

*Arch Magic**

Lyri Ahnam

On August 21, 2004, I witnessed a Black blues musician transform a hostile mostly-white mob into cheering teary-eyed comrades.

Hours before the concert started, the Gateway Arch grounds were already crowded. My friend and I spread our blanket near center stage, the air sticky thick, the sun a searing blaze, the brown Mississippi River rippling in the distance.

A gorgeous Black man in short shorts and majorette boots twirling a baton wove through the gathering. My heart lifted. Baton Bob. I'd seen him marching near Forest Park—joyful and flamboyant. I clapped in time with his prancing steps.

The couple on the blanket behind us jeered at Bob. Others laughed or joined the heckling.

Baton Bob stomped away, his handsome face tight with hurt.

I imagined giving Hollywood speeches in Baton Bob's defense, pivoting the crowd's hatred to admiration—but remained mute and shamed by my silence.

Coming of age after the civil rights movement, I was unaware that the bigotry directed against Baton Bob has plagued our city since its founding.

The Arch grounds we sat on were the ancestral homeland of the Osage Nation until forced into exile by the US Army and white militias throughout the 1800s following the Louisiana Purchase.¹

In 1934, city leaders rigged a bond measure to finance bulldozing forty blocks of riverside property. Black homes and businesses were razed to make room for what would become—thirty years later—the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, a monument to the appropriation of the West.² Two protestors, Percy Green and Richard Daly, scaled the Arch in 1964 while it was under construction, objecting to the complete exclusion of Black workers from construction crews.³

In the Old Courthouse near the Arch, Dred Scott unsuccessfully sued for his freedom in 1846. Although slavery became illegal in 1863, prejudice remained codified throughout our area in racist segregation laws. When the Supreme Court outlawed residential segregation in 1916, many white St. Louisans created covenants pledging residents not to sell their property to Blacks.⁴ Though covenants restricting ownership for racial,

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ethnic, and religious minorities became illegal in 1948, there are still about 30,000 properties across St. Louis with covenants in their deeds.⁵

At times racial prejudice exploded into violence, most notably during the East St. Louis Massacre of 1917. Blacks entered the St. Louis area in large numbers during the early 1900s as part of the Great Migration. When white industrial workers went on strike for better working conditions in East St. Louis, companies used Blacks as strikebreakers. Local politicians, company foremen, and labor union officials escalated the resulting inter-racial resentment until thousands of white men took to the streets and turned on their neighbors, murdering hundreds of Black residents and leaving another 6,000 homeless.⁶

In 2002, two years prior to the intolerance I witnessed under the Gateway Arch, Baton Bob led the St. Louis Pride Parade.⁷ I love the rainbow diversity of St. Louis PrideFest, which invites everyone—of whatever sexual or gender expression—to celebrate our authentic selves.

The Pride movement in St. Louis was sparked in 1969, when the Gateway Arch was just four years old. That Halloween, nine men dressed in drag were arrested outside a gay bar for violating our city's 1864 law outlawing crossdressing.⁸ The law was overturned in 1985 following a successful suit by female impersonator Michael Shreves,⁹ but it wasn't until 2006, a full two years after Baton Bob was harassed under the Arch, that the State of Missouri changed its sodomy laws banning sexual intercourse between same-sex partners.¹⁰

Baton Bob left St. Louis for Atlanta soon after he was heckled off the Arch grounds. The self-described “Ambassador of Mirth” endured an altercation with police at the Webster Groves 2004 Fourth of July parade¹¹ and arrest at a political rally earlier that August.¹² This simmering antagonism between police and our Black citizenry would erupt ten years later in Ferguson following the fatal shooting of Micheal Brown, one of many Black St. Louisans gunned down by our police. Between 1965 and 1970 alone, there were thirty-five fatal shootings,¹³ and Blacks were seventy-two percent of those killed by police between 1999 and 2019.¹⁴

That day, as the crowd waited under the Gateway Arch for the concert to start, its hard, ugly mood festered in the August heat. People sniped when others crowded their blankets and made rude comments at passersby. I stewed in my cowardice, paralyzed by fear, for when any one of us is attacked, no one is safe.

By the time the opening act came onstage, the crowd's hostility snapped and crackled. The antagonism smoldered through the second act.

Only when blues legend B.B. King took the stage did the crowd cheer with any enthusiasm, though the undercurrent of resentment endured.

B.B. King sat, pulled the microphone close, and laughed.

It was the laugh of a man who recognized the crowd's angry frustration, the laugh of a man who'd faced countless hostile white crowds over his fifty-five-year career, the laugh of a man completely at home in his own black skin.

B.B. King's magical laugh melted away our divisiveness. Then he started to play.

Blues music traveled upriver from the Mississippi delta to St. Louis via Memphis. In our city it melded with the syncopated rhythm of ragtime to become the distinctive St. Louis blues. Although I've always been proud of our region's musical legacy, blues and ragtime weren't always celebrated here.

In 1904, organizers of the World's Fair banned ragtime, which they considered a lowbrow fad, from the segregated fairgrounds. This same fair, The Louisiana Purchase Exposition, celebrated the centennial of opening the West to white imperialism by displaying "primitive" peoples in what historians have called "the largest human zoo in world history." Fifty-one of the First Nations of North America were put on display for fairgoers.¹⁵ This painful reality upends my long-held fantasy of the World's Fair as our city's zenith, based on the idealized Judy Garland movie *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

Though the roots of discrimination infesting our city run deep, courageous citizens have stepped forward to lead us to a more inclusive future: Carrie Smith, Indigo Hann, Jae Shepherd, Jamala Rogers, Jay-Marie Hill, Jordan Braxton, Lois D. Conley, Ora Lee Malone, Percy Green, and Sylvester Brown, Jr., among many others.

I was unaware of our city's dual legacy of discrimination and passionate activism listening to B.B. King play under the glistening Arch. That night, the crowd that had driven one black man away, embraced another. That sultry August night in 2004, B.B. King held us all spellbound with his blues music, uniting us in communal joy. That night, B.B. King's magic transformed us into our better selves.

Because I witnessed that magic, I *know* that one day, the iconic Gateway Arch will no longer symbolize Western imperialism. One day, the Arch's elegant, powerful curves will become a symbol of unity. One day, the Arch will signify the confluence of diverse people from all across the St. Louis area lending our passion and talent to create lasting harmony.

¹ Johnson, Walter. *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

² Kaplan, Fred. "The Twisted History of the Gateway Arch." *Smithsonian Magazine*. October 2015.

³ Johnson, Walter. *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

⁴ "The African American Experience," Section 8 of *A Preservation Plan for St. Louis: Part 1*. Accessed August 10, 2022; Cooperman, Jeanette. "The story of segregation in St. Louis." *St. Louis Magazine*, October 17, 2014.

⁵ Ruff, Corinne. "30,000 St. Louis properties have racial covenants in their deeds. Your home could be one." *St. Louis Public Radio*. November 18, 2021.

⁶ Johnson, Walter. *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

⁷ "Best St. Louisian of 2002: Bob Jamerson." *The Riverfront Times*, September 25, 2002.

⁸ Brawly, Steven. "Looking Forward, Looking Back: LGBTQ History in St. Louis." *Out In STL*, June 28, 2019.

⁹ "Timeline." St. Louis LGBT History Project. 1980s through 2000s, accessed August 10, 2022.

¹⁰ Missouri House Bill nos. 1698, 1236, 995, 1362, & 1290, 93rd General Assembly, 2006.

¹¹ Ratcliffe, Heather. "Police are accused of manhandling Baton Bob." *St. Louis post Dispatch*, July 9, 2004.

¹² "Best Poster Boy for the First Amendment: Bob Jamerson." *The Riverfront Times*, September 29, 2004.

¹³ Johnson, Walter. *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

¹⁴ "Death by the State: Police Killings and Jail Deaths in St. Louis." ArchCity Defenders. January 2021.

¹⁵ Johnson, Walter. *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2020 and "The Largest Human Zoo in World History." *Lapham's Quarterly*, April 14, 2020.