

MYRTLE AVENUE BLUES

By Professor Dexter Jeffries



Walt Whitman

People knew about Myrtle Avenue even before they saw it. For a native New Yorker it was always a legendary name with special connotations; it lived as a mythical place in everyone's imagination for years. If you were from Brooklyn, Myrtle Avenue was always coupled with the word "El" as in elevated train, and when some thing is linguistically bound and gagged, well, even forty years after the disappearance of the thing, the "El," those bonds leave marks. This is the problem. To understand a street you have to grasp the name behind it in the same way you have to comprehend the true meaning of someone's name. That's why you repeat someone's name when you first meet them. You keep repeating his or her name like some sort of ancient chant in the hope that this will hasten the acquaintance process. It's the same with Myrtle Avenue. You have to say it a few times and see if you can rest easy with what is in your view.

The Oxford English Dictionary takes you one step closer or further from that view—the reality. First the shock, the shaking of the head and then a silly smile comes on your face as you read, "late Middle English. Old French myrtille 1. The fruit or berry of the myrtle tree...a shrub having shiny evergreen leaves...now used chiefly in perfumery." Perfume! Are the gods playing some of their cute tricks? Telling someone that "myrtle," as in Myrtle Avenue is a berry on a tree that was used for perfume, is commensurate with the mockery that leaps out at one when they see the sign at 237 Myrtle Avenue: "The Walt Whitman Houses." A local journalist during the crack war days of the 1980's observed that it was a disgrace to call those dens of pain and horror "The Walt Whitman Houses," and it was an insult to his memory. Old Walt, man about Brooklyn, inspirer of Fort Greene Park, editor of the Brooklyn Eagle, and proud medical nurse during the Civil War. He would not have understood how they could have named this place after him. But maybe he would have:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*
- Leaves Of Grass

And that's why the naming of an avenue "Myrtle" should not cause that shock or double take. Accept it the way Old Walt would. Things change. History is a process and as you discover segments of that process, things begin to make sense; the head, instead of shaking from side to side, will start nodding up and down.

Some of the housing projects that stretch from Carlton Avenue all the way down to Prince Street were built during World War II. They were quickly constructed to house the army of workers who were needed to build the ships and tools of democracy that were going to stop fascism. Ships that left the Brooklyn Navy yard and sailed down the East River ended up off the coast of Normandy on D-Day in 1944 or in Tokyo Bay 1945. There was resiliency in Fort Greene, and the Myrtle Avenue El roared that sense of triumph every day, back and forth, forth and back. Rolling, clattering, sending sparks from the third rail down to the street, celebrating and commemorating a way of life.

World War II ends and America changes. Brooklyn dies. It has to. There are two gravestones marking the expiration of Brooklyn. Most people agree on one or the other. It was the day the Brooklyn Dodgers announced they were leaving Ebbets Field for Los Angeles, or the day Washington D.C. broadcast the dreaded news that the Brooklyn Navy Yard had received its orders to close. Fort Greene starts to fester quickly with an economic gangrene worsened by secondary infections of heroin and crime.

The 1960's -- heroin lands with a big bang on Myrtle Avenue. The regressive theory, that it is only a case of "benign neglect" if the poor and the unemployed dominate housing developments, kills off any hope. Heroin has two edges to it. It makes people hungry in a new sort of way that no one has ever known before. The hunger expresses itself on the street where the fast, the strong, and the violent are at a state of war with the old, the feeble, the young and the defenseless. I was walking to work on Myrtle, between Ashland and North Oxford and like all real things, it happened in a flash. Four young guys surrounded an old man. One put a chokehold on him from behind; the other held his legs low; the third cut open his back pocket for his wallet, and the fourth played "look out." Five seconds, eight at the most. They flew

across Myrtle Avenue, threading their way through fast moving gypsy cabs like halfbacks for the Minnesota Vikings. They vaulted the project fence and disappeared. Their victim, an old black man, was on his knees, crawling around trying to get his violated wallet back together. Shocked at the rapidity of the crime, all I could say was, "Hey, pop! You ok?" He replied, "Yeah, what the Sam Hill Happened? How did I rip my pants so bad?" The ripped pants bothered him more than anything else. The exposed buttock -- it was a question of shame and humiliation. Someone else, a man in his thirties, helped out, and we walked him to the benches that surround Fort Greene Park. He shook his head and said, "All I had was five dollars, damn, maybe only three -- I just got some fresh whiting at the fish place." I got up and searched for a brown bag back at the scene of the crime and found it. I returned, and the other fellow was trying to comfort him. "Pops, Charlie don't care. You have to understand that. Charlie don't care whether you have five dollars, three dollars, as long as it's some damn dollars above none because that's what he got. Nothin'! Charlie is fast and quick, just like the VC in Nam, and Charlie robbed you like they were hitting a foxhole out side of Quangtri. I seen it Pops. Plenty of times. Charlie is out there; they sleep all day and then hit us in the late afternoon and night. Be careful Pops! Charlie is out there, and he wants your shit."

I walked back to Carlton Avenue. I lived on the top floor of a brownstone. I mulled over the incident for a long time. Not so much the crime but what the guy had said so succinctly. This homegrown street-philosopher of the neighborhood had devised his own analogy, his own brilliant metaphor. He had taken his Vietnam experience and transferred it back to Myrtle Avenue, and now Charlie was no longer Viet Cong in black pajamas at night, looking to raise havoc at some American firebase. No, as far as he was concerned, "Charlie" was right here on Myrtle Avenue.

Another side of Myrtle Avenue, the other side of heroin, was more daunting than the first but a lot less dramatic. This was the part that not too many people were privy to; one did not see what happens to a community in terms of its psyche, its soul. That first wave of heroin deleted all energy, inclination and motion. Heroin brings you down --you're sedated and whatever your plans are for that day, morning blurs into afternoon, and a hazy afternoon makes murky the message of Martin Luther King, Junior, Eldridge Cleaver, and Malcolm X. It's 1968, and all of their words seem indistinct. You hear the speech and the presentation of alternatives for action, but you can't make a move. Like Chief Bromden says in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, "...but this morning, like I explain to you, the Big Nurse put a thousand pounds down me and I can't budge out of the chair." Residents of the neighborhood were numbed by their new habit and some times even the sound of the El couldn't be heard on Myrtle Avenue. The city, sensing desperate times, tears down the "El," the elevated train, from Flatbush Avenue to Lewis Avenue. Urban Renewal was scary. Its thesis purported that physical reconstruction can compensate for human despair. This thesis has yet to be validated.

Walk on Myrtle Avenue now and the interminably slow intravenous drip effect of new ideas has done some good. The churches are there, vibrant as ever. Between Clinton and Waverly there is the,

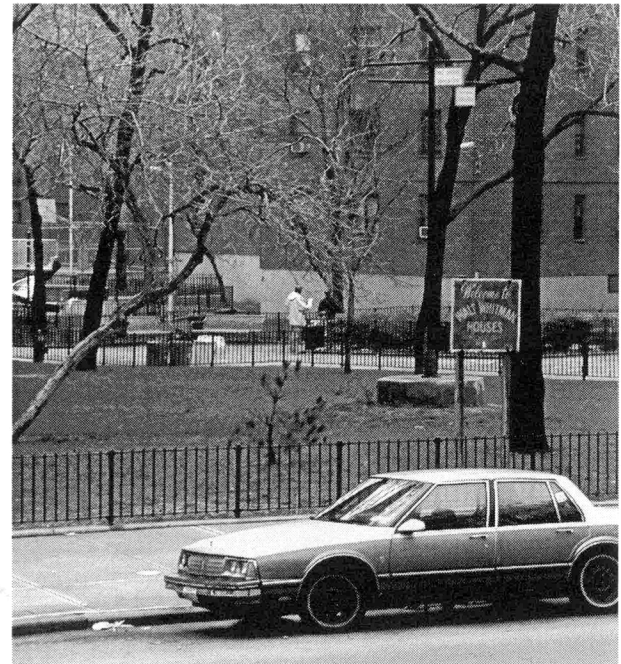
Revelation Church of God in Christ

Headquarters Fourth Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Eastern N.Y.

Pastor and Founder-Bishop John P. Lee, Sr.

If this sounds like a scene out of James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, you're right. People are resilient. Fresh fruit and vegetable stores are open and bustling. Alienating habitats like McDonald's and Blockbuster are jumping also.

Walk over to Myrtle. Turn left or right, depending, but your goal is to head east. Start walking, ride a bike, get on that skateboard. Go past Classon, Franklin, Bedford, Marcy, Tompkins, Throop, Lewis and finally when you approach Stuyvesant, you will see something up in the air, about thirty feet high, encroaching itself on Myrtle Avenue. Yes, that's it! You are not conjuring up any scenes due to the nostalgia or heartfelt reminiscences. It is the Myrtle Avenue El, the elevated train or what's left of it. They didn't completely raze it as planned. You've found it. Your history lesson is no longer just an essay or a fleeting page from a history textbook. It's right there. Look at it. You've found the Myrtle Avenue. Old Walt Whitman is there and nodding in the affirmative.



The Walt Whitman Houses