

# Black History Month

## In 'Uptown One Saturday Night,' Black Historian Details Often-Forgotten MLK Assassination Attempt

### Black Historian Details MLK Assassination

By **Saundra Sorenson**  
Of *The Skanner News*

**R**egi Taylor wants you to know how the civil rights movement as we know it came close to an abrupt ending in 1958.

The Baltimore-based writer and artist has penned 'Uptown One Saturday Night,' a longform look at the night Martin Luther King Jr. was stabbed by Izola Ware Curry at a book-signing in Harlem. Curry, a Black woman, was later found not mentally competent to stand trial and would spend the rest of her life institutionalized; the comments she made about her motivations for the attack aligned with her schizophrenia diagnosis.

Taylor writes, "(King) recognized his near murder as a test of his ability to faithfully abide by his Christian ideals and so he publicly professed his sincere forgiveness of Ms. Curry's attempt on his life before his release from the hospital once he became aware of her mental condition."

But in researching the events surrounding the attack, Taylor found inconsistencies about Curry herself, as well as concerns that her FBI file was allegedly disposed of in the 90s, many years before the woman's death. He lays those questions next to a thorough exploration of how the best of Harlem responded to King in his time of need, with the tip of a sharpened letter opener lodged perilously close to his aorta.

It is not the first book on the subject, but it is comprehensive in detailing the biographies and intersecting lines of the attacker, the responders and everyone who had a part in delivering King to Harlem Hospital and subsequently saving his life. The details are at the very least fascinating

trivia, but often serve to further contextualize this night in American history.

To name a few: Walter Pettiford, a Black 21-year-old advertising representative, restrained Curry from further attacking King. New York Police Department officer Philip Romano prevented a panicked bystander from removing the blade from King's chest, while his colleague Al Howard immediately assessed the severity of the situation, phoned ahead to Harlem Hospital, and misdirected crowds so he and Romano could secure MLK and carry him to safety; interestingly, Howard would later be on the team that apprehended "Son of Sam" serial killer David Berkowitz. Prior to operating on King that night, trauma surgeon John Cordice Jr. had been the Tuskegee Airmen Fighter Pilot Brigade unit physician, and shortly after, was part of the team to perform the first open heart surgery in France.

Taylor pushed to complete Uptown One Saturday Night in time for Black History Month, but he also turned in his manuscript before the death of his mother last week, and finds himself in a position to revisit and document his own family's personal history. In writing his mother's obituary, Taylor says he is articulating what he wants readers to come away with: The closeness and even immediacy of events often dismissed as historical and, in effect, irrelevant.

*The Skanner* spoke with Taylor by phone about his work, which will be published by Harlem World Magazine's press.

**The Skanner:** What motivated you to write this book?

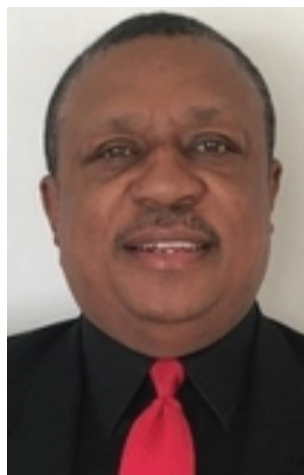
**Taylor:** What I published doesn't exist anywhere. There's no ac-



PHOTO BY SUSAN FRIED

## Black Liberation Flag Raised in Seattle

In honor of Black History month, Acts on Stage, Renaissance20 Youth Performing Artists, twin brothers Blaze and Channing, 10 help Mayor Bruce Harrell raise the Black Liberation flag over Seattle City Hall on Tuesday February 13th. The event followed a brief celebration featuring a performance of the Black National Anthem by the twins Blaze and Channing and brief speeches by Seattle City Councilmembers Joy Hollingsworth and Rob Saka, Esq. and Seattle-King County NAACP President L. Darrell Powell.



Regi Taylor

that this woman, on her own, decided to attempt to assassinate Martin Luther King. I mean, quite frankly, she was sort of a Manchurian candidate. There were some real contradictions to the story; that's why I got into the fact that she was ascertained to have an IQ of 70, clinically speaking. She dropped out of school in the eighth grade, but at the same time, she's credited with writing letters to the FBI complaining that Martin Luther King was a Communist. What did she know about Communism? How did she understand the significance of being a Communist in 1950s America?

This pistol that she bought in Florida (but did not use in the attack) – this woman, at best, was making maybe \$18 to \$20 a week. So to pay almost \$30 for a pistol, that's almost two weeks' salary at the exclusion of all her other living expenses. There are some anomalies there that just don't make sense.

Why did the FBI destroy her FBI file 24 years before she died? What was in it? She died in 2015. She spent 57

years confined, and my thinking was, at some point maybe she started to come around? Maybe she made some comments to someone? It's just curious.

At the same time, the FBI was definitely surveilling MLK. So if they're aware that this woman was a threat to MLK, were they present at the rally (the night before the book-signing)? Did they observe this confrontation this woman had with MLK? Why weren't they anywhere in the vicinity the next day (at the book sign-

champion of civil rights and education, and I was able to find her first-person, fly-on-the-wall account. She was actually there with Martin Luther King, steps away when he was stabbed, she accompanied him to the hospital in the ambulance, she signed him into the hospital for treatment. She had a bird's eye view of the whole situation, and I want people to realize – particularly young people – this wasn't just some guy who made a speech and got a day named in his honor.

I want people to real-

angers he faced, but the discomfort – for example, his having to stand for nearly 100 miles of a bus trip home after he gave his first speech at the age of 15, and instead of feeling well earned pride at his accomplishment, fuming that he and his teacher had been displaced by White passengers. In describing the day-to-day, you depict King as more accessible and more recent than he is depicted during MLK Day messaging. In a sense, you're bringing attention to the short timeline between him and us.

**Taylor:** I talk about how people with European ancestry just came over and assimilated – not so easily; anybody with an accent was an outsider, and then they were able to assimilate. But Black people, who have been here for over 400 years, 16 generations, are still the outcasts.

Here's what it breaks down to: 25 years is a generation, and slavery went from 1619 to 1865, roughly 250 years. That's 10 generations of slavery. From 1865, after the Civil War, to 1965, when LBJ signed the Civil Rights (Act), that was a century. So for 10 generations there was slavery, for four generations there was apartheid, Jim Crow. That's 14 generations. Only in the last 50-odd years, since Martin Luther King's assassination, have Black people in America had any semblance of citizenship, despite being here all this time. And that is still tentative, because it was never intended for us to have it. If the establish-

“It just doesn't make sense to me; there's something nefarious there

ing)? This woman lives two blocks from a venue where MLK was (later) attacked. Why were they nowhere around, just like they were nowhere around when he was shot 10 years later in Memphis? It just doesn't make sense to me; there's something nefarious there. I won't posit a theory, but I'm just asking the question.

**The Skanner:** What do you hope that readers come away with after reading your book?

**Taylor:** Particularly the younger generation, people who only know Martin Luther King as a boulevard in their town or a day they have off from school, what I want them to realize is the journey that this man faced, and the fact that he faced down death. One of the sections of the book talks about Anna Hedge-man. She was a prolific

ize that until Martin Luther King stood up and pushed back, we were under an apartheid system pretty much like South Africa of the 60s, 70s, 80s. And I want people to understand the peril this man faced down – he faced down death in 1958, and then he was killed in 1968, all in the name of getting rid of apartheid in America.

I wanted people to see that it was a struggle, it was contentious. I wanted people to see that it was adversarial, not just among racists – and I mention in the book that none of the civil rights successes would have happened without people of goodwill, of every race, and people of goodwill of every socioeconomic status.

**The Skanner:** Your book humanizes King, by which I mean you talk about not only the