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Book Review: Live at Jackson Station

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Abstract

Craig Keeney reviews Live at Jackson Station by Daniel M. Harrison.

Keywords

blues music, live music venues, South Carolina history

Live at Jackson Station
Daniel M. Harrison
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Great music clubs have personalities. They have an energy, an ambiance, which transcends dirty bathrooms and stale smoke. In *Live at Jackson Station*, Daniel Harrison chronicles the origins and tragic end of a venue that clearly had a unique character: the Jackson Station Rhythm & Blues Club. Located in Greenwood County, South Carolina, Jackson Station hosted performers throughout the 1980s, defying stereotypes from the beginning. Jackson Station was a venue run by openly gay men in a conservative rural area. It provided a welcoming space for freaks and outsiders, even as its décor included a Confederate flag and a portrait of segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace. It revitalized the careers of traditional blues musicians like Nappy Brown while helping launch then-cutting-edge artists like Widespread Panic.

Drawing on interviews with musicians, club regulars, and former employees, Harrison seeks to capture Jackson Station in its deliciously messy contradictions. Much of the narrative centers on founder Gerald Jackson, whose amiability, persistence, and vision literally and figuratively put Jackson Station on the map. Certain episodes read like scenes from a movie script: Jackson transporting the old Hodges railroad depot by trailer to a crossroads; Jackson's 60-plus-year-old mother Elizabeth collecting money

at the door and turning away potential troublemakers; and musicians and clubgoers reveling on Saturday nights until daybreak.

If the first half of the book centers on Jackson Station's rise as a concert destination, the second half focuses on the near-fatal assault on Gerald Jackson and its aftermath. On April 7, 1990, Jackson confronted a customer in the parking lot who struck him in the head with an ax. In the ensuing trial, the Greenwood County jury found the assailant Terry Stogner guilty of assault and battery of high and aggravated nature, a lesser charge than the prosecution had sought. Gerald Jackson miraculously survived the attack but was permanently disabled. His friends and supporters tried to keep the club going, but without his drive, things were never the same. The last known performance at Jackson Station took place in 1996.

Readers tend naturally to cheer for underdogs, and *Live at Jackson Station* presents two: Gerald Jackson, as proud of being gay as he was being a Southerner, and Jackson Station itself, as improbable a business venture as any attempted in Hodges, South Carolina. Likable as its protagonists are, *Live at Jackson Station* is not without its faults. The frequent use of direct quotes to make general observations feels unnecessary. The academic digressions on blues music and Greenwood County history distract from the narrative. The overall text could have benefited from more careful editing to eliminate typographical errors and redundancy. These criticisms aside, *Live at Jackson Station* offers a fascinating glimpse into a less polarized era when people from all levels of society could party alongside each other, and small rural towns could offer unexpected opportunities. The club itself may be gone, but the dream of Jackson Station lives on.