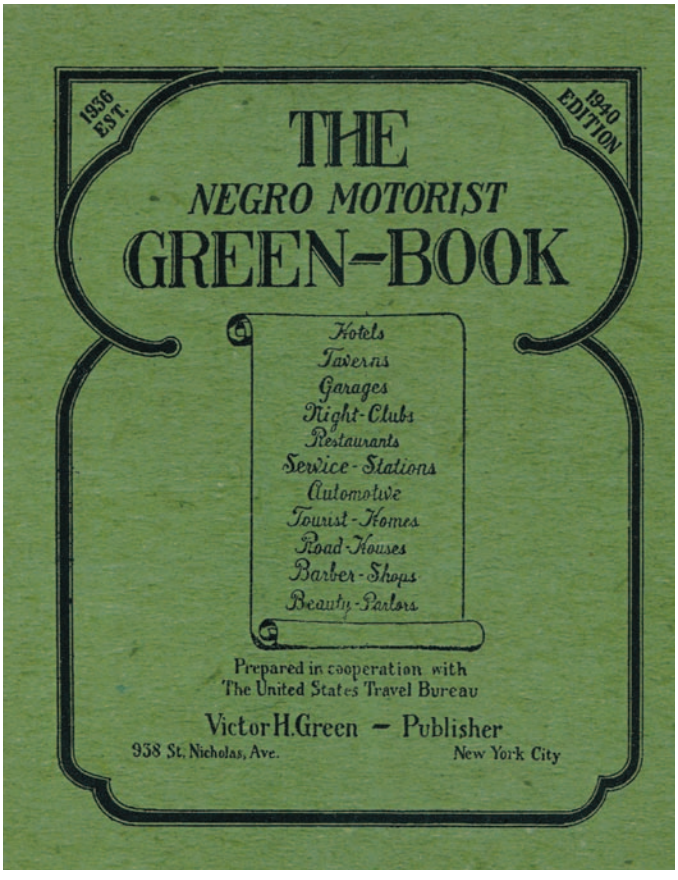
By Lamont Jack Pearley

Recently, the Academy Award-winning movie, *Green Book,* ignited conversation and intrigue about the travels of African Americans during the Jim Crow era and the use of this historical traveling guide. Those familiar with the *Green Book* were reminded of racial prejudice, price gouging and physical violence, which spawned the book's creation – and others who didn't know of its existence, sought to find out.

The original and official name of the guide was *The Negro Motorist Green Book* – eventually simply called the *Green Book* – published by Victor H. Green, a mailman from Harlem, NY, between the years of 1936 to 1966. Its sole purpose was to give African American travelers a map of safe locations they could travel, eat and lodge as they journeyed through the Jim Crow South and other segregated regions of America. This notion to create a guide for the safety of African Americans gives a harsh look at the conditions during the days of segregation. The film *Green Book* gives us a light version of the experiences that Dr. Don Shirley, a world-class African American pianist, endured during his concert tour of the Deep South in 1962. Though the character played by Mahershala Ali faced blatant racism as he and his white Bronx chauffeur drove the southern roads utilizing *The Negro Motorist Green Book* for safe lodging and meals, there is one reality that must be considered. Dr. Don Shirley, like many other African Americans who utilized this book, were middle to upper-middle class affluent African Americans. They were educated people who left the South for a more cosmopolitan way of life.

Automobiles weren't readily accessible to most African Americans of the day, especially those of the rural South. There wasn't a tremendous need for *The Negro Motorist Green Book* for a portion of African American citizens of small southern towns, since most didn't travel. However, there were some who traveled for work. There were also some who traveled to sing and play their instrument. Before the inception of *The Negro Motorist Green Book,* and even before the infamous 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson which solidified the constitutionality of "separate but equal" racial segregation laws, there were African Americans traveling across and around the United States. They were the Black spiritual choirs and vaudeville performers, and with them, they carried the tradition of messages in songs. That same tradition was passed down and utilized by the bluesmen and women who would soon become the staple of American music and Black culture. These traveling musicians didn't have the *Green Book*, but they did have knowledge of how and where to travel and lodge. Even when the *Green Book* began to circulate, rural southern bluesmen and women tended to utilize traditional tactics to journey the terrain of locations plagued by African American discrimination.

We hear the stories of the hobo or traveling bluesman sneaking on and camping out in cargo cars of the trains. We love the nostalgia of these poor African American musicians learning new notes by mimicking the sounds of the locomotive's steam horn as they sit in boredom and reflective moments. As quaint a story as it is, that's not how these professional musicians toured the country. During the Great Depression, America was introduced to the traveling bluesman. This was during a time in America when the country was poor, and the poor were even poorer. Record sales plummeted and the cheapest piece of entertainment was the radio. At this time, rural blues recordings were extremely cost



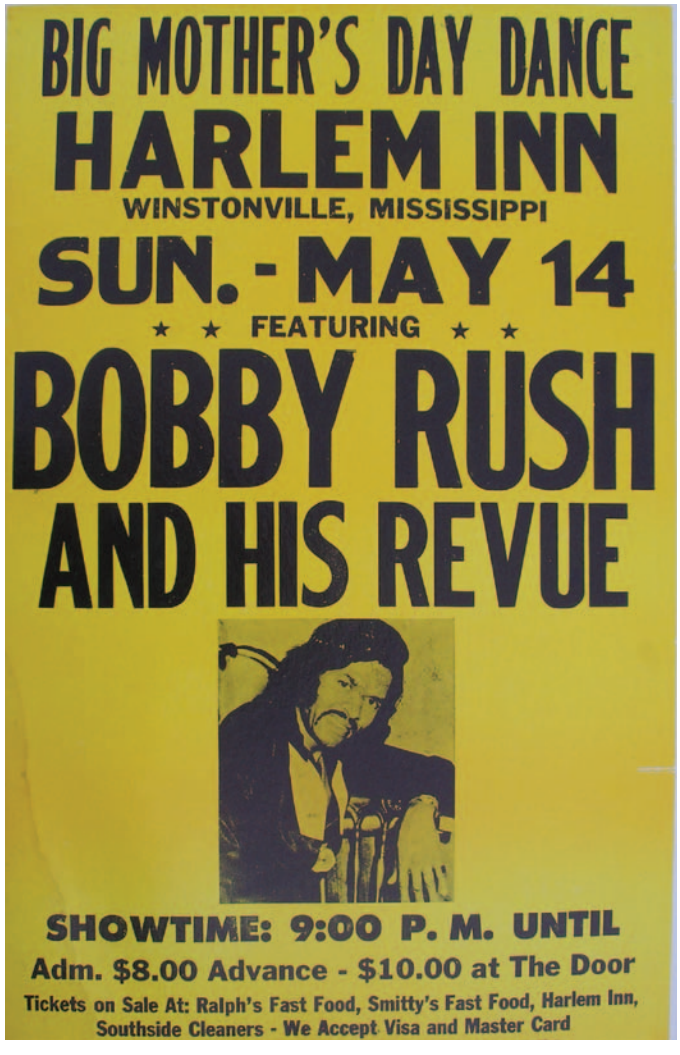
efficient. This led to a new industry where African American blues musicians traveled around the South and Midwest for gigs and recording sessions, usually with weapons. They slept in the homes of African Americans who rented out rooms to traveling musicians, none which were found in the *Green Book*. It was shared through word of mouth.

Michael Dolphin, the son of the legendary music mogul John Dolphin (owner and operator of Dolphins of Hollywood on Central Avenue in Los Angeles), shares, "During this time, bluesmen stayed either with friends or relatives, and the promoters would also guarantee housing because safety was always a concern." Traveling was troublesome, so there were kinfolk networks that musicians were familiar with. If they didn't know the "who" or "where" prior to their excursion, they were given instructions on who to look for and where to find them upon arrival. The kinfolk community system has been a major part of the African American community since slavery, abolition and the underground railroad. Considering that the majority of the country blues artists traveling during this time either started on a plantation or were sharecroppers, this system wasn't foreign to them.

In 1904, the New Amsterdam Musical Association, which was the first African American musician's union in America, was established. Now operating as a nonprofit with landmark status, the organization has been a staple for the African American music scene and community since purchasing a Harlem Brownstone in 1922. This location was not only a speakeasy for Black musicians to congregate and socialize after gigs, it was also a place for Black musicians to rent rooms when gigging in town. Jelly Roll Morton lived in one of the rooms for a time.

In the South, there were designated homes that housed not only traveling musicians, but African American workers as well. Places like this wouldn't be in the *Green Book* because they were off the radar and in rural communities, only known by those who traveled those roads. If you're familiar with how the NAACP sent representatives to different cities to monitor court cases, then you'd also remember that they had volunteers who allowed representatives or those facing the legal system, to stay in their homes. Again, to ensure the safety of the volunteers, this information wouldn't be published in a book.

Some of the homes that rented rooms to traveling bluesmen were known as "Hot Suppers." These were Black institutions that gave a form of escape to sharecroppers, allowing them to enjoy themselves away from white people. Documentation shows they began in the late 1800s, later to become known as liquor



Bobby Rush, "King of the Chitlin Circuit," experienced his own difficulties traveling and performing gigs. Photo courtesy of BluEsoterica Archives

Po' Monkey's Juke Joint near Merigold, MS, was founded in 1961 and is one of the last rural juke joints in the Mississippi Delta.
Photo by bobpalez (https://commons.wikimedia.org)

The Jackson Rooming House was Tampa's only boarding house for African Americans during segregation. *Photo by TampAGS, for AGS Media [CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)]*

houses. In these locations, you'd find music, food, gambling, liquor and just about everything one would desire. There were also places like the boarding house called The Cedar Street Cafe that bluesman Billy Jones Bluez grew up in. Located in North Little Rock, AR, the cafe was owned by his grandfather. Places like this made lodging and performing suitable for blues musicians because they were located in the immediate proximity of local juke joints.

Alas, juke joints are another part of blues history that is remembered with an unrealistic nostalgia. The reality is, juke joints were extremely dangerous, and in some cases operated illegally. However, they too housed bluesmen and women. We can't forget about places like the Jackson Rooming House in Tampa, FL, where Black performers of the "Chitlin Circuit" would stay. In some cases, the venue hosting the musicians had rooms upstairs for them to sleep – of course, that was if the venue was owned and operated by African Americans.

On my Jack Dappa Blues Podcast, Grammy-winning blues legend Bobby Rush not only shares the difficulties and secrets of travel, he also states the conditions of performing. He explains how there were times he had to perform behind a curtain, because the audience wanted to hear him, not see him. He also shares how, in some cases, he was directed to broom closets with no lights as a dressing room, similar to the movie scene in *Green Book*.

Songsters – traveling instrumentalists who mastered many genres – had been traveling since the Emancipation. From the Reconstruction Era to Jim Crow, these songsters figured out and mapped routes of travel, and shared them with fellow musicians. During what's said to be the first Great Migration, which started in 1914, a lot of the songsters evolved into bluesmen. They, and other Black blues musicians, began taking on the names of different highways, signifying the travel and routes they utilized as they journeyed throughout the South.

This is also evident in African American newspapers of the day. Ethnomusicologist Dave Evans' research suggests that the highway nicknames utilized by bluesmen were prevalent during the years of the first Migration through WWII. The same focus on location was also ever-present in song titles and lyrics. At the time of this geographical explosion, bluesmen and women were presenting lifestyles and travels that represented the African American communities they were from or visited. To quote R.A. Lawson from his book titled *Jim Crow's Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners, 1890-1945*, he says, "The traveling bluesman and his music created something of a public message board allowing members of the southern Black underclass to communicate and share their individual experience of migration." This confirms that the stories shared in blues lyrics – like its predecessor, Negro spirituals – were coded messages of travel and life beyond the confines of the oppressive and segregated Jim Crow South.

Eventually, blues music became popular enough to birth other genres of commercially successful music that are enjoyed today. However, African American musicians (and citizens) still face discrimination and difficulties with travel. Though discriminative actions against African American travelers may not be as blatant as in the Jim Crow era, many blues musicians still rely on that old tradition of notifying and staying with kinfolk for a good night's rest. Furthermore, now that all these lovely hotels and restaurants are integrated, they may not be affordable to the working bluesman, so we have to keep a couple tricks up our sleeves to ensure safe travels, lodging and eating. More importantly, we continue to express gratitude for our forefathers and mothers that faced an extremely harsh environment in order to perform, paving the way for the bluesmen and blueswomen who followed! ♫

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