

HOME COURT

A native son of Wilmington, North Carolina, resurrects the “black country club” that helped launch the careers of Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe, as well as his own

BY SHAUN ASSAEL

Lendward Simpson’s first tennis lesson came as a five-year-old, leaning out the window of his bedroom in Wilmington, North Carolina, where he heard the calibrated contact—crisp and quick—of ball and racquet. It was an improbably inimitable listening post for a kindergartner in 1953. The brick house his parents had recently built was on a plot of land purchased from a neighboring doctor, who lived in a two-story bungalow with a spacious backyard that featured a pool, a greenhouse, and most astonishingly, a clay tennis court. All but one of Wilmington’s parks were whites-only and the tennis courts at the “colored” park were also restricted to white players, so the home court was the only one in town available to African Americans (and even then, only to a privileged few).

Worried that he might become a bother to the doctor, his parents told him to stay on his side of the hedges that separated them. Even when a neighbor who left the court dressed all in white offered to show him inside, he was too nervous to say yes. But bursting with curiosity, Lenny finally snuck through the hedges to discover who was making the sound he heard outside his window. “There was this tall, long girl on the court,” he says now, “beating up on all these men.” It was the tennis great Althea Gibson.

Two years earlier, Gibson had become the first black athlete to play at Wimbledon, a big step in the journey that started when she took a train from Harlem to live with the doctor’s family in Wilmington in 1946, at the age of nineteen. Like Lenny, she was enveloped by what

was known as the “black country club”—a place where a butler served cocktails promptly at five and anyone who wanted to take a dip in the pool could use a visitor’s locker. But the main attraction was the court.

Lenny did all he could to hang around it over the next couple of years, cleaning lines, fetching balls, brushing the clay to maintain a smooth surface. Eventually, after cocktail hour ended and the guests went home, Gibson set him in front of a backboard and showed him how to rotate his back foot and drive the ball. She even imparted a few life lessons, foremost among them, he remembers now: “Every time you come to this gate, you better be ready to go.”

Hubert A. Eaton, the doctor, on the other hand, was an imperious figure who didn’t seem to cotton much to the boy. That is, until he finally announced, “Maybe it’s time,” and waved Lenny onto his court. By then, the boy had the hunger, too. He’d spent two years diving for every ball that the wall fired back and was desperate to test his tenacity against a real person. Unless he chose to battle the status quo as well as an opponent, he was likely to compete only at Eaton’s house; that same year, North Carolina’s General Assembly showed little appetite for race mixing, as evidenced by a resolution that opposed racial integration in the state’s public schools. Lenny understood that if he tried to force his way onto the whites-only public courts, he would have been called “every name in the game, and I didn’t want to go through the hassle. There would have been issues,” he says now, at the age of seventy. “I would



“Self-Portrait as the black Jimmy Connors in the finals of the New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club Summer Tennis Tournament” (2008), by Rashid Johnson. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

BEDTIME SONGS

BY KIESE LAYMON

It's something past midnight in Oxford, Mississippi, and I'm on my way home. Every night I throw on my hoodie, get in my truck, and drive around Lafayette County listening to New York love songs in Mississippi. Tonight, I drove to the Krogers parking lot, the recycling place on Molly Barr, the post office, and I circled the town square four times before heading toward Batesville. I didn't want any food. Didn't have anything to recycle. Wasn't expecting any mail. I still don't drink. I decided to drive because I didn't want to be home. I didn't want to be home because I didn't want to be alone, quiet, still. I'm thankful to have a physical and spiritual place to call home in Mississippi, but there's a loneliness I didn't anticipate when I moved back after living in Poughkeepsie, New York, for fifteen years.

Tonight I need to hear regret. Regret transports me to New York. I'm in Northern Mississippi, but I'm really turning onto Raymond Avenue from Hooker Avenue listening to Kanye's "Spaceship." I'm on I-84 veering onto the Taconic waiting for that part in "Givin Em What They Love," where Prince and Janelle Monáe deftly invent and neglect harmony. I'm sitting in a parking lot behind Jewett House at Vassar College, where I used to teach, listening to J-Live tell me that his art "is destined to be the greatest story ever missed so it's meant to be for whoever's hearing this." I'm listening to "Wax Paper" for the thousandth time, hoping to find one more Easter egg.

And then I'm heading back down Highway 6. Meshell Ndegeocello's version of Force MD's "Tender Love" comes on my raggedy pink iPod. The wandering harmonica, the breathy texture of Ndegeocello's voice, surrender seared in the space between "here" and "I." Surrender is how Beyoncé makes "that I'm not at ease" feel so perfectly out of pocket in "Pray You Catch Me." It's what allows Cassandra Wilson to take her time building syllables and empty space and syllables to "suitcase of memories" in her version of "Time after Time." None of these songs are technically Mississippi songs, but they're

all Mississippi songs to me. I really heard them for the first time while living and driving alone in Mississippi these past two years.

I'm too old for bedtime stories, too old to be writing words like these, maybe too old for love songs. But for me, bedtime songs, my body, and my truck are physical links between New York and Mississippi, between a home I was given and a home I made. The music and the movement of my body and the safety of my truck are what I need to make myself sleep and want to wake up. Tonight, for the first time in my life, they remind me that I want to be a tender person much more than I want to be a tender artist. When I pull into my driveway, I want to believe I could have gotten here without all this loneliness, without being forty-four and childless, without all this regretful bedtime

music and movement in Mississippi.

I could not.

That sentence, or really that sentiment, like the last verse of KRIT's "Drinking Sessions," which I hear sitting in the driveway, is equal parts shameful and revelatory. Like KRIT, I do not understand the difference between extreme sadness and depression, between being lonely

and feeling alone, between being afraid to fly and wanting to float, between being good and breathing healthy, between my mama's voice and my daddy's silence, between folks I almost know and friends whose laughs I can imitate.

And most nights, bedtime music is the only thing that gets me close to accepting that lack of understanding. Bedtime music is neither beginning nor end. It's all middle, all terrifying, and all familiar. Maybe that's what home will be until the day I dare to find home in a place not given to me out of economic necessity or bequeathed to me from birth. I think I am ready for that home. I think I am ready to surrender to a soundtrack I've never heard, a soundtrack I only imagine. But right now, I think I am ready to turn this bedtime music off, walk into my house, wash my hands, pray for Grandmama's continued health, and try again tomorrow.

Sometimes bedtime songs, like homes, are sad. 🌧️



have been hurt. And who knows what would have happened after that?"

The "black country club," which occasionally lured white players, allowed him to discover his talent. With a high-kicking slice serve that traveled at more than a hundred miles per hour, he traveled from Chattanooga to Connecticut, turning into the top junior of a predominately black league called the American Tennis Association. This helped him receive a scholarship to attend leafy prep schools in Pennsylvania and Connecticut and, after he advanced past the first round of the 1964 U.S. National Championships in a walk-over, become the youngest player ever to enter the second round, at fifteen. His opponent that year was Arthur Ashe, who was five years older and had been his mentor and protector in the ATA. The two lived through countless Green Book nights, when they struggled to find accommodations in the South and ended up staying in segregated YMCAs. They also endured other humiliations, like driving all night to reach a tournament for which they'd qualified, only to be asked to leave before they set foot in the club. At the U.S. Championships, Lenny considered it more than suspicious when, out of one hundred twenty-eight players, the only two black ones were placed in the same four-player first-round group.

"Why was that?" he asks, echoing a complaint commonly voiced by African Americans of the era. "They wanted me out of the tournament, that's why. They had to deal with Ashe. They had no choice. But they didn't want another black face."

Ashe captured that round, and by 1968, when he won the U.S. Open, he was drawing comparisons to Muhammad Ali for his activism. Lenny, meanwhile, accepted an academic and athletic scholarship to East Tennessee State, where he coached the team and won four ATA mixed-doubles titles. "I've seen all the greats," says his mixed-doubles partner, Bonnie Logan. "None of them have the kind of spring movement in their legs that Lendward had—and that includes Roger Federer. He was just so quick to the net."

But after turning pro and getting married, Lenny struggled to recreate the feeling that, as Logan puts it, "we had something to prove by representing our race at the top." As he recalls those years, Simpson moves his still-formidable frame forward to say, "The seventies were a different time for me. The door had been kicked open and I could play in tournaments. But I'd lost something."

Lenny moved his family to Detroit, where he became the first African American invited into World Team Tennis, a carnival-like league in which various lineups of singles, doubles, and mixed battled over a total of five sets. Yet in the era of baseliners like Jimmy Connors and Bjorn Borg, Lenny's serve-and-volley game never got him higher than forty-seventh in the rankings. He still showed up to tournaments, trying to find a spark, and even qualified for Wimbledon. But once oversized steel frames replaced wooden racquets, big topspin became so common that he found his old-school rush-the-net game literally getting passed by. In 1980, after Ashe had open heart surgery and decided to retire, Lenny, then a thirty-two-year-old journeyman, decided to do the same.

Encouraged by his fond memories from college in the Tennessee mountains, he'd already chosen to settle in Knoxville with his wife, Joanne, and two daughters. Asked why he didn't consider Wilmington, he wraps his rumbling bass voice around every word of this answer: "Because of its history. And because there was no place for advancement. There was nothing that made it attractive to move back. Certainly, not for my family."



That history was on display last November at Wilmington's Cape Fear Museum during a one-hundred-twentieth-anniversary commemoration of what is widely regarded as the only coup to unfold on American soil.

During the election of 1898, vigilantes poured into the city by train, steamboat, horseback—any way they could—with the aim of ousting an elected government that openly promoted the interests of the city's black middle class. Their red shirts identified them as supporters of the White Government Union, a supremacist group founded by a one-eyed senator from South Carolina named Benjamin "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman. At the museum, LeRae Umfleet, a scholar for North Carolina's Office of Archives and History, recounted how the Red Shirts aimed cannons at black churches to frighten parishioners into running out so they would "get shot in the back trying to save their families." She also showed a photo of a parcel where as many as two dozen African Americans were slaughtered, noting the absence of any marker. "We don't do a good enough job commemorating 1898," Umfleet said.

A chorus of "Amen" welled up from the crowd.

When I asked Lenny how his parents, both schoolteachers, explained the coup to him, his answer surprised me. "They never talked about it," he said. When I asked if he thought they were shielding him, he threw his head back to laugh. "My parents didn't shield me from a dad-gum thing. I don't think they didn't want me to know about it or thought I'd be hurt. Knowing my parents, I think they wanted me to live in the future, not in the past."

The brick ranch they put up in 1948 was part of a postwar building boom—a dozen blocks and a world away from Wilmington's neoclassical mansions. But for Hubert Eaton, the doctor who sold them the land, the spirit of the coup was still very much tangled up in the Spanish moss. He'd gone to medical school at the University of Michigan because North Carolina's schools were segregated, then come back home to marry the daughter of a wealthy doctor and launch his own practice, which thrived. But his very prosperity was evidence of how much further there was to go. He was the first African-American physician to have a darkroom, but only because the private hospital in town would not develop X-rays from a black doctor. Still, Eaton had his own ideas about how to create change, and they stemmed from his activism in the American Tennis Association.

The ATA had developed in reaction to the racial exclusionism of the sport's national governing body, the United States Lawn Tennis Association. The ATA's first championship was held in Baltimore in 1917, and before long it was encouraging clubs that admitted blacks to open across the South—from Louisville to Tuskegee. In 1939, roughly one hundred fifty clubs affiliated with the ATA included a total of twenty-eight thousand African-American members, most prominently at the Cosmopolitan Club in Harlem and the Tennis Cub of Richmond (which later produced Ashe).

The era also gave rise to a little-remembered sub-league known as the "doctor's circuit" that was spearheaded by a Lynchburg, Virginia, physician named Robert Johnson. His backyard came to be known as Dr. J's Academy because it drew hopefuls from across the South—and that included Eaton, who rose through the ATA after capturing the 1936 Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association singles title. In 1946, the ramrod-straight

thirty-year-old with a pencil-thin mustache took his own place on the doctor's circuit when he bought a house on Orange Street in Wilmington and covered his backyard with clay.

A few months after his purchase, Eaton traveled with Johnson to the ATA's national championship in Ohio, which was being played at the country's oldest private black college, Wilberforce University. The two men quickly became fascinated with Gibson, whose parents had escaped the cotton fields of South Carolina to start a new life in Harlem during the golden age of jazz. Her father treated her like a son, boxing with her until she could take a punch and letting her roam smoke-filled music halls. She'd essentially dropped out of school when she was noticed by the coach of the Cosmopolitan Club and introduced to tennis at twelve. She was on the eve of her nineteenth birthday when Johnson, by then the youth development director for the ATA, approached her with Eaton to suggest that she move to Wilmington so she could finish high school and become eligible for a college scholarship.

Gibson was deeply conflicted. As she wrote in her memoir, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*: "Up north, the law may not exactly be on your side, but at least it isn't always against you just because of the color of your skin. I would have to go into this strange country, where, according to what I'd heard, terrible things were done to Negroes, just because they were Negroes." But Eaton's home turned out to be dreamlike, the opposite of everything she imagined. When Gibson arrived in a worn dress with two cardboard suitcases held together by straps, Celeste Eaton greeted her with a warmhearted hug and a room in the attic that had been freshly prepared by the maid. "I can still remember running my fingers across the clean, starched white sheets on my bed," Gibson wrote, her astonishment palpable a dozen years later.

Dr. Eaton returned from his office at three in the afternoon, promptly changing into his whites to begin their lessons in lawn sports and life. "On the days she lost," he recalled in his own memoir, *Every Man Should Try*, "her face went blank and she seemed depressed, barely managing 'good night' when she went upstairs to bed." Still, the two developed a familial bond, forged by an implicit understanding that Gibson was the Chosen One—the athlete that Eaton and Johnson and every "colored" player who'd played in the ATA

since 1917 had waited for to break the barrier.

Three years later, she said goodbye to the Eatons’ attic to accept a scholarship to Florida A&M. Because she was a finalist in the USLTA’s indoor championships in 1950 and was being invited to regional showcases like the Eastern Grass Court Championships in Orange, New Jersey, and its clay counterpart in Chicago, the organization had no good answer about why she could not enter its national championships at Forest Hills. Upon hearing that an invitation had been extended, an ATA official exulted, “Many of us have worked untiringly for years to witness the day our players would be accepted. That day has come.”

The next decade was heady. Gibson rose to the top of her sport by winning the 1956 French championship and back-to-back U.S. and Wimbledon titles in 1957 and 1958—twice being voted the Associated Press’s female athlete of the year and landing on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *Time*. But despite this success, she was barely less broke than when she first left Harlem for Wilmington. A *Jet* magazine cover story titled “What Winning at Tennis Cost Althea Gibson” noted: “With all the tennis she has played for 16 years . . . all she has to show for her efforts is a closet full of trophies, a 1955 Chevrolet and modest furnishings in a one-room New York apartment.” A captive of her singular status, she blamed touring for the breakup of a brief engagement (to an aircraft executive), and a lack of suitable rivals for her inability to cash in on pro-level exhibitions. Maureen Connolly, a nine-time winner of grand slam tournaments, was approached to come out of retirement to face Gibson, but, having recently married an Olympic equestrian, she turned down a deal that would have netted Gibson \$50,000. Without easy access to the world of white country clubs, where other former number ones taught and networked, Gibson remained ever the outlier. As she put it in her memoir: “Suddenly it dawned on me that my triumphs had not destroyed the racial barriers once and for all, as I had—perhaps naively—hoped. Or if I did destroy them, they had been erected behind me again.”

In search of the payday that she couldn’t get from her chosen profession, Gibson retired from tennis following the U.S. championships in 1958. She recorded an album of torch songs; held exhibitions at Harlem Globetrotters games at the invitation of another Wilmington native, Meadowlark Lemon; and spent long weekends on Orange Street with the Eatons, struggling to

find a path forward. Lenny was vaguely aware that his mentor, then thirty-one, suffered from depression. “But I was ten and Althea was my hero. It’s not like I had a crystal ball that let me really understand.” Moreover, Ashe was the new Chosen One. And in ATA circles, not to mention in the Eatons’ home, Lenny was being referred to as the next Ashe. He had a fifth-grader’s faith in the future to carry both of them beyond where Gibson had been able to go.

Dr. Eaton, meanwhile, was investing in his own activism. He launched a losing bid for the Wilmington school board in 1952 that made him the first African American since the coup to seek elective office. He tried again in 1954—the same year he filed a successful suit against the city over discriminatory education funding. In 1956, he ran a third failed campaign while suing a local hospital for denying privileges to black physicians. Gibson desegregated a second sport in 1963 by joining the Ladies Professional Golf Association, and a year later, Eaton was suing to desegregate Wilmington’s schools.

With Eaton’s activism came opposition. Not long after the desegregation suit was filed, a fellow African-American physician arrived at police headquarters to allege that Eaton had lied about the death of a patient who’d gone into anaphylactic shock in his office. The allegation that it was really an abortion gone wrong caused an all-white grand jury to file second-degree murder charges, and while the case was eventually thrown out for lack of evidence, its message was clear: As Eaton recalled in his memoir, “I had been alert for reprisals of all kinds, including attempts at physical harm.”

By the turn of the seventies, as violent protests over integration tore Wilmington apart, the Eaton family was beset by illness. Celeste Eaton, who had suffered complications from open heart surgery, slipped into a coma and died during a 1972 vacation in Jamaica. Five years later, Dr. Eaton—who once wrote, “I played a controlled game of tennis as I learned to live a controlled life”—had a stroke, too, and emerged a different person, often bursting into tears at random moments.

“Then he started having problems remembering people’s names and then English,” says his son, Hubert Jr., a third-generation physician. “The court got sick when my dad got sick.”



For Lenny, the changes to his old block were sad, but hardly consuming. Nothing he saw on holiday visits to Wilmington with his two daughters or his grandkids—overgrown yards, unfamiliar faces loitering under street lamps past dark—convinced him he’d made the wrong decision. The postwar generation of professionals who gave the neighborhood such a strong foundation had been replaced, he says, “by people who weren’t working because there were no jobs. The pride wasn’t there.” It saddened him that the Eaton family finally sold the old place in 2004. But he had bigger battles to fight.

“Knoxville was my home, where I invested in the business of tennis,” he says. Yet despite having run programs for the city, the YMCA, and various youth groups, he couldn’t find financing to open his own club. He lets his genial, churchgoing guard down when he explains, “Because I was a black man, there were people who did not want that to happen.”

His fortunes changed when a multimillionaire businessman offered to enter into a partnership with him for an indoor/outdoor facility. Lenny, who contributed his own savings, was suddenly a forty-nine-percent owner in a booming business with eight courts, three hundred members, and charity events that lured big-name stars. Life was good. Good enough, in fact, that when he brought one of his promotions to Wilmington in 2012, he was asked to return as a celebrity guest for the largest event of the city’s social calendar, the springtime Azalea Festival. He believes organizers of the festival—which celebrates garden clubs, debutantes, and, at least unofficially, competitive day-drinking—saw an opportunity. “It’s a very white event. I solved part of their problem: A black celebrity come back home.”

If that sounds cynical, he surprised himself when he was guided to the reviewing stand of the climactic parade. “I saw the VIP podium and had a breakdown,” he says. “I remembered the days of sitting on the curb, watching the parade, waiting to see someone who looked like me. I started to think maybe it’s time to come back. Maybe it’s time to make a difference.” That opportunity presented itself when his partner in Knoxville received an offer to buy their club. With enough money to comfortably retire, he asked his wife, “How bad would it be to go back to Wilmington? We’d have a little tennis program and sit on the beach.” The pair found a condo by the ocean and christened a

group called One Love to give lessons to kids on public courts around the city.

When I called Lenny to talk about One Love, he suggested we meet in his office, which, as it turns out, was a table in a Port City Java franchise. On a near daily basis, he wedges his two-hundred-fifty-pound frame into a chair among hipsters, retirees, and truckers while he wields an increasingly ambitious agenda. Since arriving back in Wilmington, he’s succeeded in getting a local tennis complex renamed for Gibson, lobbied to have Dr. Eaton included in a local sports hall of fame, and become the catalyst of a growing black history movement inside the U.S. Tennis Association (“Lawn” was dropped from the name in 1975), which in March gave him its prestigious founder’s service award.

The man who rarely changes out of jogging suits also proved to be a prolific fundraiser, as demonstrated by his partnership with David McLemore, a retired nuclear engineer from Wilmington who began a charitable trust to help what he estimates is the “twenty-five percent of this community that lives below the poverty line.” After mutual friends arranged a meeting at a Krispy Kreme in 2016, McLemore gave a \$200,000 gift to One Love that included a van to replace the Chevy Tahoe that Lenny was using as a “traveling office” to transport equipment around town. Other sponsors now include a local bank and the USTA, which has included One Love in the league’s national junior learning network, yielding an annual budget that provides after-school support to roughly five hundred kids, “academic enrichment” to another thirty, and bus trips to places like Asheville, North Carolina, where forty students recently saw an international women’s team event.

One Love has a model that Simpson believes can be exported. But there was one thing that he had to tackle first, and that was the decline of the old Eaton home. In the backyard, he holds his hand at chest-level to show how high the weeds had grown and grimaces when pointing to where the greenhouse collapsed and the garage burned down. Early in 2018, he took one final step back to the future by approaching its owners with an offer to buy the yard. The idea was that he’d rebuild the court and add a clubhouse with a permanent office. But sensing that the owners might be open to more, and once again with McLemore’s financial help, he acquired the entire property.

Now it’s early spring, and with blooming red camellias foreshadowing azalea season, Lenny answers the door wearing a mauve jogging suit. He’s elated because an eighteen-wheeler is unloading an avalanche of clay out back, and he takes me there to see the old country club roaring back to life. He sounds more seven than seventy as he talks about his plans to bring back the sanctuary he remembers. “Around the court there was this plush greenery. And right there, where you’re standing, was the swimming pool. You’d come out of the shower and walk down the railing into this beautiful, glistening water. And the greenhouse, that was right back there.” He’s rolling. “We’re going to grow vegetables for the neighborhood all year long!”

The actual house is a shell, stripped down to its beams. But Lenny treads lightly when he walks through its sliding glass doors, as if the old man is still eying him while he’s hitting on the backboard, wondering if he has what it takes. “Very few kids got the opportunity I did to be part of the family,” he says.

He points out the original touches that remain: Dr. Eaton’s knotty pine and mahogany study. (“This is exactly like it was sixty-five years ago. If walls could talk, um-hum.”). The butler’s button. (“It was a danger code as well, in case there were threats outside or rocks thrown at the house.”) His old locker. (“I’d come in here every day, to change my clothes from the tennis court, go to the pool, and go right back to the court.”) The family room. (“When I came in, the jazz music would be playing so soft.”)

In the converted attic, where Gibson slept, he plans to build an academic enrichment center open to visiting students. Wilmington’s most famous native, Michael Jordan, contributed \$50,000 toward the project. When it’s done, Lenny and Joanne will live there, just as Hubert and Celeste did.

It’s hard not to see them as caretakers of ghosts. Instead of coming back home, they’re reincarnating one, in all of its period detail, with all its cultural and political significance, which is why, sitting on the flagstone patio with Lenny, watching an eighteen-wheeler dump clay, I ask him if it feels odd to so fully occupy someone else’s life.

He looks into the middle distance before replying, “I’m not so sure that Dr. Eaton didn’t have it in the back of his mind that he was grooming me for this. I didn’t see a man who just wanted to sit on his patio. The man I saw was determined to make sure all his work in this community would not be in vain.” 🏡

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