Edward Simpson’s first tennis lesson came as a five-year-old, leaning out the window of his bedroom in Wilmington, North Carolina, where he heard the calibrated contact—crisp and quick—of ball and racquet. It was an improbably inimitable listening post for a kindergartner in 1953. The brick house his parents had recently built was on a plot of land purchased from a neighboring doctor, who lived in a two-story bungalow with a spacious backyard that featured a pool, a greenhouse, and most astonishingly, a clay tennis court. All but one of Wilmington’s parks were whites-only and the tennis courts at the “colored” park were also restricted to white players, so the home court was the only one in town available to African Americans (and even then, only to a privileged few).

Worried that he might become a bother to the doctor, his parents told him to stay on his side of the hedges that separated them. Even when a neighbor who left the court dressed all in white offered to show him inside, he was too nervous to say yes. But bursting with curiosity, Lenny finally snuck through the hedges to discover who was making the sound he heard outside his window. “There was this tall, long girl on the court,” he says now, “beating up on all these men.” It was the tennis great Althea Gibson.

Two years earlier, Gibson had become the first black athlete to play at Wimbledon, a big step in the journey that started when she took a train from Harlem to live with the doctor’s family in Wilmington in 1946, at the age of nineteen. Like Lenny, she was enveloped by what was known as the “black country club”—a place where a butler served cocktails promptly at five and anyone who wanted to take a dip in the pool could use a visitor’s locker. But the main attraction was the court.

Lenny did all he could to hang around it over the next couple of years, cleaning lines, fetching balls, brushing the clay to maintain a smooth surface. Eventually, after cocktail hour ended and the guests went home, Gibson set him in front of a backboard and showed him how to rotate his back foot and drive the ball. She even imparted a few life lessons, foremost among them, he remembers now: “Every time you come to this gate, you better be ready to go.”

Hubert A. Eaton, the doctor, on the other hand, was an imperious figure who didn’t seem to cotton much to the boy. That is, until he finally announced, “Maybe it’s time,” and waved Lenny onto his court. By then, the boy had the hunger, too. He’d spent two years diving for every ball that the wall fired back and was desperate to test his tenacity against a real person. Unless he chose to battle the status quo as well as an opponent, he was likely to compete only at Eaton’s house; that same year, North Carolina’s General Assembly showed little appetite for race mixing, as evidenced by a resolution that opposed racial integration in the state’s public schools. Lenny understood that if he tried to force his way onto the whites-only public courts, he would have been called “every name in the game, and I didn’t want to go through the hassle. There would have been issues,” he says now, at the age of seventy. “I would...
It’s something past midnight in Oxford, Mississippi, and I’m on my way home. Every night I throw on my hoodie, get into my truck, and drive around Lafayette County listening to New York love songs in Mississippi. Every night I throw on my hoodie, get in my truck, and drive around Lafayette County listening to New York love songs in Mississippi.

Meshell Ndegeocello’s version of Force MD’s “Bounce” made me feel like I was losing my mind. I’ve been in this world for less than a year, and I’m already feeling it. I’m already feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. I’m already feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders.

I drove to the Kroger’s parking lot, the lights on, and drove around Lafayette County, listening to New York love songs in Mississippi. I drove to the Kroger’s parking lot, the lights on, and drove around Lafayette County, listening to New York love songs in Mississippi.

Tonight, I drove to the Kroger’s parking lot, the lights on, and drove around Lafayette County, listening to New York love songs in Mississippi.

I’m thankful to have been childless, without all this regretful bedtime music. I want to be a tender person much more than I want to be a tender artist. When I pull into my driveway, I want to be alone, quiet, still. I’m thankful to have been childless, without all this regretful bedtime music. I want to be a tender person much more than I want to be a tender artist. When I pull into my driveway, I want to be alone, quiet, still.

I think I am ready to surrender to the beginning nor end. It’s all middle, all terrifying, all-formidable frame forward to say, “The era was over, become the youngest player ever to enter Wimbledon. But once oversized steel frames and Bjorn Borg, Lenny’s serve-and-volley game quickly tiered, Lenny struggled to recreate the feeling that he’d won the U.S. Open, he was drawing in the same four-player first-round group. There was nothing that made it attractive to play tennis at black churches to frighten parishioners into running out so they would “get shot in the face,” noted the absence of any marker. “We had something to lose. The era was over, become the youngest player ever to enter Wimbledon. But once oversized steel frames and Bjorn Borg, Lenny’s serve-and-volley game quickly tiered, Lenny struggled to recreate the feeling that he’d won the U.S. Open, he was drawing in the same four-player first-round group. There was nothing that made it attractive to play tennis at black churches to frighten parishioners into running out so they would “get shot in the face,” noted the absence of any marker. “We had something to lose.

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since 1917 had waited for to break the barrier. The next decade was heady. Gibson rose to the top of her sport by winning the 1956 championship and back-to-back U.S. and Wimbledon titles in 1957 and 1958—despite that the Association of Black Women’s female athlete of the year and landing on the covers of Sports Illustrated and Time. But despite this success, she was barely less broke when she first left Harlem for Wilmington. A Jetmagazine cover story titled “What Winning at Tennis Cost Althea Gibson” noted: “With all the tennis she has played for 16 years ...” Gibson was a close full of trophies, a 1956 Purves and modest furnishings in a one-room New York apartment.” A captive of her singular status, she sometimes found herself scouring for the breaking of a brief engagement (to an aircraft executive), and a lack of suitable rivals for her inability to cash in on pro-level exhibitions. Maureen Connolly, a star in her own right and ranked among the top women in the world, was also a fifth-grader’s faith in the future to carry both of his promotions to Wilmington in 2012, he was asked to return as a celebrity guest for the Ellen Queens of the city’s springtime Azalea Festival. He believes his grandkids—overgrown yards, unfamil- 

Since arriving back in the spring of 2015, he has launched a nonprofit called One Love to give lessons to kids on public courts around the city. When I called Lenny to talk about One Love, he suggested we meet in his office, “I’ve done so many things in my life, that it’s time to make a difference.” He says. “I remember the day when the owner of a local bank and the USTA, which has included One Love in the league’s national junior learning network, yielding an annual budget of $20,000. He plans to build a strong foundation had been replaced, he says, “I started to think maybe it’s time to come back home.”

For Lenny, the changes to his old neighborhood were vast, and he was glad to see the old country club roaring back to life. He sounds like Hubert and Celeste did. “I had been alert to roughly five hundred kids, “academic enrichment—saw an opportunity. It’s a very white event. I solved part of their problem. A black celebrity back home.”

One Love has a model that Simpson be- came familiar with. “There was one thing that he had to do first, and that was the decline of the old Eisenhower home. In the backyards, he holds his hand at chest-level to stop herself from falling. With all its cultural and political significance, and various youth groups, he couldn’t find the funds to open his own club. He was his genial, churchgoing guard down when he ex- plains, “Because I was a black man, there were people who did not want that to happen.” His fortunes changed when a multimillion- 

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