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Sparks amid the Darkness

Close your eyes, take a breath, tune out the tech noise, and fly. Imagine yourself aboard a whirring drone scanning the deep night sky, soaring over a deserted stretch of highway from a distant place and time. Here, on the outskirts of suburban Chicago, it's Christmas, 1963. Fat, wind-whipped snowflakes descend through incisor-rattling cold. A pristine blanket of snow—four inches and counting—gives the open countryside along the empty highway a peaceful, ethereal crown. Even in a remote place like this, the magic about to happen in one young man's life remains a marker etched into his soul.

A monthlong period of mourning America's dashing young president has given way to nationwide malaise with the loss of so much hope Camelot represented. Floridians were just getting over nagging anxiety from the year previous: the existential threat of annihilation via Soviet missiles staged in Cuba, at zero lot-line proximity to Key West. That sunny mid-November, who could have imagined, when Floridians feted forty-seven-year-old JFK in Palm Beach, Tampa, Cape Canaveral, and Miami Beach, that this was his *farewell*?

At MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Kennedy met with Monsignor Michael Gannon, who briefed him on St. Augustine's upcoming four-hundredth anniversary celebration. The nation's only Catholic president, Kennedy showed a keen interest in Gannon's field of expertise: Catholicism in Spanish Colonial Florida. Gannon shared with



President John F. Kennedy campaigning in Miami Beach, November 18, 1963, four days prior to his assassination. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

Kennedy a beautifully framed photographic copy of the oldest written record of American origin, a marriage certificate dating from 1594. The Chamber of Commerce was hoping the gift might entice the president to return for what was sure to be a magnificent celebration. “As he left he said, ‘I’ll keep in touch,’” Gannon recalled. “Four days later he was dead.”

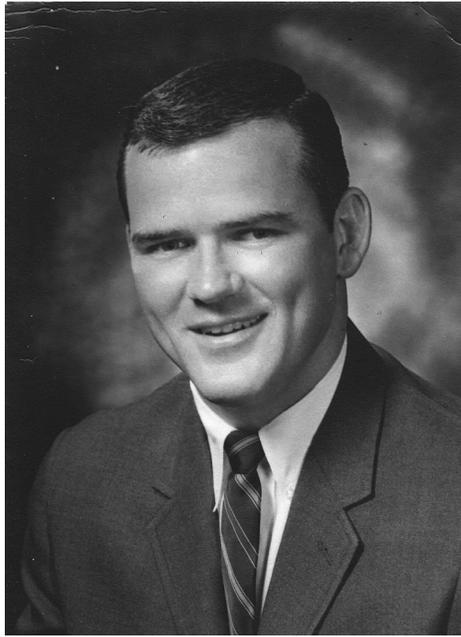
At the conclusion of his successful trip to the Sunshine State, the president was already laying groundwork for the 1964 election. Kennedy told an aide he dreaded going to Texas; he’d had a chilling premonition about the ease with which someone could fire at the motorcade with a high-powered rifle. And then it happened. A national nightmare of the highest magnitude, the assassination of a president, was captured on film in horrifying detail. Two days later, the nation witnessed his assassin’s murder on live television. It was all so dark and *surreal*. With the holidays approaching, snow descending along

the Illinois countryside, Americans everywhere struggled, yearned to find some sense of relief.

Along the darkened outskirts of Homewood, Illinois, a 1957 Buick, the long and rangy, gas-guzzling kind with the sleek lines, barreled down the interstate. All alone behind the wheel, a young, crewcut navy man nursed a healthy beer buzz and hauled ass. John Trusty was in transit, having just finished hospital corpsman school in San Diego. In the midst of thirty days home leave near the Windy City, Trusty was preparing to head south to Florida and his assignment at the Naval Air Station hospital in Key West. To pass the time, stay awake, and keep his brother-in-law's car from ending up in a snowy ditch, he switched on the radio to 89 WLS-AM, the bright sound of Chicago radio. In the wee hours of this frigid night, an urgent, unfamiliar beat hit him like a blast of wind: "*Oh ya I, tell you somethin', I think you'll understand.*"

At this heavy and uncertain time in American history, the Beatles had arrived, musically at least. The timing could not have been better. Stateside, popular music had been churning along at a low ebb. In March 1963 country music suffered a crushing loss when superstar-to-be Patsy Cline died in a plane crash coming home from a charity show in Kansas City, Kansas. The one-time King of Rock and Roll Elvis Presley was imprisoned by his manager's desire to develop more middle-of-the-road appeal. Presley's latest single, the jaunty "Bossanova Baby," hit the charts and sank like a stone. There was Sam Cooke, whose soulful voice flowed like honey. Keith Richards once said that soul singers who try to measure up to Sam Cooke should "go back to pumping gas." Vanilla crooners like Bobby Vinton and Jack Jones mined the Great American Songbook.

But not these new guys. The music blasting from Trusty's car radio that frigid night was akin to an awakening. During this saddest of holiday seasons, dear God, could we dare say it was *joyous*? Hearing "I Want to Hold Your Hand" for the first time on that deserted, snow-blown stretch of interstate, John Trusty picked up on the vibe immediately. And then, he did something stupid. "I actually started doing donuts on the four-lane highway, I was so happy," he marveled. "I don't know, I can't say why . . . I heard it and just—*wow*. This shit is *good*." In this dream flight of time and imagination, we're witnessing a youth's visceral reaction to music of his generation. Watching from a drone's



John Trusty. Courtesy of John Trusty.

eye above, two tons of American steel on four wheels swirl round and round, just like an old-school 45 RPM single on kid's portable record player. At a pivotal moment in time musically, culturally, and politically, America's youth were meeting the Beatles, their new North Stars, one DJ, one radio, one record player at a time.

In 1964, John Trusty was destined to get much closer to the Beatles than most. Even as a hospital corpsman assigned to an out-of-the-way, end-of-the-road military outpost in tropical Florida, closer to Castro's Cuba than Miami or anywhere else on the mainland. But that's where it happened, thanks to fate and a devastating hurricane.

A thousand miles from the frosty, ivory-blanketed Midwest, sixteen-year-old Kitty Oliver's love affair with the Beatles began to blossom as soon as her mom drifted off to sleep. In the clandestine late-night hours, she clicked on her hand-held transistor radio to WAPE-AM, the Mighty 690, the "white" radio station in rigidly segregated Jacksonville, Florida. At the end of 1963, Jim Crow laws and segregation were still strictly observed there. In June of that year, when Kitty showed up to march in protest of the murder of Medgar Evers, local Klan



Kitty Oliver. Courtesy of Kitty Oliver.

members watched and jeered, foreshadowing greater turmoil in 1964. Kitty, an only child living within the recesses of a Blacks-only Westside neighborhood, knew since early childhood where she could and could not go. There were zones of uncertainty if you were Black, potentially unsafe places for no other reason than the color of your skin. Kitty might as well have been invisible; she was expected to accept lesser prospects and lower horizons like generations of marginalized urban youth before her. “I describe it as being very similar to apartheid,” she remembered. “The only white person I ever saw was an insurance man from time to time, and I mean rarely.”

Then along came the four Brits whose driving beat and soaring harmonies reminded Kitty of songs from girl groups like the Ronettes. The Beatles sprang from working-class roots and wore their hair long, drawing immediate derision from the establishment. As Kitty saw it, they didn’t seem to care. But there was something else about them: early photos featured them alongside Black artists like Little Richard. That was unusual, and it caught her eye. After hearing them on the radio, Kitty and her best friend bought and danced to early Beatles singles on a portable record player; her friend chose Paul as favorite; Kitty opted for shy-but-smiling Ringo. In teen magazine photos, it was unusual to see a drummer staged dramatically up on a riser, bashing away. Most were hidden behind the front men, but not Ringo. That subtle difference gave him more star status, an equal to the guys on guitar.