

“The times, they are a-changing”

By Brian R. Owens

From “Black Swan”, Essays on the Civil Rights Movement in
St. Augustine in 1963 and 1964

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In the summer of ‘63 Michael Jordan was in still in his crib but Michael Jackson was already being groomed as an entertainer at the tender age of 5. A collective feminine sigh could be heard when a young Sean Connery returned as James Bond, the tuxedo wearing spy in the movie “From Russia with Love”. An even younger Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammad Ali) had already defeated his first 19 professional opponents using an unorthodox and entertaining boxing style of his own invention. ABC’s Wide World of Sports was in its third year and Americans were staying up late to watch a guy named Johnny Carson on a relatively new kind of TV program called the Tonight Show. American car manufacturers were in a race to produce light cars with huge engines called “muscle cars”. Ford introduced the 1963 Galaxie 500, sporting a 460 cubic inch power plant that you could use to vaporize your rear tires to the sound of Marvin Gaye’s performance of “Pride and Joy” – a Top 10 pop single that placed no.2 on the R & B chart in May.

In the summer of ‘63 you could fill your Galaxie “Five-Oh-Oh” for about 30 cents a gallon and take a road trip from St. Augustine to visit one of the great northern cities with a large black labor force that had evolved into an arts and cultural super-collider. You could roll up to New York and see the work of visual artists like Romare Bearden in person, as it should be seen; or, you could drive to Detroit and explore one innovative nightclub after another and witness the birth of new styles and new talent for yourself. Imagine yourself on a northbound Florida highway near sundown. You’re rolling and the car still smells new. And when the Supremes fade to static on your radio and the sound of the road fills your ears; when the sun sets and all you can see are the lights on your dashboard and 60 feet of highway unfolding in front of you, your mind begins to wander. First you think of the opposite sex, then you think of the future. You have your degree, your honorable discharge and your dreams. You’re an American so you dream big. And for a while you forget that you’re black and that although you’re driving across a nation of laws, your access to lodging, the dining room and the rest room on the open road is by no means certain. The welcoming neon sign may signify a courteously prepared take out meal or abundant possibilities of humiliation, for your practical status as a citizen – as a human being – can change as quickly as your Goodyear radials carry you from one county or state into another.

So what else was happening in the world beyond St. Augustine and how shall we reckon the effect it may have had on the black leaders that lived there? It was no secret that America was under the long dark cloud of a "cold war" with no end in sight. By mid-1963 the "space race" (an emerging competition within the "arms race") was in full swing. The US had just inched past the Soviet Union with John Glen's success as the first man to orbit the earth about a year earlier. This was no friendly contest. Just five years earlier, Americans listened using their 'ham radios" with wonder and fear to the beeping sound of Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite; a reminder of America's theoretical proximity to the long arm of Soviet rocketry. Three years earlier, a spy plane called "U-2" was the state of the art in covert, aerial surveillance as the spy satellite had not yet been perfected. This was a secret until US airman Francis Gary Powers' U-2 was shot down over Soviet air space and he was captured alive. The view from inner space – however it was done - was expected to make up for our lack of intelligence "resources" within the USSR and China. And orbital missile platforms, then considered to be an attractive alternative to silo-based ICBM's, were on the conceptual drawing board. Yes, the space race was a way of demonstrating to the world the superiority of the US in all matters related to ingenuity and bravery. But space was also expected to be the next frontier for war – be it hot or cold – with our greatest adversary.

In its rhetoric, the military claimed to offer more to blacks than could be found in civilian life; a more level playing field; the opportunity for recognition and advancement on merit. Since the birth of the republic, blacks had volunteered for military service, distinguished themselves in combat and then returned to civilian life to discover that their sacrifice had precious little effect on the conscious of the nation. Once again in the sixties, blacks had been asked to be patient and to wait for equality - but for how long, they wondered? In the fifties, black soldiers had fought and died alongside whites to achieve a stalemate in the killing fields of the Korean peninsula. In 1963 they were fighting in elite units prior to major combat operations in a small country in Southeast Asia called Vietnam. In October 1962, the "Cuban missile crisis" had brought the US and the Soviets so close to a hot war that Kennedy's Secretary for Defense, Robert McNamara, would attribute the avoidance of nuclear combat - decades later in his writings - to "blind luck". Each side had a disturbing assortment of conventional, strategic and tactical nuclear weapons and the will to use them. In a contest for geo-political dominance the US government had laid claim to world leadership as its pre-eminent force for good while the world watched newsreel footage of peaceful black protesters beaten with pipes, shot with water cannons and set upon by dogs.

Bare with me and follow me closely for a moment: The civil rights movement essentially began when a woman named Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954. This was a bold move as police had killed a black man on a bus less than a year before for doing the same thing. By 1963, the movement had been underway for nine years and had suffered many casualties. Then, on June 12, 1963, NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers (an honorably discharged Sergeant who fought in Europe during WWII) was assassinated by the KKK in front of his Mississippi home. This was the third attempt to kill Evers in as many weeks, lead by a unit of Klansmen who probably bore a closer resemblance to the inbred banjo-playing kid on the porch in the movie Deliverance than to elite commandos. Evers had followed Martin Luther King, Jr. by agreeing not to use violence, even in self-defense.

This tragic death (and others in the following months) could likely have been prevented by a simple request from President Kennedy's office that Evers be watched by a couple of agents. Black citizens had reached out to Kennedy many times as State and local governments failed to offer meaningful, lawful protection from outrageous mob violence. How would blacks measure the honor of a White House that needed them to exercise its strategy of communist "containment" even as that White House ignored one preventable racist atrocity after another? Reacting to the senseless killing of Medgar Evers, Bob Dylan composed his enduring masterpiece: "The times, they are a-changing." To the St. Augustine chapter of the NAACP I suspect this conclusion was self-evident.

I have no crystal ball to observe how these national and international events affected black leadership in St. Augustine but consider this: In 1963, all that was required to see the world beyond St. Augustine change before your very eyes was the effort needed to turn the little knob on the front of your flickering black and white T.V.

This much I know for sure:

1. To actively and directly challenge authority in the pursuit of racial equality in St. Augustine was no small decision, and
2. In the summer of 1963 the decision to so challenge authority was made.