

Charlie's Place

How the Ku Klux Klan Tried to Stop the Rise of Rhythm & Blues

by
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Chapter 1 — Shaggin' the Night Away

Her stare was as cold as the draught beer she held in her hand. "Why," she angrily demanded, "do you have to bring the blacks into this?"

A few feet away, on the dance floor at Fat Harold's Beach Club, middle-aged white couples danced the "shag" to vintage rhythm and blues records. My interrogator at the bar was also white, in her late forties and a diehard shagger—part of the biannual migration to Ocean Drive to celebrate South Carolina's official state dance.

Her question surprised me. "Why would I not bring the blacks into the story?" I shot back. "This music and dance was invented by black people!"

The woman huffed, puffed and brusquely disappeared into the crowd, convinced I was some kind of troublemaker.

As I've found with so many cultural matters in my native South Carolina, it's much easier to skip along the surface and accept what one's told at face value. The most casual curiosity is often unwelcome. Asking too many questions can quickly turn disruptive, even with subjects as seemingly innocent as the state's native dance.

My unexpected adventure with what's known in the South as Carolina "beach music" began at a New Year's Eve celebration in 1993 at a hotel in Greenville. Though I had devoured this regional strain of R&B in the 1960s at the University of South Carolina, my interest had faded in the years after I left the South.

On this festive night, however, the old memories came rushing back. Though the setting was a sterile hotel ballroom designed to host sedate corporate events in this booming Piedmont city, booze was flowing and inhibitions common to white Southerners were in temporary remission.

I watched meticulously dressed, middle-aged women from the upper crust of Greenville's white society cluster around the stage, gradually rising to a state of ecstasy through the hypnotic performance of a group of black musicians. Nearby, tuxedo-clad husbands watched with mild discomfort at the transformation of their spouses.

The music, a staple of the region for half a century, was loud and distorted—a sanitized R&B hybrid with simplistic lyrics celebrating youthful romance, alcohol highs and a carefree life at the Carolina beaches. The performance, by a popular group of Southern singers called the Tams, touched a deep chord with many of these women.

As the drink kicked in and male spouses were dragged into action, high heel shoes shot into the air and sweaty bodies gyrated across the dance floor. The Southern reserve that normally dominates this hardcore Bible belt community had taken a holiday. The evening quickly got down and dirty.

Though I had seen this spectacle many times before in my college days, the distance of time and detachment of place now made it more fascinating. The deeper meaning of this Southern ritual started to weigh on my mind.

As I watched the increasingly rowdy antics on the dance floor, it was clear that these black performers were piercing the carefully nurtured bubble of propriety so characteristic of upscale whites in South Carolina. Such passionate communal behavior is usually reserved for and tolerated at Southern sporting events. But as I listened to this familiar music from my youth, I was astonished to see these well-worn songs now generating a sexual tension in aging white adults.

The whole affair seemed so out of character for the place. Despite the seismic industrialization of the Carolina Piedmont in recent years, most of upstate South Carolina

remained intensely conservative. The region has a history of right wing politics dating back to its Tory leanings during the American Revolution, and it was one of the first areas in the state to take to Republicanism after World War II.

The city of Greenville, in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, is home to Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist Christian school that has long banned student dancing, drinking, smoking, kissing and hand-holding. Women wear ankle-length dresses on campus. Students caught attending a movie in town can be expelled. In March, 2000, only after being targeted with intense criticism during the state's presidential primary, did the school end a ban on interracial dating among its five thousand plus students.

Of Greenville County's 380,000 residents, more than seventy-seven percent are white, according the U.S. Census of 2000. This hub of conservatism is a place where the Civil War remains a hot-button topic and the ethics of slavery is still debated. It's also a place where mistrust between the races actively bubbles just beneath the surface of daily life.

Yet, it was clear from what I experienced in this Greenville ballroom that any racial divide ended on the dance floor. For a few hours, music and dance united people who would have little or no connection the next day or the day after.

Questions began to explode into my mind. How did the "shag" originate? How did it become a popular dance embraced by white Southerners? Surely the dance and beach music—a derivative of R&B—must have roots in some kind of local black-white collaboration from another era. How could that interracial collaboration have occurred in the segregated South? How did blacks and whites get together to learn from each other? Was it done openly or was there some sort of secret alliance? Questions, questions, and more questions.

Thus began a personal exploration, one that led me to a little known story that began in the Carolinas during the waning days of World War II. My journey took me through some uncharted territory, from popular white beach music hangouts like Fat Harold's and Ducks in the Ocean Drive section of North Myrtle Beach to a quiet black neighborhood a few miles south in Myrtle Beach. It was here that I discovered an extraordinary musical legacy that's been all but forgotten in the modern South.

Chapter 2 — Whispering Pines

The old saying goes that when Billie Holiday sang at Charlie's Place, the pine trees above—fanned by a gentle ocean breeze—whispered along with the music. To this day, that patch of trees on Carver Street is called Whispering Pines.

Whispering Pines is on "the Hill," a black neighborhood only a stone's throw from the noisy, neon-lit oceanfront pavilion and amusement park that once dominated the tourist district in Myrtle Beach.

Yet, as I drive down this modest street, with its scattered homes and businesses, there's little to reveal an illustrious past when hundreds of music lovers came to hear the likes of Louis Jordan, Billy Eckstein, Count Basie, Ray Charles, Duke Ellington, Fats Domino, Lena Horne, and virtually every significant "race music" artist of the 1940s and '50s.

Charlie's Place at Whispering Pines was run by Charlie Fitzgerald, a stylish black entrepreneur from New York who, from the late 1930s until his death in 1955, operated nightclubs, a motel, a cab company, and—according to some—the beach resort's most notorious brothel. Charlie's legal name was Lucius Drucker. His past and the reason for the name change remained a mystery even to those who called him a friend.

I had been gradually introduced to the Fitzgerald legend in a series of informal interviews I'd done with dancers credited with inventing the shag. All were on the Carolina beaches in the years following World War II. I wanted them to tell me how the dance was created. As Leon Williams, George Lineberry, Harry Driver, Clarice Reavis, Betty Kirkpatrick, Chick Hedrick, Billy Jeffers, and others independently told their stories, the name Charlie Fitzgerald repeatedly came up.

One by one the dancers cited Fitzgerald as a significant cultural influence in the post World War II years. His name was always spoken with reverence, mystery, and a sense of awe. It was as if Charlie's old nightclub had been some kind of secret hideout that held the keys to a forbidden world. And each of these dancers, through good fortune, had gained admission.

There's no mention of Charlie Fitzgerald's name in South Carolina's modern history books. His contribution to his state's music and dance have been ignored, and today he's essentially a forgotten figure. To learn his story, an outsider needs to ask a fast-dwindling group of friends who still live and work in the old neighborhood, and a handful of music lovers—both black and white—who visited his club as teenagers.

One of those is Dino Thompson, a beach music lover and lifelong restaurateur who had hung out at Charlie's Place as a kid. I found him at Cagney's Old Place, his restaurant on the Highway 17 tourist strip in Myrtle Beach.

"Charlie was one slick dude. He had an aura about him. He could have been the doorman at the Cotton Club," Thompson told me as he warmed to old memories. He had visited Charlie's Place as a youngster to hear musicians he could find nowhere else. "In 1952, Little Richard came to the Hill. He wasn't allowed to sing in the white clubs here. I begged my father to let the cook and two dishwashers in our restaurant take me. They sat me right up on the stage and I saw Little Richard in his blue suede shoes."

Dino Thompson wasn't the only Southern white kid who pined to hear black performers. In segregated South Carolina, where a prominent local radio station proudly advertised that it played "no jungle music," the provocative and sometimes raunchy mix of black gospel, jazz and blues was taboo. Labeled "race music," it was forbidden fruit that was rarely heard on mainstream Southern radio stations or sold in local record stores.

By 1950, however, the genie was beginning to come out of the bottle. A young Billboard magazine writer, Jerry Wexler (later to become a partner in Atlantic Records), published an article arguing that race music was more aptly called "rhythm and blues." The name stuck.

When WLAC, a 50,000 watt AM radio station in Nashville, switched to a black R&B format each night, it started reaching many white teenagers throughout the South. Disc jockeys Gene Nobles and John R became the first major links connecting black music to a white Southern audience. John R, a white South Carolinian and former actor, used his deep voice and a hepcat banter to convince many in the listening audience that he was a black man. (One of WLAC's savvy sponsors, Randy's Record Shop of Gallatin, Tennessee, sold the hard-to-find black music via mail order, delivering the recordings to white customers in discreet, unmarked packages.)

Randy's modern day equivalent is Marion Carter, a white fan of black music who grew up to become one of South Carolina's top R&B record promoters. I spent half a day driving through the remote countryside to his Repete Records operation in the tiny South Carolina town of Elliott. From a barn-like structure that seemed more likely to house a small farming operation, Carter's employees ship hundreds of R&B recordings to music lovers and record stores each day.

"This was the devil's music—you just didn't listen to it in the average white Southern home," Carter told me. "White teenagers like myself were relegated to sneaking around to hear the music. We'd listen to WLAC at night out in the car or hide a portable radio under our pillow. What I have found as I've grown up and talked to people is there were tens of thousands of us all doing the very same thing in order to hear this music."

At the Myrtle Beach Pavilion, less than half a mile from Charlie's Place, white nightlife—as it was in other towns throughout America—was centered around the jitterbug, a strenuous, acrobatic dance usually performed to quick-tempo swing or jazz. The dance supported a subculture of fashionable young creative dancers known as "jitterbugs."

The top male dancers were instantly recognized by their long blonde peroxided hair, draped peg pants, T-shirts, penny loafers, and swirling gold chains. Not available in stores, the custom-tailored pants often cost the equivalent of hundreds of today's dollars. The favored design called for 14-inch bottoms and 22-inch knees, which created a drape look. Half-inch welt seams ran along the sides, and pocket flaps were sewn upside down. Men wore cashmere wool sweaters, regardless of how warm the temperature on the dance floor.

Women dancers—favoring a far simpler, less flamboyant look—wore pedal pushers, angora sweaters, and flowing scarves. Shorts and other standard beach garb of today were the sure sign of an unsophisticated tourist. Fashionable clothing was essential to the dance floor elites who ruled beach society in the years following World War II.

By eight o'clock on most summer nights, hundreds of tourists gathered around the balconies and dance floor at the Pavilion. The star jitterbugs—known to the crowd by such nicknames as Rubber Legs, Chicken, Bunk, the Roach, and Little Robin—appeared one by one to show off their latest moves. Just as the streets in the Old West cleared when a known gunslinger appeared, the dance floor emptied for the kings and queens of the night.

One of the undisputed greats was Leon Williams, who was nicknamed "Rubber Legs" after he perfected a technique where he crossed his legs while standing and then began rocking from side to side, eventually sliding into a squat. "He was like a snake on the dance floor," an admirer proudly told me. "Nobody did it but Leon."

What few in the white Pavilion crowd realized was that Williams, along with a handful of other star dancers on the beach, was adapting the jitterbug with tricks picked up from the black dancers in clubs like Charlie's Place. "The black dancers had a huge influence on us. They had rhythm and they interpreted the music," recalled Williams. "It still fascinates me how they felt the music so well."

Though Williams and his fellow dancers lived in a racially segregated community, they ignored the repeated warnings against associating with blacks that came from South Carolina's political and social establishment. "The colored girls danced with white boys and the colored boys danced with white girls," said Williams. "We hugged each other's neck. If you had been at the beach in that period of time, you'd thought segregation didn't exist."

The white dancers' fascination with black music and culture extended beyond the nightclubs. "We used to go to colored churches on Sunday because we loved the gospel music," said Williams. "We wanted to hear our friends clap their hands and sing. They really got into it and that impressed me. We realized early on that you can dance to gospel music."

Partially due to the passion of another talented young dancer, George Lineberry, R&B was finding its way onto the jukeboxes in the white dance halls and pavilions along the Carolina coast. "Big George," as he was nicknamed, installed records on the coin-operated machines for a local amusements company. He took it upon himself to move the most popular records from the jukeboxes in the black clubs, including Charlie's Place, to the white dance halls.

Big George, who died in 1999, was an immensely popular fixture at the beach and was often slipped a few bucks by concerned parents to dance with a daughter who needed a boost in self-esteem. With great ceremony, he made it a point to "test" each new record installation with a personal spin on the dance floor. In South Carolina, the R&B that could be heard only at the beach joints became known as "beach music."

In the 1940s, the young dancers found the beaches a liberating place. For many it was the

first time in their lives that they were in a community where no one knew them or their family. "There was a special freedom in that," disc jockey John Hook mused one night as he spun records at a crowded beach dance club. "That meant they could let it hang loose and do stuff they'd never dare do at home."

This precious anonymity, Hook shouted over the club's roaring decibel level, also gave the young white men and women a chance to escape the pressures of a segregated society and to emulate what they liked best about their contemporaries in the black community. "There was a certain sensuality, a certain sexuality that put it all out on the edge," he said.

"The guys knew when they went out on the dance floor that a hundred women were watching them right at that moment and that each would give anything to be their partner. Man, that's some heady, heady power. Imagine the confidence that produces in you. Imagine what happens to your body when you know—you absolutely know for sure—that you're gonna score tonight."

The best of the young male dancers, said Hook, concentrated on their female partner. "The great dancers never danced to the crowd. They gave their whole attention to the woman. They fired on her with great subtlety, sophistication and eloquence. It was not a dance about doing steps, but a dance of moving with her. It was a mating dance. It didn't always lead to sex, but it led to intimacy."

Chapter 3 — The War Years

It was in the summer of 1945—the waning days of World War II—that the lure of black music began to take hold among white dancers. Until that time, artists like Stan Kenton, Gene Krupa, Tommy Dorsey, Lionel Hampton, and Glenn Miller drove a dance culture based on big band swing and jazz. However, an unlikely convergence of events on the Carolina coast was to broaden the Southern dance repertoire.

One sprang from the logistics of war. Though most of the beach dancers were too young or, for one reason or another had received deferments from military service, the war still had a huge impact on their daily lives. An inconvenience that would later prove to have a significant effect on the dance was the government-imposed banning of bright lights along the coastline.

"You couldn't have lights on the beach at night because they could be seen by enemy submarines off the coast," explained Harry Driver, one of the top beach dancers, in a conversation before his death in 1998. "All the windows and the top half of car headlights had to be painted black until the summer of 1945. If they blew a siren, it was a warning that a submarine was off the coast and all lights had to be turned off."

The lighting restrictions temporarily drove beach nightlife 125 miles inland to the resort area of White Lake, North Carolina. It was here, at hangouts such as the Crystal Club and the Hayloff, that the dancers met a continuing stream of soldiers preparing for war at

nearby Fort Bragg and Camp Lejune.

"During the war years our dance styles were influenced at White Lake," said Driver. "Soldiers came to that area from all over the world. I met great dancers from Chicago, New York, and California. It was at White Lake that I learned from those soldiers a lot of the steps that have long been attributed to me. It was a real melting pot of dance."

But the same war that brought the regional dancers together was also decimating the big bands that produced their favorite music. Depleted of musicians gone to combat and hindered by increasingly high costs, large traveling orchestras virtually disappeared in the war years, replaced by small combos of six to eight musicians. The musical experience was not the same.

"When big bands went out of vogue, there were many more black musicians left to perform in their place. I think that opening for the black performers had a lot to do with the crossover of black music to white audiences," said Chick Hedrick, a beach dancer who later operated the popular Chick Hedrick's Domino nightclub in Atlanta.

That black music was essentially banned in the segregated Carolinas didn't hurt either, added Driver. "They called it 'suggestive music.' You've got to understand," he said, "when we were growing up, 'Sixty Minute Man' implied that you could last sixty minutes doing the big trick. A white Southern society was not going to listen to that. The music was parental repulsive. Lyrics like 'Sock it to me, baby, one more time' or 'I'm gonna smoke you all night long' made the parents go crazy and left the teenagers wanting to hear more. Plus it had the tempo we liked to dance to."

Chicken Hicks, a charismatic beach legend who emerged from another dance hot spot, Carolina Beach, North Carolina, noted a clear distinction between the raw beach music of the 1950s and the sanitized "bubblegum beach" that emerged as a popular Southern party music during the 1960s.

"The new crap from bands like the Embers is not beach music. It's college bop. The [original] beach music was race music," said Hicks, who died in 2004. "Bull Moose Jackson had a song called 'Bow Legged Woman Just Fine.' 'Old legs built like barrels/wide in the middle/jump start/slamming the straddle.' You didn't hear that kind of stuff on white jukeboxes."

Most of the top white dancers agree that it was a mix of jazz, blues and gospel music that fueled the transition of the jitterbug to the popular slower, smoother dance that's known in the South today as the "shag."

Spanning the popularity of both the jitterbug and the shag was Bill Pinkney, an original member of the Drifters and a 1988 inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. "The only thing that separates the shag from swing and the jitterbug is the movement, the rhythm of the body and the footwork," Pinkney told me while sitting at his kitchen table in Sumter, South Carolina. Until his death at age 81 on July 4, 2007, Pinkney remained a

shagger. "I can shag at my age, believe it or not," he said proudly.

Though there's continuing disagreement over the exact origins of South Carolina's state dance, those who created it gave major credit to the black dancers of the era, many of whom did an erotic dance that mimicked the act of copulation known as the "dirty shag." In fact, the very definition of the word shag, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang, is "to have sex with." It appears, however, that the slang term did not come into common use in America until years after the dance became popular in the Carolinas.

"I first heard the term shag at Charlie's Place," said Big George Lineberry, who left the beach in 1948. "They called it the shag on the Hill. I think the shag and dirty shag came out of Charlie's nightclub."

Henry "Pork Chop" Hemingway, who eventually became the first black policeman in Myrtle Beach, was a close friend of Charlie Fitzgerald and the official chaplain at the club during its heyday. His taxi company was headquartered on Carver Street, a few steps away from where the club once stood. Hemingway, who died in June, 2007, watched the dance evolve over many years and emphasized there was a clear difference between the dirty shag and the dance now called the shag.

"The dirty shag was basically a bump and grind type of thing," Hemingway said. "The shag was altogether different. It was a smooth dance. The first person I ever saw do it was a girl from Elloree, South Carolina. She did it so well they nicknamed her 'Shag.' That's where the word came from. It was a girl's name."

That girl, Cynthia Harrol, waited tables and worked behind the bar at Charlie's Place, said her aunt, Dora Lee Goings. Possessed of a friendly, outgoing personality, Harrol lived to dance. She made repeated trips to New York City, where she tore up the dance floors at Harlem's top nightclubs. Everyone, Goings said, wanted to dance with Shag.

"She was an erotic dancer and a very sexy lady," recalled Bill Wingate, a young white dancer from Greeleyville, South Carolina who visited Charlie's club to learn new steps. "I knew Shag when she was working behind the bar. I'd say she was about 18 and a naturally talented dancer."

The modern version of the shag was born in the black clubs, agreed Dino Thompson. "The jitterbug is just an offshoot of the lindy hop. When you throw in some really acrobatic stuff and some flamboyant moves from the lindy hop to the triple-time swing, you've got the jitterbug. The blacks took it to another level with their creativeness and flexibility. The shag is the jitterbug on Quaaludes...the jitterbug slowed down."

Harry Driver, an early member of the Shaggers Hall of Fame, said "the jitterbug was done by a bunch of footloose, fancy-free zoot-suiters—both black and white—from Chicago, New York, and all over the South. "I recall seeing a lot of the dancers who would bring the girl in, swing her over their shoulders, and never miss a beat."

However, the jitterbug took on a different meaning for Driver in 1946 when he saw two dancers come together and then do a very smooth, full 360-degree pivotal rotation on the dance floor. "It set me on fire because I saw so much more to the dance than acrobatics." Driver would later perfect the pivot, earning a reputation for his smooth, effortless execution on the dance floor.

Black dancers, said Driver, brought a rhythm that was largely missing with white dancers. "It was the beat—the way they moved. They had a history of African tribal dance. What we learned from the blacks was their rhythm and tempo—the moves. You watch a white person do a syncopated walk and then watch a black do it. The blacks put more into it than you can imagine. We emulated what they did. Everybody claims to have started the shag. Nobody started it. It evolved from one dance to another in a big melting pot."

Charlie Fitzgerald stirred that melting pot. "When I came to Charlie's club, he'd say 'Little Dancin' Harry, come on in, man! You ain't gotta pay!' Charlie was as nice to me as any white guy has ever been on any beach I've ever worked on," Driver remembered. "I loved the guy because he loved me and we both loved dancing."

Love of dance and the welcome atmosphere at Charlie's Place also attracted top white female dancers like Clarice Reavis and Betty Kirkpatrick, both later inducted into the Shaggers Hall of Fame. "It was the music and dance that drove us. It had nothing to do with color," said Kirkpatrick, who frequented the club.

Reavis, later to become a much celebrated female show dancer often called the "Queen of Shag," minced no words in telling me what drew her to black music. "I like the nigger blues, honey. They are so slinky. Low down."

Then, concerned that I had interpreted her description of the music as racist, she grabbed my arm and whispered, "You can call it 'black music' if you want in your book—if it will make people feel better. When I called it 'nigger' music, they called it 'nigger' music. There's more feeling in there."

George Lineberry, also to be named to the Shaggers Hall of Fame, had warm memories of his nights at the Hill—many ending at daylight. "Charlie once told me, 'George, you got a little black in you.' I knew the black music had a better beat. It would turn me on a little more. I was the best at the belly roll and the dirty shag. I could lay it on them."

For young Dino Thompson, the belly roll—or "vertical sex" as it was also called—was the ultimate shag step, a move that had been perfected by dancers at Charlie's Place. In his personal memoir, *Greek Boy*, Thompson offers a description of the belly roll: "Boy pulls girl close enough to touch belly buttons. Then, in rhythm, they throw one leg out together, then the other. Slick and sexy."

The belly roll and a 10-cent song on the jukebox, recalled Thompson, was "your license

for romance. Pick out the girl of your dreams, lead her out to the dance floor, ease her out of a fast sweaty pivot into a tight belly roll and bruise your excited private parts all up against hers. Then, right as the lyrics get down and dirty, burn her down with your Tyrone Power eyes."

As I gathered bits and pieces of Charlie's story from those who knew him in his old neighborhood, it became evident that his unique take-charge persona served to elevate his image within the community. Not only did Charlie Fitzgerald's nightclub patrons see him as exceptionally stylish, but he was a man who commanded their respect.

Chick Hedrick, a Shagger Hall of Fame member who would later own and operate his own nightclub, remembered being impressed with how well Charlie managed his place. "He wore a pistol on his side. Nobody bothered anybody there. He didn't need that gun to keep the peace, though. He wore the gun because he was the boss. He was the law there and everybody knew it."

In fact, it was Fitzgerald's aura of control and gangster style that's still most remembered in his old neighborhood. At night, he often wore striped suits, round-collared white shirts, kitty bow ties, suspenders and Stacy Adams lace-up boots. Sometimes he'd wear hats, usually a round Stetson derby or an Al Capone-style fedora. By day, he'd put on denim overalls with his white shirts. "Not just overalls, but starched, clean overalls. The man was a cat...sharp, slick," recalled Leroy Brunson, who grew up in the Whispering Pines neighborhood and lived directly across the street from the vacant grove of trees that was once Charlie's Place.

Housed in an enclosed wooden structure, the main room of Charlie's club had a long bar, small stage, and rows of standalone wooden picnic tables. The graffiti-covered walls displayed the handwritten names and visit dates of the club's patrons. A jukebox, then called a piccolo, provided the club's soundtrack on nights when there were no live entertainers.

Charlie's Place was part of the "Chitlin' Circuit," the collective name given to series of performance venues for black artists throughout the eastern United States. The circuit, which thrived during the era of racial segregation and the South's "Jim Crow" laws, was the launching pad for many of America's greatest black entertainers, including Ray Charles, Otis Redding and Jimi Hendrix. It included a diverse lineup of clubs, ranging from the smallest Southern dive bars and juke joints to the historic Apollo Theater in Harlem.

The term "chitlin" is from chitterlings, a soul food staple made from boiled or stewed pig intestines. Once popular in the rural South, the food dates back to colonial times when hogs were slaughtered and their body parts fed to slaves.

One of the many dark sides of the Chitlin' Circuit era was that black artists were usually not allowed to eat or rent rooms in the all-white establishments at which they performed. Many top entertainers, like Count Basie and Duke Ellington, were forced to stay at the

homes of friends when performing on the road.

In order to ensure that black artists performing at his club had suitable overnight lodging, Fitzgerald built a small multi-unit motel on the property directly behind the main building. That tiny motel remained standing in 2007, the only remaining remnant of the old nightclub.

Though music and dance were the most visible activities at the club, Charlie provided his paying customers with just about any activity they desired. That included one of his own favorite pastimes—gambling. Inside a private room curtained off from the main club area was a card table. It was home to Charlie's game of choice, Georgia Skin.

Immortalized in song by performers including Jelly Roll Morton, Charlie Poole, and Jerry Garcia, Georgia Skin was, according to Zora Neal Hurston in a 1939 spoken word recording, "the most favorite gambling game among the workers of the South." The easily manipulated game usually resulted in players being swindled of their last dime.

Lyrics from "Georgia Skin" by Memphis Minnie summed it up well:

*When you lose your money, please don't lose your mind
Because each and every gambler gets in hard luck sometime.*

As a teenager, Bill Wingate witnessed Georgia Skin games run by both Charlie Fitzgerald and the man who he said taught Charlie the game, "Cooter" Jennings, the white owner of another area club, "Oasis," on Highway 501.

Wingate, who played jazz piano at Oasis and was known as "Little Billy" at Charlie's club, avoided gambling after eyeing the brutal results to losers in all-night card games. "I saw people throw the deed to their house or the title to their car in the pot," he remembered.

Yet, despite the occasional drunken visitor who crossed the line, Charlie's Place had a reputation as one of most peaceful establishments on the beach. Perhaps a major reason for this tranquility was the general knowledge that under his stylish clothes, Fitzgerald packed weapons.

"He carried a .45 and a .38 all the time. He had holsters that ran around his shoulders," said Brunson. "Charlie was a man of few words. He didn't talk much. But when he told you something, he meant what he said." Then Brunson paused, as if to reconsider his hardball take on Fitzgerald. "Charlie was a bluffer, though. He'd scare a lot of people by pulling a gun out and firing it into the floor or in the air. He'd do this during fights or if he wanted somebody to leave and they didn't want to go."

It was also well known to club goers that Charlie kept a sawed off shotgun and a wooden blackjack under the bar. "Oh yeah, he'd pop someone with the blackjack to get them out of there," recalled Wingate. "And that shotgun, he didn't just aim it at them, he put it in

them."

On one memorable occasion, a young Wingate said he saw Charlie evict a troublesome customer by jamming the shotgun deep into the man's stomach. "He put it right in the guy's gut. That ended the trouble right away."

As a rebellious teenager, Henry Hemingway learned the hard way that Charlie was boss. "Back in those days, I loved to fight. I'd go up to Charlie's Place at night and turn the place out...just raise hell. He'd say 'Boy, you got to quit this! You got to quit this!' One night I went there and stepped on a guy's foot, and he asked 'What did you step on my foot for?' I hit him."

Hemingway said he'll never forget what happened next. "Charlie put his nickel-plated shotgun in my mouth and said, 'Son, hell has overtook you.' I was scared outta my mind and that was the last big fight I ever had."

But it was never Charlie that instigated the trouble. "Charlie was cool, but there was always that little underlying air of danger about him," said Wingate. It was "I won't mess with you, but I'll give you some good advice. Don't mess with me either. I'm gonna live and let live. If you don't, you may not live."

In the same breath, however, Wingate described Charlie Fitzgerald as friendly, courteous, and kind—especially to kids who aspired to music or dance. Later, when he was a little older and wiser, Hemingway would also experience that same side of Charlie.

After spending several years away playing trumpet in his college band, Hemingway returned home to Myrtle Beach unable to afford his own horn. "Charlie bought me a trumpet. 'Here boy,' he said, 'maybe you'll make something out of yourself.' He would do things like that for kids. He was a good man."

Chapter 4 — South Carolina, Circa 1950

During the years following the war, the white beach dancers forged their own unique counterculture along the Carolina coast. Some supported themselves as lifeguards, bingo callers, or dishwashers. Others proudly lived off the continuing flow of young female tourists who vacationed at the beach in the summer.

From the number of fist fights each night at the beach, it seemed the dancers' natural enemies were either local boxing team members or soldiers from nearby military installations. "If we didn't have three to five fights a night at the beach, something was wrong," Bill Wingate remembered. "Some people came to the beach that just loved to fight. Here we were dressed and dancing, and they couldn't understand why we got all the chicks. All the fights were over women."

Leon Williams, from Florence, South Carolina, was both a skilled high school boxer and

one of the best dancers on the beach. Both attention-grabbing activities, he said, created a macho feeling in young males. Williams will never forget the surprise he got on Labor Day, 1948, at Roberts Pavilion when he spontaneously joined a group fight at 2 a.m.

"I picked an older man, about 40, figuring I could easily beat him," Williams recalled. "But he was from Tabor City, where there are some real tough people, and he came at me like a wild man. I didn't know he had a razor in his hand. When I saw blood I figured I was beating the hell out of him. But the truth was he was slicing me up."

Bleeding profusely, Williams needed medical attention. But in those days there were no doctors or hospitals at the beach. He was rushed by a friend, Charlie Wills, to a local veterinarian. Having no pain killing medication, the vet suggested that Williams grab some object and squeeze hard while he cleaned the wound with alcohol and applied the dozens of needed stitches.

"I grabbed Charlie's hand," Williams remembered, wincing as he relived the night. "When the vet poured that alcohol on me, I broke four of Charlie's fingers. It really, really hurt!"

When the young jitterbugs weren't dancing or fighting, most scrambled to make enough money to survive at the beach. By day, Driver and Williams were lifeguards. In the early evening, Williams called bingo games at Roberts Pavilion. Due to his extraordinary dancing ability, he also entered and won many dance competitions, where the prize was usually a \$25 war bond. "You could live a month on \$25 in the 1940s," he said.

Behind many of these jobs, however, was a scam. Williams always knew who would win at bingo because nearly every game was rigged. A generous man, he made sure that his more needy friends were winners. "When you pick a ping pong ball out of that blower that's got B-12 on it, it doesn't mean you have to actually say B-12," Williams explained. He worked with the help of an assistant who roamed the bingo hall collecting money and checking to see who needed certain numbers to win. She'd simply write the needed numbers on a slip of paper and hand it to him.

Cash from arcade games and snow cone concessions (since ice melted fast, it couldn't be inventoried) was easily skimmed. In the era before automated pin setters, bowling was rigged for preferred players by astute pin placement. Bill Wingate created his own little business, sneaking past the lifeguards to sell German-made wire sunglasses to young vacationing women on the beach. Many of the dancers, he said, created a unique hustle to generate cash.

"You've heard of tennis bums? I was a dance bum," Chicken Hicks told me over breakfast in an Ocean Drive coffee shop. "I'd get a little money off the girls. I didn't work much. The girls liked to dance with the beach crowd. I'd put the poor mouth on. Tell them I was a little bit down. I'd get names, and hell—in the wintertime—I'd travel around to these different towns (to visit the girls at home). I just didn't work. I was sorry as hell."

Jo-Jo Putnam, a parttime professional pool player and member of the Shagger Hall of Fame, recalled a beach lifestyle in the 1940s and '50s that he claims put Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation to shame. "We were hip, we were first, and we were real. While the Beats drove a car across the country, we stole the car. We laughed at those phony motherfuckers. We encompassed all walks of life, from bank presidents to bank robbers."

Putnam apparently felt the need to prove to me, even though he was over sixty, that his survival skills were undiminished. Just outside a packed Columbia dance hall, he abruptly stopped our interview, jumped out of his chair, and ran behind me. Within seconds, he was wielding his long switchblade knife firmly against my neck. From that point on, I left his assertions unchallenged.

It wasn't so much the dancers' carefree ways that bothered the powers that be in South Carolina, but their disregard for the state's social rule that the races shouldn't mix. Even in Myrtle Beach, a frontier town always more forgiving in matters of sin than the rest of the state, the jitterbugs constantly flirted with the edge of the law.

"There were always policemen looking to lock somebody up on the beach," remembered Driver. The charge might be dirty dancing, having too much to drink, or swearing in front of an officer of the law. "I got arrested one night for saying 'No damn kidding, I better get a beer before they close.' The cop reached over and grabbed me and said 'You're going to jail.' I asked, 'For what?' He said for using loud and profane language in a place of business. I said all I said was 'damn.' He said 'You're still going to jail, kid.' But before he could book me they had taken up a collection at the Pavilion for my bail. This happened to everybody from time to time. All they wanted was a fine. They only wanted the money."

Money, everyone knew, was the mother's milk of law enforcement in the beach community. Charlie Fitzgerald, as a successful black entrepreneur operating in a segregated town controlled by whites, followed the rule that to survive he had to pay for protection. "I saw Charlie with a cigarette carton—one of those tall boxes that cigarette packs come in—jammed full of money, nothing but bills to go to some law enforcer," said Hemingway. "I can't prove anything today, but law enforcement got mighty rich back in those days."

There were other mysteries about the man everyone knew as Charlie Fitzgerald. Originally from New York City, it appeared that Charlie had a business relationship with "Cooter" Jennings, the white owner of "Oasis," another place where liquor flowed freely, gambling flourished, and business went on long after competing establishments had closed.

"I suspect that Cooter set Charlie up in business," said Wingate, who knew both men. "I also think the police chief protected Charlie by the order of Cooter Jennings."

Even if the eyes of the law looked the other way from his various business enterprises, Fitzgerald's coziness with whites was out of sync with the time and place. Racial tension

in South Carolina began escalating after a federal judge opened the state's Democratic primary to black voters in 1948. It was to the chagrin of many Southern whites that blacks began to assume a few positions of power.

"To the surprise of a great many 'traditional' Southerners, there is a Negro alderman in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Richmond, Virginia has a Negro city councilman and a Negro state representative," reported Bem Price of the Associated Press in June, 1950. "Even here [Columbia, South Carolina], headquarters for the States Rights Democrats, a Negro undertaker was in the race for city council. Another is running for the council in Chattanooga. Two reportedly may enter the race in Nashville."

The political awakening of the South's black citizens was at the core of the racially charged 1950 Democratic U.S. Senate campaign in South Carolina. The incumbent senator, Olin D. Johnston, entered the summer campaign bolstered by the successful attempt of Southern senators to block the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), a federal agency that would investigate racial discrimination in employment practices.

In bombastic Southern oratory, the earthy Johnston—his arms flailing wildly—railed in a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate that it would be "a blow to Christianity" to require equal treatment of whites and blacks in hiring. "A responsibility has been placed on mankind to keep his race pure," argued Johnston. "Mongrelization of the races is the greatest destroyer of civilization and Christianity."

In his deep baritone voice, Johnston decried "persistent agitation, designed to cause all colored people to have such a group consciousness as to carry continuously a chip on their shoulders," and warned his fellow senators "not to mine the road ahead with dynamite that is certain to explode with great destruction when these opposite viewpoints collide."

Back home in South Carolina, anxious to exploit the race issue to the maximum in his campaign for reelection, Johnston stumped the state's forty-six counties in a series of verbal slugging matches with his opponent, incumbent governor Strom Thurmond. It turned into quite a show. In the towns along the campaign trail, the political rallies leading up to the July 11 Democratic primary were considered top-flight summer entertainment. Boisterous crowds of up to four thousand turned out for the carnival-like stump speeches, demanding that the candidates mix it up with an exchange of barbs and insults. For the first time, newly empowered black voters joined the mostly white crowds. It didn't matter to either candidate that the rising black constituency would witness the most openly racist political campaign in the state's modern history.

The two candidates worked hard to outdo each other with caustic race-baiting rhetoric. Thurmond accused Johnston of being soft on racial segregation and promised if elected to the Senate that he "will not sit with folded arms and my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth" when a federal court makes a civil rights ruling that attacks the southern way of life.

"Any man that says I am for mixing of the races is a low-down, contemptible liar," charged Johnston in a speech at Georgetown. In another appearance at Charleston, the senator—loudly booed by blacks in the crowd—shouted to his hosts, "Make those niggers quit!"

Johnston, who darkened his graying hair with black shoe polish, sometimes found moist black streaks running down his forehead in the humid evenings of summer. Thurmond, a health fanatic, became well known for standing on his head on the lawn of the governor's mansion.

At two stops a day in the grueling campaign, the candidates hammered each other on race. Thurmond was accused by Johnston of inviting the governor of the Virgin Islands, a black man, to the South Carolina governor's mansion. Thurmond was irate. "No Negro will ever be a guest at the governor's mansion so long as I am governor," Thurmond shouted to a chorus of boos from blacks at a rally in Columbia.

At a rally in Spartanburg, Thurmond chided Johnston for his tenure on the Senate's District of Columbia Committee. "If he's got so much influence, why does he let the Negroes swim in the same pools with white people?" Thurmond barked.

When they weren't berating each other on race, the candidates were using paid political ads to polarize South Carolina's electorate. In a newspaper ad for his candidacy, Thurmond urged President Truman to forget about "minority blocs" of voters and withdraw his program to break down segregation in the armed forces. He warned that Truman's desegregation plan would "compel Southern white boys to serve, eat, and sleep together with Negro troops and also use the same recreational facilities."

As one looks back on this dark chapter of South Carolina's history, it is fascinating to note that beginning in 1941, nine years before the senate campaign, Strom Thurmond began providing financial support to a daughter he had fathered with a black woman in 1925. The revelation that Thurmond had a daughter of mixed race came after his death at age 100 in June, 2003.

Thurmond's daughter, Essie Mae Washington-Williams, was born October 12, 1925 to a 16-year-old unmarried mother, Carrie Butler, who cleaned the Thurmond family home in Edgefield, South Carolina. At the time, Thurmond, 22, was living at the home while he worked as a school teacher and high school coach.

Thurmond first met his daughter around 1941, after he had been a state senator and circuit judge. From then on, the aspiring politician provided financial support for the woman, who remained a well-kept secret throughout his public career.

Knowing Thurmond's personal history makes his political attack on Paul Robeson, the heroic black singer, actor, and human rights advocate, even more remarkable. Robeson, Thurmond charged, "has been going all over the country demanding that we abolish

segregation, and to show his contempt for our way of life in the South, he married his son off to a white girl."

Robeson, one of the era's most talented, articulate, and politically active public figures, had risked his life to tour small towns throughout the South in 1948 on behalf of the progressive presidential candidate Henry Wallace. Strom Thurmond, as that year's presidential candidate of the segregationist Dixiecrat party, represented everything Robeson abhorred.

In retrospect, Thurmond's family secret made his attack on Robeson and his son staggering in its sheer hypocrisy. But this cynical Southern politician was not about to lower the racial temperature.

Robeson, however, was a black man that Thurmond couldn't intimidate, and the eloquent intellectual knew how to get under the governor's skin. Cheerfully singing his way through the deep South, Robeson attacked the Thurmond-led Dixiecrats as "powerful reactionaries who hope to stamp out the militant struggle of the Negro for complete freedom, equality and civil rights [and who] hope to keep all the wealth for themselves."

Framing the "black belt of the South" as the area that would decide whether the Negro people "survive or perish," Robeson spoke with a level of public candor then unheard of in South Carolina. "For as long as any boy or girl can be denied opportunity in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and Mississippi—so long as one can be lynched as he or she goes to vote—so long as the precious land does not belong to the people of that area (and with the land, the wealth that flows there from in agriculture and in industry)—so long as they do not have the full opportunity to develop and enrich their cultural heritage and their lives—so long are the whole Negro people not free."

To the South's white establishment, those were fighting words.

Chapter 5 — The Ku Klux Klan Attacks

As racial passions flared in the Senate campaign during the summer of 1950, the Ku Klux Klan, whose local members had kept a low profile for many years in Myrtle Beach and surrounding Horry County, sprang back to life. Led by Grand Dragon Thomas L. Hamilton, a Leesville grocer, Klan members in South Carolina were emboldened by the racially explosive political climate.

At a July rally attended by two thousand people in Wagner, South Carolina, Hamilton railed on about a wide assortment of the Klan's enemies, a grab bag that included blacks, Jews, Catholics, communists, congress, newspapers, radio and the United Nations. He prayed in public and sought the help of God in the Klan's crusade against evil. It was about this time that Klan members took it upon themselves to punish those citizens in the community they considered moral deviants.

Beatings and cross burnings became rampant in North and South Carolina. Unmarried couples were awakened in the night and flogged with buggy whips. A cross was carved into the head of a pregnant black woman. Dozens of men and women were severely beaten and left naked miles from their homes.

By midsummer, the Klan turned its attention to Charlie Fitzgerald. To them Fitzgerald was a black man breaking all the rules. He was wealthy, successful, and fearless. "He went where a lot of black people couldn't go," recalled Brunson. "When we went down to the Cozy Corner to order a hot dog, we'd have to stay outside. When Charlie wanted something, he'd just walk right in the door and sit down. When Charlie went to the movies he went right to where the whites sat. He didn't go upstairs with the blacks."

The reason he got away with it, Brunson mused, is that Fitzgerald defied all the stereotypes that whites had of blacks at the time. "He was a real light-skinned man. People looked at him differently because he was dressed nice, he always drove a brand new convertible car, and he'd wear those hats."

With the escalated racial tension of 1950, however, Fitzgerald's luck ran out. "The Klan felt Charlie was having too much influence on the white girls and boys," recalled Wingate. "Of course, we were going to the club because we wanted to go, but the Klan didn't want that."

In an intimidating visit to his club, Klan members demanded that white patrons no longer be admitted. "They told Charlie they didn't want the white kids there listening to music," said Hemingway. "Charlie told them to go to hell. They warned him they were coming back."

It was a warning that Fitzgerald kept to himself. "He had his gun ready, but few others knew about it," said Hemingway. "If Charlie had told the general public about the threat, there would have been a bloodbath. 'Cause everybody would have tried to help him."

At 9 p.m. on Saturday, August 26, 1950, the Klan staged a motorcade through the streets of Myrtle Beach. Scores of nightriders, outfitted in white KKK regalia, cruised the town in dozens of automobiles. The lead car had a fiery cross made up of glowing red electric light bulbs mounted on its left fender. Local police sympathetic to the Klan provided traffic control.

"All of a sudden everything got quiet...an eerie quiet," recalled Harry Driver, who was at the Myrtle Beach Pavilion at the time. "We turned around to see what was happening and we saw all these convertibles coming down Ocean Boulevard. They had on white sheets and cone hats. I get cold chills right now just thinking about it."

Betty Kirkpatrick, the white dancer, watched the caravan—announced by loud blaring sirens—from nearby Highway 17. "It was the most frightening thing I have ever seen," she said. "It's not pleasant to talk about."

Genie Hood, then a high school senior, had joined a boyfriend that night for a last summer fling at the beach. As they drove to Spivey's Beach to "rock" on a beautiful moonlit night, sirens broke the tranquility. Pulling their convertible to the side of the road, the couple were startled to see the passing parade of Klan members.

"There were about fifty cars, some of which could have belonged to only very wealthy people and some of which appeared to be about ready for the junk yard," Hood recalled in a 1952 essay at Converse College. "Each was lighted inside and had in it from four to six men clothed in flowing white robes and tall white hats with red crosses on them. Contrary to all I heard, the men wore no masks."

Lacking the "common sense to turn back when something exciting was happening," Hood wrote that she and her friend pulled their car behind the Klan parade. I was "thinking about all the pleasure I would receive from telling my friends all the exciting details." As the car inched ahead, the glow of "a massive, burning cross" came into view.

"Suddenly, I heard something whiz by a few feet from my head. It was a bullet. I hit the floor of the car. There I stayed until all was fairly safe again," Hood wrote.

A lingering memory for Hood was "the look of sheer terror on those brown faces" observing the KKK parade. "The cries of small children clinging tightly to their mothers" changed the nature of the experience. "All the glamour of the adventure had now worn bare," Hood wrote.

The Klan motorcade snaked slowly through the black neighborhoods of Myrtle Beach. Eventually it reached Carver Street, the automobile-lined roadway used by club-goers for parking during visits to Charlie's Place. As the intimidating convoy passed his crowded establishment, Fitzgerald became enraged. He picked up the phone and called the Myrtle Beach Police Department, warning that if the Klan returned, there would be bloodshed.

Instead of providing the club with protection, police passed Fitzgerald's message directly to Klan members, who took it as a dare. "Ladies and gentlemen, we being white Americans could not ignore that dare from a Negro," Hamilton, an organizer of the parade, recalled later at a Klan gathering.

Just before midnight, about sixty Klansmen in twenty-five vehicles—this time with sirens silenced—made a return trip to Charlie's Place. Fifty-nine-year-old Charlie Fitzgerald waited defiantly for the white-sheeted mob outside the club. He was six feet, three inches tall, 190 pounds, balding, with a thin mustache. In each hand he gripped a pearl-handled pistol.

The arrival of the nightriders was swift and violent. A furious rush of ghost-like men streamed from the cars, immediately striking Fitzgerald in the face and seizing his weapons. Overwhelmed, he was thrown into the trunk of a Klansman's car. There, locked in darkness, he listened helplessly as windows were smashed, tables and chairs overturned, and a volley of more than five hundred rounds of ammunition was sprayed

into the wooden building that held his friends and customers.

"People were screaming, hollering, running everywhere. And the police were nowhere to be seen," said Brunson, who witnessed the attack as an eight-year-old boy.

Suddenly, in the midst of the fury, the music stopped. The club's jukebox—the most powerful symbol of the cultural fusion that had united young blacks and whites in the postwar years—skipped, sputtered, and went silent as it was riddled by a hail of bullets.

"From the way some Negroes left with window panes around their necks and in a hurry, it would seem something was going on inside," Hamilton said sarcastically, as he described the attack to Klan supporters a few weeks later at a public rally.

After wrecking the club, the Klan members—with Charlie Fitzgerald still locked in the trunk of a car—quickly left the scene. Gene Nichols, who operated another nightclub on the Hill, was shot in the foot. Clubgoer Charlie Vance sustained internal injuries from a beating he received at the hands of several Klansmen. Cynthia Harrol, the dancer nicknamed Shag, suffered an injured back after being beaten. Klan members then crushed her fingers by slamming shut the cash register drawer as she tried to secure the club's money.

A Klansman, left behind by his cohorts, lay bleeding on the ground. A bystander drove him to a local hospital. When doctors lifted his blood-soaked sheet, it was revealed that the man was wearing a police uniform. James D. Johnston, age forty-two, an off-duty police officer from neighboring Conway, died within an hour from a .38 caliber bullet wound. The coroner said he was shot in the back. His assailant was unknown.

As Johnston lay dying, his fellow Klan members viciously whipped and beat Fitzgerald on a deserted road near a local sawmill. A Klansman used his knife to slice off a piece of each of Fitzgerald's ears. Bleeding and nearly senseless, Charlie Fitzgerald was left on the road to die.

It was not to be. A defiant Fitzgerald pulled himself up and staggered slowly to Highway 17, the main inland business thoroughfare along the Carolina coast. There he was picked up by a motorist and taken back to his nightclub.

At 3 a.m., Sheriff C. Ernest Sasser drove to the nightclub and arrested Fitzgerald. Rather than take him to a local hospital for medical treatment, Sasser quickly transported Fitzgerald to an undisclosed jail three hours away in Columbia. The sheriff then took a public stance of silence, revealing no information about the arrest—including what Fitzgerald had been charged with and why he was taken so far away from Myrtle Beach.

Newspapers speculated Fitzgerald was taken to the prison hospital at the state penitentiary. However, no public records exist that document an arrest of Fitzgerald.

The attack on Charlie's Place shocked both white and black Myrtle Beach residents,

many of whom were surprised by the viciousness of the Klan's actions. For a significant number of local blacks, it was cause to leave town.

"The aftermath of the terrorizing visit of the Klan to the Hill was the loss of colored employees by hotels and guest houses here at the beach," reported the Myrtle Beach Sun. "Many colored waitresses and maids, fearful of a return visit of the Klan, left town Sunday and Monday and this week a number of hotel operators have reported they were without domestic help of any kind."

After publicly denouncing the violence at the nightclub, Myrtle Beach Mayor J. N. Ramsey offered a tepid explanation for what triggered the attack. "Some of the conditions that probably caused the Klan to parade through this particular area of Myrtle Beach, namely white people patronizing colored business establishments or visiting in colored sections for amusement purposes, are not approved by the Southern people generally, but they are absolutely legal," the mayor said in a written statement after the shooting.

Five days later, Sheriff Sasser made a live radio address that was carried by stations in Myrtle Beach and Conway. In it he cleared Charlie Fitzgerald, who was still in jail, of committing any crime related to the attack and said he found no evidence that any Negro had fired a gun in the fracas.

Sasser, as had other law enforcement officers, speculated that James Johnston, the Conway policeman, was shot in the back and killed by a fellow Klan member. In his radio address, the sheriff placed full blame on Klansmen "who left him on the ground to die." Earlier, the Associated Press quoted an unidentified state law enforcement official who contended Johnston was shot and killed "in a bout with robed and masked men." No one speculated as to why the Klan would kill its own man.

The sheriff denied a widespread rumor that Charlie's Place had been attacked because Fitzgerald "was keeping a white woman for immoral purposes." He did suggest, however, that the young white dancers who frequented the nightclub had influenced the Klan's actions. "To my knowledge, some white men and women do go to this place on special occasions to hear the orchestra and watch the colored people dance," the sheriff said. "I have on many occasions told them it was not a good policy."

The sheriff ended his address by attempting to convey the extremist nature of the Klan's activities while acknowledging that the organization still had strong community support. Sasser told listeners that the Myrtle Beach radio station on which he spoke had been warned that if it carried any information about the Klan it would be blown up. But then he quickly added: "I happen to know a few men that are members. Some are from good families. They were led into this unfortunate thing with no intention of committing a crime."

Just before Sasser went on the air, his department began arresting a handful of Klan members for the attack on Fitzgerald's nightclub. Grand Dragon Hamilton was the first—picked up as he was driving alone to the nearby town of Florence. He was quickly

released on \$5,000 bond.

As the night wore on, others were arrested. R. L. Sims Jr., a beer truck driver, was rustled from his bed in the middle of the night. Dr. A. J. Gore, a Conway optician; Clyde Creel, a service station operator; and June Cartrette, a farmer, joined the list. By the following day, ten Klansmen were under arrest and lawmen said they were looking for one hundred more, though that number was never apprehended. All those arrested were charged with conspiracy to incite mob violence.

Meanwhile, Charlie Fitzgerald—charged with no crime—remained in an unknown jail.

Why? Perhaps to protect him from attack by Klan members working in law enforcement, speculated Henry Hemingway with a quiet chuckle. "You see, Sasser and Charlie were actually good friends. The general feeling was that Charlie was making a lot of money for Sasser. But there were certain things with Sasser being white that he couldn't do or say. On the inside, though, he would help Charlie."

About two weeks after the attack, Fitzgerald was released from jail under a \$300 bond as a material witness and promptly arrested again during a taxi ride in Columbia. The charge was possession of a weapon and an obscene motion picture. He was fined \$76 and released.

In his only known media interview, given after the proceeding in city recorder's court, Fitzgerald told a reporter he had been holding an automatic pistol on the seat next to him for protection. "I know it was against the law to have that gun, but it was right in my conscience because my life has been threatened and I am still in danger." The film, Fitzgerald added, was collateral for a three-dollar loan he had made to a friend who was short of cash.

The club owner confirmed he had been held in three jails since the attack, but wouldn't say where. His mood was conciliatory, and he said he had been treated well while in custody. He praised Sasser, saying "I've never known a straighter white man in my life."

In a parting comment, though, Fitzgerald displayed the street smarts that had made him a survivor. "I'm a free man—and I'm not a free man," he declared. "I don't know who is or who isn't a member of the Klan."

Chapter 6 — The Aftermath

After the Klan arrests, Grand Dragon Hamilton began campaigning for public sympathy. "When a Negro fires at a Klansman, we will fire back," he said. "Whenever a Negro tells me to stay away, there'll be trouble." The Klan leader also vigorously denied that Officer Johnston had been killed by a Klan member at the shootout.

The emboldened Klan organization in the Carolinas broke with tradition and did not

mask their faces in parades and demonstrations. "The traditional Klan robe includes the hood that covers the face, but no member of this organization whatsoever covers his face," Hamilton said. The reason, he explained, is that the Carolina area Klan members are "white gentlemen" who are neither afraid nor ashamed to be recognized in their regalia.

Hamilton's boast came from a genuine confidence that the Ku Klux Klan enjoyed significant support in the white beach community. After all, Klan rhetoric had carefully targeted the moral sensibilities of the region's conservative Baptist churchgoers. Race was a red-hot political issue, and President Truman's attempts to bring racial reforms to government and private institutions had been unpopular throughout the South. It was perhaps no coincidence that just after the sheriff had made his well-publicized Klan arrests, the Broadway Theater in downtown Myrtle Beach offered the movie *Masked Raiders* to its patrons.

On October 5, the Horry County grand jury supported the sentiments of many of the area's white residents. Even with substantial proof of their involvement, five Klan members, including Hamilton, were cleared of all charges relating to the attack on Charlie Fitzgerald and his nightclub. The white grand jurors refused to indict the men on charges of conspiracy to commit mob violence. A strong plea to the grand jurors by Judge E. H. Henderson that "no group or organization, by whatever name or style, has the right to set at naught the laws of our state" fell on deaf ears.

All other Klansmen charged in the case had been released after an earlier preliminary hearing found no probable cause for their arrest warrants. A coroner's jury ruled that unknown persons caused Officer Johnston's death. His murder was never solved.

Two of the beach community's local newspapers, the *Myrtle Beach News* and the *Horry Herald*, had little to say about the release of the Klan members. Neither felt it significant enough to report the grand jury's action on their front page.

Within weeks of the shooting, the U.S. Attorney General directed the FBI to investigate the Klan attack. However, M. W. McFarlin, special agent in charge of the FBI's Savannah, Georgia office at the time, permanently stonewalled the press, refusing to discuss what he called "the Fitzgerald case." There is no evidence an investigation ever took place.

In November, a feisty Hamilton—wearing a bright green cloak—spoke from the back of a truck to a crowd of eight thousand gathered at a Klan rally in a tobacco field near Myrtle Beach. Backed by a twenty-foot-high flaming cross and flanked by a handful of men and women wearing red Klan uniforms, the Grand Dragon retaliated against Sheriff Sasser for his arrest.

"I have affidavits showing that some people are having to pay law enforcement officers for the privilege of doing business," Hamilton bellowed to the crowd. On his lectern, an American flag was draped over a Bible. At his feet, more than a hundred white-sheeted

men stood guard, acting as a buffer from the assembled masses.

To the Klan's accusations of graft, Sasser responded to the press after the rally: "Enemies stop at nothing; they say I accept graft. Well, I have one thousand dollars to give to anyone who can prove from reliable information that I ever took a dishonest dollar."

The proof never came, but it didn't matter. Sasser's arrests of Klan members eventually cost him his job. In 1952, the Klan flexed its political muscle and worked to defeat the sheriff in his bid for re-election. The loss was overwhelming, with Sasser carrying only four precincts in the entire county. One of those he did carry was the "Race Path" precinct that included the Hill area of Myrtle Beach. The precinct's black residents voted 343 to 6 for Sasser's re-election.

The man who beat the sheriff, John T. Henry, was sympathetic to the Klan and accused of being a member. Although his Klan connection was never proven, Henry's police force was later charged with violating the civil rights of blacks.

Olin D. Johnston was re-elected to the United States Senate in 1950, beating Strom Thurmond for the Democratic nomination in the primary. He served until his death in 1965. Thurmond got another chance to run for a Senate seat and was elected as a write-in candidate in 1954. He retired from public office in January, 2003, after setting a record as the oldest and longest-serving member of the U.S. Senate. Thurmond died at age 100 on June 26, 2003.

"No one can say with certainty that the recent political campaign in South Carolina contributed to the outbreak of violence there," wrote John Lofton of the attack on Charlie's Place in the September 5, 1950 issue of the Arkansas Gazette. "But it was obvious that both candidates in the United States senatorial contest were inflaming racial antagonism."

Charlie Fitzgerald eventually recovered from his injuries and returned to his nightclub. Some whites still came to hear the music, but many were then afraid to visit the Hill. The days of innocence were over. "I never went back there after that because I knew it would not be safe," Harry Driver lamented. "They would hate me because I was white, even though I had nothing to do with it."

Young Dino Thompson is one who did return, making the mistake one night of allowing Fitzgerald to catch him staring at his now legendary ears, whose healed scars were still visible. "I thought the Klan had put Ks in his ears and I would kinda peek at them," remembered Thompson. "Charlie saw me staring and said 'you trying to look at my ears, boy.' I said 'no sir, no sir.'"

Hemingway said that after the Klan attack Fitzgerald was "basically the same guy, but a little meaner."

What Hemingway and others also remember is that while all the Klan members went

free, Fitzgerald ended up going back to jail, even though I could find no court records or press clippings to document it or explain why. "Charlie went back to jail in less than ninety days for something related to the shooting," Hemingway said. Though he doesn't remember the charge, Hemingway estimated Fitzgerald remained in jail for a year or more. This was confirmed by Leroy Brunson; his brother, Henry; and Elijah "Kidnapper" Goings, all close friends of Fitzgerald at the time.

"They put Charlie in prison," said Leroy Brunson. "They were trying to blame him for shooting the Klansman even though they never found any evidence." A now-deceased Hill resident, said Brunson, was beaten by police and threatened with drowning in an attempt to get him to implicate Fitzgerald in the killing. The man refused.

"More or less, they wanted to get Charlie out of the way," said Hemingway of the white establishment that ran South Carolina at the time. "If they had left him alone, Charlie would have been one of the first real rich black men ever to come out of Myrtle Beach."

The lack of records documenting Fitzgerald's return to jail doesn't surprise Hemingway, who in 1955 joined the police force as Myrtle Beach's first black officer. "Back then, black people had no voice whatsoever. None. You'd be surprised how many things would come down from the state to a little place like Myrtle Beach in those days. After thirty-two years that I have as a policeman, I've seen so many crooked things in law enforcement it makes me puke."

Hemingway remained Charlie's friend until the club owner's death from cancer on July 4, 1955. "It was the only time I ever saw him break down—he was in his bed sick—and I started praying for him," said Hemingway. "I remember part of the prayer was 'God, if it's your will that Charlie must leave us, prepare his soul. We are not worried about how long he stays here, but where he goes hereafter.' At that point, Charlie broke down. He died a little after that."

Though Charlie Fitzgerald's contributions are unknown to the thousands of white shaggers who keep the dance alive more than a half century later, the influence of his club—and the crossover of black music to a white audience—are repeatedly cited by the pioneers credited with inventing South Carolina's state dance.

"Black music influenced us from the start, and the only good place to hear it was on the Hill," said Billy Jeffers, who died in 2005. A popular jitterbug and Shagger Hall of Fame member, Jeffers began working at the Carolina beaches in the summer of 1938. "We learned to smooth it out and do more with just a little bit of music. Being there made you think you were at the best place in the world."

Leon Williams credits blacks at Charlie's Place and other clubs with helping white dancers feel the music. "Colored people felt the music and that's why they can dance. When they feel the music, you can't teach them to count 1, 2, 3, 4. If they feel like wiggling when they feel the music, that's what is called 'dirty.' But it was never our intent to create a dirty dance. And it wasn't the colored people's intent either. They did the same

thing in church. You might think they are getting with it, but they are just feeling the music."

Added Harry Driver: "We had integration twenty-five years before Martin Luther King [Jr.] came on the scene. We were totally integrated because the blacks and whites had nothing in our minds that made us think we were different. We loved music, we loved dancing, and that was the common bond between us."

Chapter 7 — Fast-Forward a Half Century

In late September, 1998, the beachside streets of Ocean Drive in North Myrtle Beach are packed with more than twelve thousand middle-aged white shaggers as they barhop between dance clubs such as Fat Harold's, Ducks, Pirate's Cove, the Barrel, the Spanish Galleon, the Boulevard Grill and the Ocean Drive Pavilion. This ten-day festival of shag is the annual Fall Migration of the Society of Stranders (SOS). (A similar annual spring festival is called the Spring Safari.)

Shagging is big business in Ocean Drive, a small resort community about twenty miles north of where Charlie Fitzgerald's club once stood. On Main Street, Judy's House of Oldies sells hard-to-find beach music records and instructional shag videos, while Beach Memories caters to coastal nostalgia with lithographs, clothing, coffee mugs and bric-a-brac that commemorate legendary South Carolina beach hangouts like The Pad and Roberts Pavilion. Storefront windows display a mountain of shagging kitsch, from T-shirts, cheap watches, and beer bottle covers to specialty ship cruises organized for shag dancers.

The best of the white beach dancers are memorialized in a Hollywood-style Walk of Fame along Ocean Drive's sidewalks. The patrons of Charlie's Place are all there, now credited with inventing South Carolina's state dance. A short walk away is the Shaggers Hall of Fame at the Ocean Drive Beach and Golf Resort.

Lining the walls of Fat Harold's are letters and momentos of the dance greats. Among them is an iconic image of the era—a seductive pose by Clarice Reavis, among the first inductees, along with Leon Williams, Harry Driver and Billy Jeffers, in the Shaggers Hall of Fame.

Reavis, naked and partially covered only by a small mink stole, is seated on a towel. It was a simple photograph, taken on a whim, but it became a powerful pin-up coveted by American soldiers at the end of World War II.

"She was voluptuous and beautiful and completely alluring, and a bunch of 17 and 18-year-olds fell in love with her," writer Bo Bryan said of Reavis's allure. "She was strong as train smoke. You take a deep breath, she'd knock you out."

The photo was made one night in 1945 when Reavis and a female friend were clowning

at her home. While in the bathroom, Reavis said she grabbed the small mink "and just draped it around me...not even fixing it...but it just happened to cover everything. My friend backed out of the bathroom with the camera just so she could get all of me in the picture."

In the area surrounding Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, Reavis said she gave away thousands of the photos to soldiers who had seen it at various USOs and wanted one for themselves. "Those were just young boys," she said. "I was going to send one to my husband, but then the thing (the war) ended in 1945 and I didn't get around to sending it."

Though the music played by the elite group of disc jockeys in these thriving beach clubs is still mostly R&B, there's rarely a black face to be found among the affluent group of mostly fifty-something couples who keep the shag alive. On the Carolina coast, the unique biracial collaboration that created the dance a half century ago has all but vanished. These days the aging white dancers find their beach excursions—with all the boozing and social camaraderie—a pipeline to their youth and a release from the pressures of the modern world.

"For many people this is an outlet. It's like a drug. They get high on the music—the energy of the show," said General Johnson, a veteran black singer-songwriter whose group, Chairman of the Board, has long been a staple of the Carolina beach music scene.

Another enduring beach music act on the Southern club circuit is Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs, whose recording of "Stay" has long been a beach classic. "Shaggers want the nitty-gritty real thing," said Williams, who is black, noting that he grew up with his white audience, most of whom are now in their forties and fifties.

"The beginning of beach music was predominantly rhythm and blues," said Williams, "but today if you say to a young black man, 'come on, let's go and listen to a beach music show,' he'll say 'I ain't going to that white music.' The average black kid in his twenties or thirties doesn't know what this is all about. They see a beach music festival and think it's all white music. It's strange. They haven't studied the history of their music and the guys who recorded it enough to know what beach music is all about. They just don't know any better."

Clifford Curry began his professional career as an R&B artist in the mid-1950s as a member of the Echos, a group that played the Chitin' Circuit with such notable artists as Otis Redding, B.B. King, Wilson Pickett, Bobby Bland, Junior Parker, and Jimmy McCracklin. But it was 1967, when his song, "She Shot a Hole in My Soul," took off along the Eastern coast of the United States, that Curry became a star on the Carolina beach music circuit.

Based in Nashville, Clifford Curry has remained a mainstay on the Carolina beaches for four decades by giving his young, mostly white audiences exactly what they want. That is not, he emphasizes, the kind of black R&B music he performed in his early days for the jitterbugs.

"The older music was more soulful," he recalled. "My aunts and uncles just danced. It just came to them naturally." Today, Curry said, shaggers—many of whom have taken dance lessons or have studied instructional videos—want upbeat, positive "shuffle songs" they can dance to.

"Today, if you don't play a shuffle song, they are not going to dance. It has got to have that beat. Dancibility is more important than lyrics." For this reason, Curry now writes songs specifically for the shaggers. "I can write them in my head and visualize them dancing to it. I'm not a great dancer but we try them out in the studio before recording to make sure it's the right tempo for dancing."

Curry is very aware that he is a black man performing for a mostly white audience. "I don't see too many of my people dancing like this. I never understood why, but they've forgotten what got us here in the first place. The jitterbug and R&B is a forgotten thing with us because of rap. I've been blessed to be where I am, but—yes—it frustrates me."

Leroy Brunson, a lifelong dancer, has long avoided the white shagging scene at nearby Ocean Drive. "I watch the shaggers now on TV and sometimes I have to laugh," he said. "They are doing this shag and beach music now, but we invented it. They just kind of took it away. They just claimed it."

If the blacks lost part of their culture, Southern whites gained something precious from their brief creative fling with race music and dirty dancing in the 1940s and '50s. "Beach music and shagging was a celebration of life that was new for Caucasians," said John Hook. "It was an emulation of what white people thought they were seeing in the black community. Beach music isn't the music or the dance or the attitude, it's all of those married together and what it has become over time. Lots of people listen to this music today and don't know why they like it. They just know that something was missing in their life."

See pictures of the key characters in Charlie's Place at:
http://www.beachamjournal.com/photos/charlies_place/

Acknowledgements

The seed for "Charlie's Place" was planted during a set break for the band at a New Year's Eve party in a hotel in Greenville, South Carolina. As no more than an old college-days fan, I casually approached one of the members of the Tams, a popular Carolina "beach music" group playing that night. I was invited to meet the other band members in their makeshift dressing room. This led to a second visit a few days later in Atlanta, the home base of the band. As I discovered quickly, the Tams were as much fun offstage as on. I was regaled with tales of the road—getting an earful about deadbeat nightclub owners, swindled song writers and a culinary guide to who makes the best fried chicken in the South.

That day with the Tams steered me to a reunion with my old boss at WCOS, the Columbia radio station where I worked during my college years. Woody Windham, known to his radio listeners as “Woody with the Goodies,” was one of those people who could have challenged Dick Clark as a music-loving “teenager” who never grew up. I told Woody I was interested in writing something about Carolina beach music and its companion dance, the shag. Woody gave me a list of names that would set me on my journey to Charlie's Place. I thank him for his help.

I “discovered” the story of the legendary Myrtle Beach nightclub only after hearing Charlie's name repeatedly mentioned in recorded interviews by old-timers credited with inventing what was to become South Carolina’s official state dance. Long talks with legendary Shagger Hall of Fame dancers Harry Driver and “Big George” Lineberry opened my eyes to the remarkable creative collaboration that had occurred between blacks and whites in Charlie’s long-forgotten club.

In addition to Driver and Lineberry, I owe a big debt to the pioneering dancers who told me their personal stories: Billy Jeffers, Leon Williams, Clarice Reavis, Jean Ferguson, Chick Hedrick, Betty Kirkpatrick, Jo-Jo Putnam and Chicken Hicks.

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Bio of the Author

FRANK BEACHAM is a New York City-based independent writer, director and producer who works in print, radio, television, film, theatre and the Internet.

A former staff reporter for United Press International, the Miami Herald, Gannett Newspapers and Post-Newsweek, Beacham's articles and stories have appeared in dozens of magazines and newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times, Washington Post and Village Voice. "Charlie's Place" is being developed into a feature film.

Beacham has written three non-fiction books on video for the American Society of Cinematographers, and has been a long running columnist on television and the Internet for TV Technology magazine. He is a contributor to *Toward the Meeting of the Waters*, a new anthology on the civil rights movement published by the University of South Carolina Press.

Beacham was executive producer of Tim Robbins' Touchstone feature film, *Cradle Will Rock*, which was released nationally in 1999 and is currently available on home video.

Beacham wrote and directed the American Public Radio drama, *The Orangeburg Massacre*, starring David Carradine, Blair Underwood and James Whitmore. It won the 1991 Gold Medal for Best History and the Silver Medal for Best Social Issues programs in international radio competition among 26 nations at the New York Festivals.

Beacham produced, with the late Richard Wilson, the six-hour retrospective, *Theatre of the Imagination: Radio Stories by Orson Welles & the Mercury Theatre* and wrote, directed and produced the documentary, *The Mercury Company Remembers* with Leonard Maltin. Previously, he has written for *Riverwalk: Live From the Landing*, a weekly jazz broadcast from American Public Radio.

During the 1970s and 80s, Beacham was owner of Television Matrix, a film/TV production company that developed and produced a wide range of programming for broadcast, cable, syndication and home video markets. The company also supplied video news crews and freelance news reporting teams to the networks and other broadcasters.

Beacham's clients included ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, BBC, NHK, Canadian Broadcasting and many individual television stations. He provided all west coast production and post-production services for *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *The Start of Something Big* with Steve Allen and the Emmy award-winning *Mr. Previn Comes to Town*. His company also provided southeast production services for NBC's *TODAY* Show and Paramount's *Entertainment Tonight*.

In 1985, he teamed with Orson Welles over a six-month period to develop a one-man television special. *Orson Welles Solo* was canceled after Mr. Welles died on the day production was set to begin. Beacham's other credits include *A Tribute to John Huston*, hosted by Jack Nicholson and Richard Brooks; *Ronald Neame on the Director*; *Hollywood Chronicles: The Great Movie Clowns*, hosted by Jackie Cooper; *Private*

Lives, Public People, and A Day in the Life of Hawaii, directed by Gordon Parks.

As a writer/reporter, Beacham was a member of a joint investigative reporting team for New York Times/Post-Newsweek/Miami Herald that spent one year investigating U.S. Sen. Edward Gurney (R-Florida). Gurney was indicted and left office. At UPI, he was assigned to cover the civil rights movement in Mississippi in early 1970s. He was a documentary cameraman at 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. He provided multi-station radio coverage of flights of Apollo 11 and 13 from the Kennedy Space Center.

In 1977, Beacham provided television coverage of the Begin-Sadat peace talks in Egypt and President Carter's 1978 trip to France for ABC News. He worked for CBS News in Nicaragua during 1979 when Sandinista guerrillas overthrew President Anastasio Somoza. He covered the exile of Shah of Iran in Panama for NBC News. He also provided television coverage of President Reagan's 1982 European trip to 25 television stations (working in five countries in ten days).

Frank Beacham has a B.A. in Journalism, 1969, from the University of South Carolina. He did post-graduate studies at UCLA, the University of Southern California, and the American Film Institute.

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