How to make a smash hit Black history museum: Smithsonian head Lonnie Bunch tells what it took to start the National Museum of African American History and Culture

Lonnie G. Bunch III speaks about his new book on founding the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture during an interview by Linda Johnson Rice at the Chicago History Museum. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

More than 16 years ago, when Lonnie G. Bunch III was heading the Chicago Historical Society, the oral historian Studs Terkel introduced him to Mamie Till-
Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till.

“We were supposed to have an hour lunch,” Bunch recalled last week, from a stage in the building where that meeting happened. “She spent six hours telling me what happened, from the time she kissed her son goodbye until the time of the funeral. I’m crying. It was really the most emotional day of my professional life. And I was just amazed at this woman. And she talked about how that death transformed her and transformed the civil rights movement.”

They became friends and met again at Till-Mobley’s house in January 2003, two days before she died, Bunch told an audience who came to what is now the Chicago History Museum to hear about his new book detailing the founding of one of the most ambitious and successful new museums in the United States this century.

There is no blueprint for starting a museum, Bunch told the crowd, especially one that had been proposed in various ways for almost a century but had never gotten off — or into — the ground.

But as he does in “A Fool’s Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump,” Bunch described a series of fortunate breaks, beginning with a change in the cultural winds. The nation finally seemed willing to start to come to grips with its racial legacy, he said. And after a series of near losses turned into wins as well as plenty of grit and perseverance, the museum has become in three short years a pillar of American culture.

Bunch, 66, was appointed in June the secretary of the Smithsonian, arguably the biggest museum job in the world. From that perch he shepherds 19 museums and the National Zoo, serving almost 29 million visitors in 2018. But the 11-year effort to build the museum honoring Black history remains vivid in his mind.

One of the breaks the museum got was Bunch’s meeting with Till-Mobley. Till’s family offered the nascent museum, in the midst of starting an artifact collection from scratch, the casket the African-American Chicago teen had been buried in at south suburban Burr Oak Cemetery after his racially motivated 1955 murder during a summer visit to Mississippi. The casket had been exhumed after the investigation into the murder was reopened in 2005.

Bunch wasn’t immediately sure he wanted such a macabre item in the museum. “I
thought, ‘Is it ghoulish? Should I collect the casket?’ ” he said. “Remember, we talked about it a lot?” he said to his on-stage interviewer, Linda Johnson Rice, who was co-chair of the founding NMAAHC Council.

“I thought, ‘Well, we'll collect it, and we'll preserve it. I'm not sure we'll ever show it.’ And then as we were thinking about the exhibitions, I thought, ‘How do I honor Mamie Mobley?’ ” he said.

So the museum recreated around the coffin, in a kind of alcove separated from the main museum pathways, the Chicago church where Till’s funeral was held. “But it’s really about how Mamie Mobley used the worst moment of her life to transform a nation,” Bunch said. “It’s the only space in the museum where I don’t want (or allow) anybody taking pictures. It is sacred space. And it’s turned out to be the one thing everybody has to see.”

Bunch wrote the book, he said in an interview before his talk, in part because he’s a historian by training and he wants the record there for his children and grandchildren. But it’s also largely because when he decided to go on this “fool’s errand” — a title borrowed from an 1879 novel by Albion W. Tourgée describing the failure of the reconstruction South even as the author thought going there had been worth the risk — he could not find another such book about making a museum.

“So I ended up reading a lot of books about start-ups in Silicon Valley,” he said, adding that he’d be happy if those authors wanted to read his start-up book in return, “and if they also gave money to the Smithsonian, that would be even better.”

The start-up lessons apparently took. While Bunch did not wind up a multimillionaire, he was able to navigate the fundraising, political, collecting and building hurdles necessary to start the museum — and in a place of prominence on the National Mall, in the shadow of the Washington Monument.
When he left Chicago to take the founding director’s job, there were four possible sites for the museum, he said. But Bunch knew it had to be on the Mall, and he went so far as to meet with people who had been crisis consultants during the Clinton administration, because he figured they know crises.

“I said, ‘Well, what happens if they give us a site that’s not on the Mall?’ ” he recalled. “And the Clinton people said, ‘You walk away, you give up your job and you go back to Chicago.’ ”

The prime site came through. “A Fool’s Errand” describes a whirlwind of decision-making, everything from cozying up to the potential donors who would help raise the necessary half a billion dollars to choosing the architect to the collecting of a shawl worn by the abolitionist Harriet Tubman and the gleaming red convertible driven by rock pioneer Chuck Berry.

“When I started this work, I loved the travel, and by the time we dedicated the museum, I hated trains, planes and hotels,” he writes.

“I took 497 fundraising trips in 11 years,” he told the CHM crowd.
“It was really helpful to be able to say this is part of the Smithsonian. I mean, that’s one of the greatest brands in the world,” he elaborated. “And then to say, ‘We rarely get a chance to build a national museum, and especially one that can help the country bridge the chasm of race.’”

For Chuck Berry, though, that argument almost worked the opposite way. Bunch really wanted the guitar on which Berry had written one of the prototypical rock-and-roll songs, “Maybellene.”

“And he said, ‘Well, tell you what? I will only give you the guitar if you take my 1972, candy-apple-red Cadillac.’” The Chicago History Museum audience cheered at this, knowing the place of prominence that car now holds in the African American museum.

So Bunch sent a junior curator to meet the rock legend, get him to sign over the donations, and ship the items to Washington. “So the next day I get this panicked call: ‘Chuck Berry’s angry. He’s not going to sign the deed of gift. He keeps yelling he doesn’t trust you.’"
“I’m like, ‘What did I do to Chuck Berry?’ I get on the phone, and Chuck Berry says, ‘I just found out you work for the federal government.’ ”

To win back the trust of the songwriter who had a history with the IRS, Bunch’s associate had to agree to lunch with Berry. “I said to Kevin, ‘Whatever he serves, eat it.’ So Chuck Berry brings out 25 ice cream sandwiches. When Kevin eats the 13th, Chuck Berry signs the deed of gift.”

All of those stories became part of history on the day in September 2016, in front of Barack Obama, America’s first Black president, when the museum formally opened. Former President George W. Bush, who had signed the 2003 legislation creating the museum, was there as well.

Johnson Rice and the Civil Rights leader and Congressman John Lewis spoke, among others. And Bunch was getting nervous, he recalled.
grandfather and my father, who were both gone. And for me, it’s almost as if that’s what the museum was, a place to remember, yes, the big names but really remember those people who lived and died and who believed in a country that often didn’t believe in them.”

The nervousness went away, he said: “It really was this moment, I would argue, that was America at its best. It was an America that crossed racial lines, political lines ... This is a moment when America is America. This is an optimistic moment.”

And although there have been less optimistic moments in the national discourse since then, the nation now has, as Bunch writes in the book, “a symbol of possibility, resistance and resiliency on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.”

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