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Cover

The Celebrity Club in Providence was a nationally known jazz venue during the 1950s. Harassed because of its interracial clientele, the club closed in 1960. Photo, November 1955, by Paul Darling.

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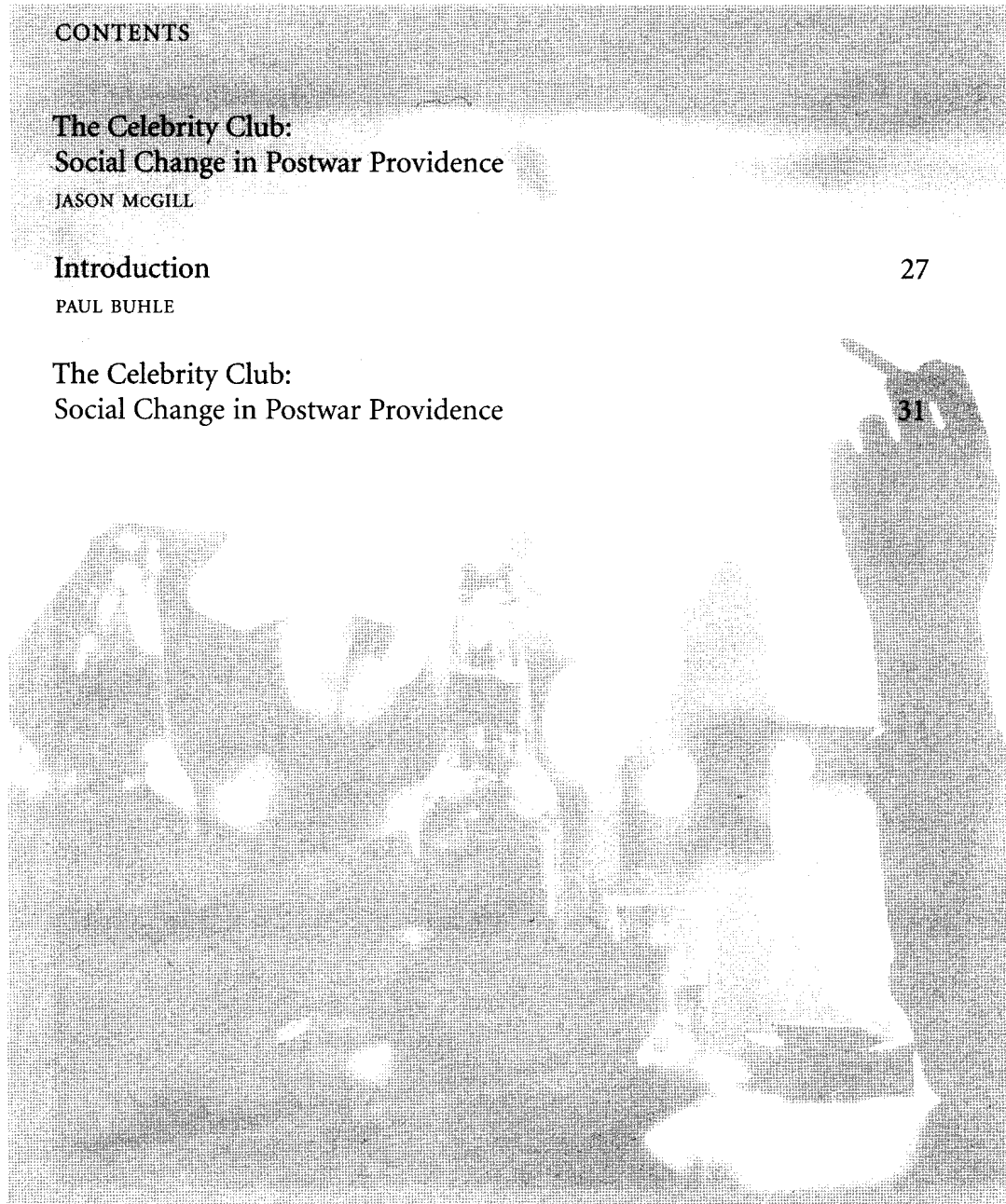
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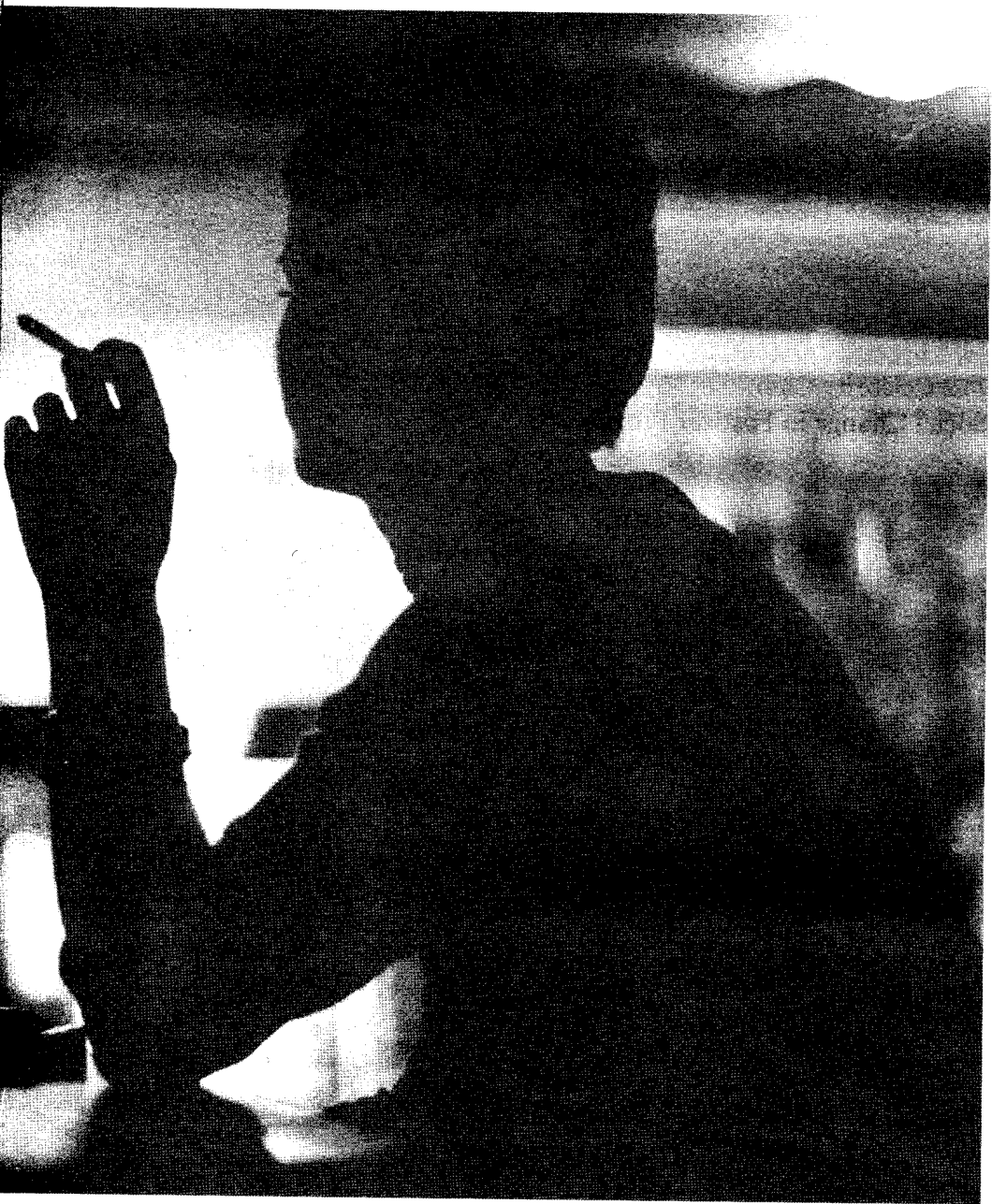
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The Celebrity Club: Social Change in Postwar Providence

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Introduction

PAUL BUHLE

This issue of *Rhode Island History* is dedicated to one of the most fascinating and least understood phenomena in the state's unique version of the twentieth century. Famed as one of the greatest jazz clubs in the nation, regularly under intimidation and the threat of closure, yet pioneering in its social mixing of Rhode Island African Americans (and Cape Verdeans) with their white fellow citizens, the Celebrity Club has had no written history.

Happily, Jason McGill, who is a working musician as well as a scholar (an honors graduate of Brown University), has relocated the living memories in the only way possible: through oral history. The uniqueness of the process and its application to the subject at hand require a little commentary.

Oral history can be viewed as a relatively recent scholarly innovation. The Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project collected more than two thousand personal testimonies of former slaves during the 1930s, decades before the field of oral history could be established. The first formal oral history collections, organized as such, go back to the 1950s, which saw the creation of both the earliest presidential libraries and prominent university projects (notably at Columbia University) for the recording of prominent individuals from politics, business, labor, and the arts who had no written memoirs. The perceived archival need to fill in certain blanks within the public record, to learn who influenced whom at the highest levels of institutional importance, was presumed to be the source of useful, if distinctly secondary, evidence for the scholar.

Then came the 1960s and a new kind of constituency for oral history, reshaping the way that it was practiced, and even imagined. The still-small field was transformed by the direct and indirect influence of progressive social movements, as well as by folkloristic impulses towards discrete community histories. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, the Peace Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, and other causes, younger scholars sought to examine origins, personalities, and lesser-known local stories through the lives not only of leaders but also of the otherwise forgotten rank-and-file.

Oral history thus grew into a distinct field of study bearing, in large part, a mission sometimes described as "history from the bottom up." The shift of interviewing from the collection of data to the creation of interpretive texts soon had its counterpart in the shift of the interviewer from supposedly objective viewer to active participant in the creation of meaning. The present study of the Celebrity Club is a child of that dramatic shift.

Providence of the 1950s, the Celebrity Club's setting, has often been seen as a city in severe stagnation. Local industries that had flourished during the war—particularly textiles, metals, and machinery—were now, very often, on their profit-line last legs, with ready contingency plans for either moving elsewhere or shutting down entirely. Outward migration, though small compared to that of fast-growing American cities, had a major impact on Providence, which experienced an unprecedented drop in population, most visibly of the prosperous middle class en route to the suburbs. Decades later it was widely admitted that "urban renewal" had leveled vast quantities of valuable his-

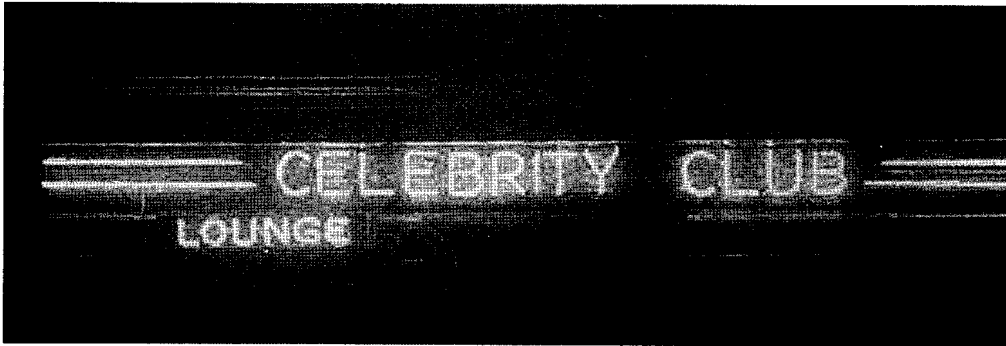
toric architecture, a move half justified at the time with the argument that “something had to be done” and that federal funding might not be so readily available again.

This view, largely from the top and the middle of the socioeconomic scale, entirely obscured the view from below, captured here and there by specific oral history efforts. Racial segregation, mainly informal but formal as well, was under pressure and on the wane, even—in grand and painful irony—as the dispossession of African Americans from the Randall Square-Lippitt Hill neighborhood they had occupied for more than a century was being carried out. Historic segregation within the city’s nightlife yielded sporadically, under conditions very different from those in housing or employment.

Rhode Island’s live music scene, a source of pride throughout the twentieth century, was naturally a site of youthful exuberance and social experimentation. Bohemians associated with the Rhode Island School of Design and an insular crowd of East Side hipsters connected in large and small ways with the African American community for the first time, thanks to the Celebrity Club and its clones. The hostile response of officialdom, the police in particular, was in no way surprising: not much earlier some of the best music clubs had been speakeasies, in a city where the reputation of organized crime was large and well founded. The Celebrity Club, moreover, lacked the customary power of the payoff that had kept sin mostly safe elsewhere in town for decades.

Jason McGill’s splendid essay—supplemented with photographs researched by Brown University undergraduate Laura Atkinson—weaves oral history with a variety of other sources to illuminate the contradictions that brought some of the greatest cultural performers ever to spend time in Rhode Island; gave them an unlikely audience that was just right for their music, an audience whose enthusiasm overrode powerful taboos of the time; and then brought about the enforcement of those taboos and the defeat of those who had ignored them. But the defeat was not total, nor was it permanent. The memory of that episode may well deserve a place in a cultural history given to recalling Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, Thomas Dorr, and more recent rebels at odds with the existing social order.

This issue of *Rhode Island History* offers a product of an extended project entitled “Underground Rhode Island.” Formulated, appropriately, by students and former students of Brown University, this is a venture in oral history that focuses on various forms of what is often called the counterculture, a term borrowed from the 1960s but better considered more generally as creative cultures outside the mainstream. The Rhode Island Historical Society, the Newport Art Museum, AS 220, the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization, and the Wayland Collegium of Brown University, along with the university’s American Civilization Department, Rockefeller Library, and Scholarly Technology Group, have all participated in and supported various phases of the project from 2003 forward. Those interested in this project are urged to consult its website, at www.UndergroundRhodeIsland.org, where contact information is available for those who wish to participate in this work.







The Celebrity Club: Social Change in Postwar Providence

JASON MCGILL

As is the way with cultural developments throughout U.S. history, the social milieu known as “the jazz scene” did not materialize in a vacuum. Rather, it was built upon social relationships, primarily between Americans of African and European descent. Jazz culture developed in conjunction with, and reaction to, the complex state of race relations in twentieth-century America. Thus the answer to the question “What is jazz?” is far from simple. Musically, the deepest roots of jazz are found not only in African rhythms but also in European harmonic structures. The legacy of jazz culture suggests a wonderfully intricate, syncretistic social development; and by examining the history of jazz and its environment, we can gain key insights into the complex reality of culture and diversity in the United States.

In Providence the post-World War II-era jazz scene brought together participants of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Gathering at sites like the Celebrity Club—a venue in the city’s Randall Square neighborhood that operated from 1949 to 1960—jazz enthusiasts experienced new forms of camaraderie, as well as daunting challenges and conflict. Simultaneously they confronted the larger Rhode Island community and all its social norms, and this interaction helped produce a kind of social friction that brought questions of racial and cultural power forcefully to the surface of public consciousness. It was a friction that helped spawn and define such phenomena as the local civil rights movement and the reactionary backlash it came to face.

The 1950s were in many ways the peak years of Providence’s jazz scene, and during that time the Celebrity Club—though now largely forgotten—was one of the best-known jazz establishments in the country. Ranked by the popular jazz magazine *Metronome* as one of the top five music venues in all of North America,¹ the club was a regular stop for the biggest names in American jazz, such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Louis Jordan, and Ella Fitzgerald. A wealth of local talent worked alongside these legends, and the club quickly became a vibrant center for lovers of jazz. As such, it supported one of the very first substantially racially integrated cultural scenes in Providence’s history. As one elderly patron at another (still operative) local jazz landmark, East Providence’s Bovi’s Tavern, recently put it, “It was the first time black and white musicians had ever played together [in Rhode Island].”

Among those who remember the club (and, by extension, within Rhode Island’s collective memory, exemplified by occasional reminiscences in the *Providence Journal* over the years since the club’s demise), the Celebrity Club is commonly recalled as a landmark site where racial borders were renegotiated and forms of social change were born. It is a microutopian story, with compelling, fertile ground that has remained essentially unexplored by serious historical inquiry. But regardless of whether or not the Celebrity Club fostered true racial harmony, the simple reality of people of different races enjoying its ambience was widely perceived at the time as a

Jason McGill is a resident of Providence, where he is associate director of the Everett Dance Theatre and the Carriage House Stage and School. He is also a saxophonist/percussionist with the band *Barnacled*.

Paul Filippi, founder and owner of the Celebrity Club. December 1951 photo. RIHS Collection (Rh3 7781). All photographs in these pages are by Edward Hanson.

threat to the city's social status quo. The club's founder, the late Paul Filippi, recalled the harassment that he and his patrons suffered: "They [Providence police and political leaders] frowned on the idea of black and white people mixing socially. They tried to harass me to the point that I'd have to close. One night they actually raided the place, dragged all the whites down to the police station and held them for two hours. I was told that if I kept the whites out, I'd be left alone. The funny thing was, though, that when they let those people out of the police station, they all came right back to the club. See, Providence had never been exposed to music like this before, and the people couldn't help but respond to it."²



From at least as far back as the 1920s, Providence has had a long, rich history of involvement with America's jazz culture. As a stop on the major East Coast rail line between New York City and Boston, Providence (like New Haven, Connecticut, to the south) maintained a reputation among traveling musicians as an easily accessible and supportive minimetropolis. Travel meant trading stories and, ultimately, cross-pollinating culture. As the late Providence saxophonist Art Pelosi once put it, "We feel compelled to keep up with the biggies."³ Inspired by the spreading jazz culture of the 1920s and beyond, Providence began to produce its own highly talented jazz musicians, further energizing the local scene.

But Providence was a racially segregated city during the early days of jazz, and so cultural cross-pollination between the races there was limited. Well-known "popular [black] dance bands rarely played in Providence," Andrew Bell, cofounder of the Providence Urban League, has written of this period. "When one did, admission was off-limits to black music lovers."⁴ Local black musicians and audiences crowded into small neighborhood bars, homes, or speakeasies in Providence, while whites had greater opportunities to hear and play music throughout the state, the greater New England area, and beyond. Additionally, white musicians could get paying gigs playing in a variety of music styles, while African Americans were relegated to the "race music" niche, which meant very low pay in this relatively small city. A black jazz musician in the 1920s and 1930s could make substantial money only in bigger cities and/or by making recordings, and since the major record companies were based in New York or California, they were too distant to recognize the talents of black musicians in Rhode Island.

One African American big band that performed in the area during the Jazz Age 1920s was the local group Ford's Musical Aces, which entertained eager black audiences in Providence, Boston, and other cities, including Woonsocket. Even Count Basie sat in with the band in its early days. The group maintained a high level of musicianship, working long hours at its rehearsal space at 21 Wheaton Street in Providence's College Hill area, but although it was an influence on Rhode Island's big bands to come, the economics of keeping such a large group together at the time proved prohibitive.⁵

Meanwhile, white bands, including the one led by the "King of Jazz," Paul Whiteman, swung through town and cashed in on the 1920s jazz craze. Downtown Providence's legendary Arcadia Ballroom, located on the fourth floor of the Raymond Building at the corner of Mathewson and Washington Streets, opened for business with a hugely successful Paul Whiteman performance on 24 October 1922, thereby establishing itself, and Providence in general, as a hotbed of the mainstream entertainment industry.⁶ Over the next four decades the Arcadia Ballroom hosted some of the

biggest names in entertainment; yet both stage and audience remained predominantly white. Several talented local musicians, such as trumpeter John Azevedo, went on to perform at the Arcadia and elsewhere with Whiteman's band.⁷

Providence-born pianist Al Conte got his start with groups at the Arcadia Ballroom and then went on to a successful touring and recording career with Joe Venuti, Guy Lombardo, and other big names in American popular music, as well as leading a group at the exclusive Dunes Club in Narragansett. Eventually he was inducted into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame.⁸ Conte was an undeniably talented musician, but his example speaks to the reality that white musicians could go much further with their careers than could their black contemporaries. White and African American jazz scenes developed separately in Rhode Island, as they did throughout the United States.

A comparison of the careers of two of the most famous jazz musicians to emerge from the early Rhode Island scene—one white, one black—can serve to illustrate this local segregation. White trumpeter Bobby Hackett and African American saxophonist Paul Gonsalves were both legends in jazz history who grew up in the Providence area and went on to become internationally known; but except for these shared experiences, their paths diverged in important ways.

Hackett, born in 1915, was a multi-instrumentalist child prodigy who left school at the age of fourteen to pursue a career in music, first locally at such notable downtown Providence venues as the Port Arthur Restaurant and the Biltmore Hotel, then nationally and internationally. Having been encouraged to develop his talents from an early age, he reached the highest levels of popular music, playing the trumpet with “King of Swing” Benny Goodman at Goodman's famous 1938 concert at Carnegie Hall, and then with such stars as Glenn Miller, Eddie Condon, Jackie Gleason, and Tony Bennett. Hackett frequently returned to Providence, where he was known as a friendly man who supported the careers of such up-and-coming local musicians as trombonist George Masso and pianist Mike Renzi. Hackett was a jazz legend when he died in West Chatham, Massachusetts, in 1976, and he was later inducted into Kansas City's Jazz Hall of Fame.⁹

Hackett's contemporary, Paul Gonsalves, born in 1920, started his music career under an altogether different set of circumstances. Like Hackett, Gonsalves took to music early in his life, starting out on guitar and later concentrating on tenor saxophone, but the musical talent of this dark-skinned Cape Verdean was not initially as well received by the community at large as Hackett's was. While Hackett achieved early success in the limelight of Providence's music establishment, Gonsalves found it necessary to look elsewhere for creative outlets.

A childhood friend of Gonsalves, local trombonist and bandleader Arthur Medeiros, said that on weekends Gonsalves would travel all the way from their neighborhood in Pawtucket's Woodlawn section (near Lorraine Street and Mineral Spring Avenue) to New Bedford, about thirty-five miles away, for opportunities to play with fellow Cape Verdeans. Gonsalves told Medeiros of the good times he had playing with groups in New Bedford. According to Medeiros, “You didn't have anything here like that, at that time, for him [a black musician], so he got up there [to New Bedford], and there was a big, big community up there. So I guess that's where he spent most of his time.”¹⁰

Medeiros, a light-skinned Portuguese American, was also playing music at the time, but he and Gonsalves never performed together, because Medeiros played with youth orchestras while Gonsalves played “black music” (blues and jazz) on his gui-

tar. When Medeiros and Gonsalves were drafted into the military together during World War II, the two friends were quickly separated in accordance with the Army's strict segregation policy. "We lost touch," said Madeiros. "I think the last time I saw Paul Gonsalves, we were bunked right next to one another, because twelve or thirteen of us from the neighborhood got drafted together, and the last time I saw him was up there at the induction center. He was there with me about two or three days, four days, then they came in and took him out . . . We felt so bad when they came in to get him—and the way they said it: 'Paul Gonsalves!' 'Yeah, right here.' 'Get your stuff. You're coming with me.' He says, 'Where am I going?' 'We're taking you to the nigger section!' . . . To see the tears coming out of his eyes—I felt so bad for the guy. We all did—we all went to school together . . . It took me a long time to get over that."¹¹

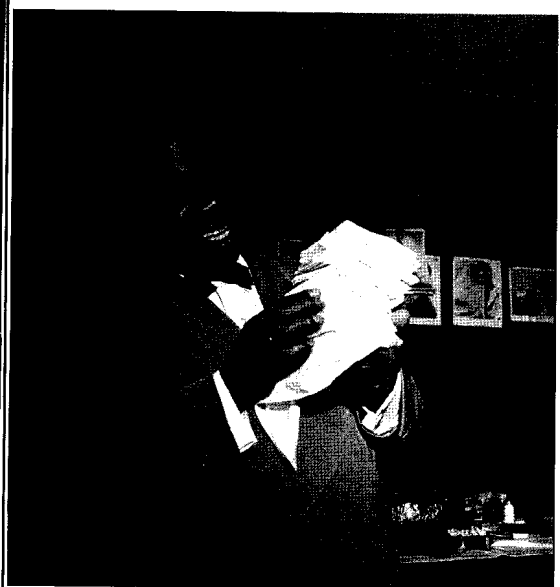
Medeiros later learned from Gonsalves's sister that Paul was having a hard time in the army. Gonsalves did, however, have an opportunity to hone his musical skills in the segregated army band, and he emerged at the end of the war as one of America's most accomplished saxophonists. Much to the surprise of Medeiros and other neighborhood friends, Gonsalves garnered one of the best possible slots for a black musician at the time—a place in Duke Ellington's orchestra. Gonsalves and Ellington would work together for the rest of their lives (both men died in 1974), with Gonsalves fueling Ellington's compositions with what one critic has called a "warm, breathy tone and harmonically advanced solos."¹²

Playing with Ellington at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1956, Gonsalves performed what has since become one of the most famous solos in jazz history, rousing the crowd to a near frenzy with his passionate playing.¹³ He thereupon became a local hero, spurring such warm *Providence Journal* headlines as "Pawtucket Sax Star Big Hit at Newport" whenever he returned to Rhode Island.¹⁴ Within the changing post-war climate, the nationally popular Gonsalves could be claimed as one of Rhode Island's own, the state's previous coolness to him notwithstanding.



Stories told by Providence-born African American jazz singer Clay Osborne reinforce the picture of Providence's complex racial history. Osborne's father, Clarence "Legs" Osborne, a local jazz trumpeter and bandleader in his day (and Clay's main influence in becoming a musician), struggled to feed his family of six boys and six girls by playing occasional gigs at white-owned establishments, where blacks such as himself were allowed inside only as entertainers, while working days as a delivery driver for a meat-packing plant. He told Clay (short for Clarence Jr., his first-born child) that despite financial hardship, he preferred staying in Providence among his own community of family and friends, rather than trying to make a name for himself on the touring circuit, because of the racism experienced by traveling black musicians throughout the country. "When I thought I could go out and be a singer, he discouraged me," Clay remembered. "He told me it was a tough world for a black kid. Black musicians had a rough time on the road—white musicians stayed in a hotel and you stayed in a shack down the street."¹⁵

Legs Osborne persevered in the local scene, however, and his reputation grew among local and national musicians alike; but reputation alone does not pay bills or alter social circumstances. Before the establishment of venues like the Celebrity Club in 1949, there was not much in the way of local gigs playing for serious jazz audiences. When Clay was a child, his father sometimes brought him along on gigs at white restaurants like North Providence's Club Atwood, where patrons paid more atten-



tion to their meals and conversations than they did to Osborne's trumpet, and Clay was made to feel unwelcome and awkward among them. "I used to say to my father, 'You're playing, but I don't see any black people in the place,'" he recalled. "I feel like a stranger going to see you. And you always have to protect me—"That's my son over there." You know? And he would say that a *few times*, because I'd be the only [black person in the audience]. But I got used to it. And then I could bring a friend. That's the way it [desegregation] started."¹⁶

Legs responded to this situation by creating his own place where he could play—and present other musicians—for his own community: he started a speakeasy in the



Louis Armstrong (top left, with Paul Filippi) performed for an appreciative audience at the Celebrity Club on 18 October 1951. The celebrated Cozy Cole was the band's drummer. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7796, 7792, 7795, 7791, 7793).



Osborne family apartment, a flat in a Lippitt Hill three-decker. There he staged band rehearsals and hosted concerts and after-hours jam sessions, with big-name touring musicians such as Lionel Hampton and members of the Duke Ellington and Count Basie big bands regularly stopping in to play. Jazz was more a community affair than a commercial one at the apartment, and as such it was informal, festive, and frequently

raucous. According to Clay, the Osborne speakeasy (it had no formal name), “drove the people in the other floors crazy” with the noise, but they put up with it, as did Clay and his siblings, who at times would rather have been able to get to sleep sometime before the early A.M. hours. “So I met all these famous guys, because they were sitting on the couch—and the couch was *my bed*. I had to wait for those guys to leave before I went to bed. I got to know all these guys, like [Ellington’s alto saxophonist] Johnny Hodges, who sitting down there.”¹⁷

Jazz that remained within African American communities in the mid-twentieth century years, outside white commercial establishments, was more of a family affair than a business. At sites like the Osborne speakeasy, African American jazz “insiders” transmitted musical knowledge and aesthetics on their own terms. In reaction to discrimination, this form of black culture grew powerfully unique, separate from the American mainstream. A significant downside, of course, was the fact that black musicians often had a difficult time making economic ends meet, especially if they had families to support.

Two incidents that occurred in 1949 illustrate the extent of bigotry potentially faced by local African Americans during this time. In September 1949 Providence jazz radio disc jockey Samuel Jackson and his wife (the parents of popular present-day Boston jazz radio host Eric Jackson) were physically restrained from entering the Ambassador Inn nightclub on Mineral Spring Avenue in North Providence. The couple subsequently filed discrimination suits against Ambassador owner David Overton, whose defense was that if the Jacksons had been let in, then other blacks would want to come in too, and “they would soon overrun the place.”¹⁸ Also in 1949 a black man who went into the downtown Providence’s Loew’s Theater (now the Providence Performing Arts Center) was reportedly “beaten half to death in the lobby in a racially charged attack.”¹⁹

White jazz musicians did sometimes play with black musicians during the early postwar years in Providence, generally in speakeasies or at jam sessions like the one that Legs Osborne presided over at the tiny downtown bar Pirate’s Den, at 32 Aborn Street.²⁰ African American musicians generally welcomed white players into their sessions, but not all whites were comfortable in such situations; some, in fact, refused to mingle with African Americans in any way whatever, on or off the bandstand.²¹ In any case, the real money to be made lay outside the reach of the black musician, and separation remained the norm. Not only were white jazz musicians offered greater opportunities to play both jazz and “general business” gigs—dance music and popular show tunes—than their black counterparts; they also enjoyed the privilege of being allowed to frequent the area’s most popular clubs, theaters, and restaurants when African Americans often were not. And then the Celebrity Club opened its doors.



The postwar climate brought about a substantial loosening up of some of Providence’s traditional racial norms. After the defeat of Hitler’s racialized fascism, overt racial discrimination became less tolerable in the American North. Whites in Providence now began to display a more cordial attitude toward African Americans, although there were still significant social and political barriers in place. “Outside of the political arena there were a number of citizens of the white race who were concerned about the treatment given to their black friends,” Andrew Bell recalled. “Some attempted to give help in various ways such as offering financial help to those who needed that kind of assistance. Others made a point of showing their true feelings by

including some of their black friends in their social gatherings. The activities of other whites who were willing but timid were limited because of their fear of being criticized by their peers and ostracized socially.”²²

Jazz, as an interracial art, posed a very early challenge to the dominant social structure, a challenge physically manifested by the Celebrity Club. Paul Filippi, the club’s founder, was certainly not one of the local whites whom Bell referred to as fearful of being criticized or ostracized; instead, he was a man who took bold steps in furthering the cause of racial harmony, regardless of the community’s response.

Filippi, who died 1992, was a social pioneer. The offspring of a traditional Italian American family, the jovial Filippi was widely known for his warm personality, his eagerness to make new acquaintances, and his talent for remembering names and faces, even of those he had met only once. He was, as well, a thoughtful and kind man with a keen insight into race relations and a sincere determination to act upon his convictions. His creation of the Celebrity Club, financed by his years of employment as a doorman at the Crown Hotel on Weybosset Street in downtown Providence, was in large part the expression of his concerns about racism in Providence and throughout America. He would pay a certain price for those concerns, while gaining the status, not always directly rewarding, of “a man before his time.”

The Celebrity Club was truly a first in Providence: an establishment that not only brought internationally known performers from diverse backgrounds to the area but also welcomed local audiences and artists of all races in a pleasant, respectful atmosphere. Before the Celebrity Club opened, members of Providence’s African American community who wanted to hear live jazz, or even just to go out to dinner, had to cram themselves into small black-owned neighborhood bars or speakeasies or else travel to select establishments in Boston or in other area cities, such as New Bedford. Filippi in fact claimed that he opened the club specifically to address this type of racial inequality: “I came from a poor background and used to work on WPA projects with other poor people, and many of them were black. One black guy and I were talking one day and he mentioned that he was going to take his wife to dinner—at some chicken shack in Boston . . . Well, that gave me an idea. I figured I’d open a place where black people could go [in Providence]—a nice, small supper club where they could have a good time.”²³

The Celebrity Club opened its doors on 18 November 1949 at 56 Randall Street, in the Randall Square neighborhood on the western edge of Lippitt Hill. The interior decorating had not quite been completed as planned, but the capacity crowd did not seem to pay that detail much notice as it took in the sounds of the first of innumerable jam sessions featuring some of Providence’s finest jazz talent.²⁴ An announcement two weeks earlier in Providence’s black newsweekly, the *Providence Chronicle*, had urged local African Americans to prepare themselves for “courteous and prompt service” at “Providence’s newest, most up-to-date club.”²⁵ The black community heeded the call, and in the first night helped transform Filippi’s till of seven dollars and change (what remained of his startup money after paying for building renovations) into eleven hundred dollars.²⁶

African Americans were not the club’s only eager patrons that night. “I’ll never forget the first night,” said Filippi. “White fella comes over and sat at the bar, and he’s looking around, and he ordered a beer. He called me over and said, ‘You’re the owner.’ I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘My wife and friends are out in the car. Is it all right if we come in?’ That was the beginning of the interracial club that the Celebrity Club turned out to be.”²⁷ “We were breaking down all sorts of walls in that place—and

doing a good job of it too, if I may say so," Filippi remembered on another occasion. "You could buy a beer for 50 cents and sit there all night at a front row table and hear the greatest talent in the world."²⁸

Within a year the club had become enormously successful, drawing overflow crowds for local and touring acts. In July 1950 Filippi added space to accommodate three hundred more guests, as well as "private rooms for weddings, bands, and staff."²⁹ By September of that year such internationally famous jazz artists as trumpeter Cootie Williams were headlining sold-out weeklong engagements, with "no cover, admission, or minimum" and a full bar and kitchen.³⁰ The following month the kitchen was



Louis Jordan and his band, with drummer Chris Columbus, played at the Celebrity Club on 16 November 1951. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7790, 7788, 7787).

expanded, a new heating system was installed, and arrangements were made for local radio station WRIB to broadcast live Celebrity Club performances.³¹ Paul Filippi greeted patrons at the front door, as he had done for years at the Crown Hotel, while his brother Pete tended bar at the back of the club. At the venue's one-year anniversary in November 1950, Frederick Williamson reported in the *Providence Chronicle* that Filippi had eighteen African Americans in his employ at unheard-of "top union scale wages." The Celebrity Club "should warrant your support," Williamson told his readers.³²

As reports in the *Providence Chronicle* indicated, African Americans who worked for other white-owned establishments in Providence seldom fared so well. Under the editorial guidance of Providence Urban League cofounder William D. Wiley, the *Chronicle* was an activist-minded newspaper, and along with its boldly printed appeals for readers to "Join The NAACP" and "Aid The Crippled!" it included numerous articles about the struggles, the very slow gains, and the failures in the local black employment picture.

The paper did, however, attempt to portray the Providence African American community in the most uplifting, hopeful terms, and any instance of mainstream society's positive involvement with local blacks was cause for at least a mention in the *Chronicle*, if not an entire article. Often the Celebrity Club was the site of this interaction, and with the club beginning to book so many famous artists (black and white alike), including Duke Ellington, even the most elite levels of white society began to pay attention to this unlikely Randall Square cultural center. A 1951 *Chronicle* report

excitedly detailed the local interest in Nat King Cole's engagement at the club: "People from all over New England have poured their way into this Randall Street house of big name bands . . . Managers for both the Crown [Hotel] and Sheraton Biltmore had reservations for large parties. Judge Dooley and a party of six complimented Paul Filippi on his ability to bring nationally known entertainment to Providence. Other community leaders in the business and professional field are phoning in for reservations."³³

White customers came to the club in droves once Filippi began booking performers they had heard of, listened to records by, and/or seen in Hollywood movies, such as

Louis Armstrong. In fact, whites came to vastly outnumber blacks at many of the bigger shows. Filippi's longtime business assistant, the late Mel "Bunk" Burgess, later relayed a story of how the club came to be split into two separate parts: a smaller front room that usually presented local acts, with a majority-black clientele, and a larger back room for touring groups, more expensive drinks, and a racial mix of "about three whites to one black."³⁴ Other first-hand reports, and photographs in the Rhode Island Historical Society's collection, lend credence to Burgess's estimate. The Celebrity Club was not completely immune from the racial practices that ruled the community outside its doors—what the *Providence Journal's*

African American reporter James Rhea referred to as firm "social tendencies."³⁵ For all its successes, the Celebrity Club's "cross-racialism" in some ways proved to be rather limited and superficial.



Certainly Filippi did everything in his power to create a comfortable, respectful environment for all—performers, audiences, and staff alike—but neither he nor anyone else was fully in control of how the club's physical environment would translate into a social one, or how that envisioned social environment would be regarded by the community at large. Regardless of the fact that Filippi was determined to bring people together to transcend racial boundaries, and even the fact that many of his patrons shared his progressive outlook, social practices and ingrained prejudices are not easily changed. Celebrity Club headliner Joe Thomas once wrote a friendly note to a fellow musician in which he hailed the venue as "a musician's paradise," but the club was to prove a temporary utopia at best.³⁶

Although increasing numbers of whites began to speak out against racism in the postwar era, the social stigma that overt racism was coming to take on in the North often served merely to push old tensions under the social surface, where they took root in new, subtle ways. A white man candidly summed up this reality to James Rhea in 1953: "Mister, the truth is I just don't like Negroes, never have, never will.



But it's getting so I've got to at least pay lip service to the great gospel of equality if I want to keep out of arguments with my friends."³⁷

But regardless of the complexity of the social moment, the Celebrity Club maintained a solid stance of openness and equality, and throughout the better part of the 1950s it continued to pack the house week after week. Presiding over this vibrant scene, Filippi sought to share its excitement with all lovers of jazz. For instance, he allowed the aspiring Providence African American saxophonist Randall Ashe and his friends, too young to be legally admitted to the club, to watch their heroes on the bandstand from the club's kitchen door; later he invited the young men themselves to the bandstand, where they played under the name Little Randy and the Stompers. Besides Ashe, the teenage group featured Herman Pittman, Arthur Hazard, Harry Bailey, James McCann, and drummer Billy Osborne (Clay's younger brother).³⁸

Many Rhode Islanders were inspired to become musicians because of the Celebrity Club, and Filippi was always eager to encourage up-and-coming jazz players to showcase their talents onstage, either in open jam sessions, in short headlining gigs, or as opening acts for nationally known performers. Rhode Islanders such as saxophonist Art Pelosi, pianist Joe Massimino, trumpeter Mike Marra, drummer Eddie Polito, and bassist Bob Petteruti were among those who strengthened their musicianship in front of Celebrity Club audiences.³⁹

Finishing an opening-act performance one night, Petteruti came off the bandstand to a big surprise: Duke Ellington asked him to sit in for regular bassist Jimmy Woode, who had missed his train to Providence. Despite his nervousness and awe, Petteruti returned to the stage and set up alongside Ellington's band. "I mean, my knees were knocking together. I was nervous, man . . . I was playing with Duke Ellington, and I winged it. It was like hanging on to someone's coat tails—and I just winged it."⁴⁰ Other local musicians had similar experiences. The late pianist Eddie Soares, for one, filled the sizable gap left by the absent Earl "Fatha" Hines during a Louis Armstrong All Stars engagement at the club.⁴¹

National performers came back again and again to warm receptions. Musician Arnett Cobb ranked the Celebrity Club as the number-one destination on his tour circuit, citing "the excellent mixing of races, the spirit of friendliness on the part of both patrons and management, the genuine appreciation of the music being played, and the spontaneous response to the efforts of the musicians."⁴² Patrons, too, were enthusiastically loyal to the club; for many, going there became a regular ritual. "[I went] every night!" said one regular, Harvey Miles, who lived up the street from the club during its heyday. "I've seen all the bands and entertainers—the greatest entertainers the world has ever known . . . [The Celebrity Club] was the greatest thing that ever happened to Providence."⁴³



But not everyone in Rhode Island shared this enthusiasm. Although the Celebrity Club drew some of Providence's elected officials, judges, and business leaders, who came to "see and be seen" at the venue's biggest events, the club remained largely a pariah to local mainstream society, and thus it faced serious challenges. As a successful establishment in the heart of Providence's African American community, it was a welcome sight to area blacks and many whites, but it became a growing sore spot to others. To certain members of the local law enforcement community, for instance, an establishment of that size that catered to African Americans was imme-

diately suspicious, and the fact that working-class whites were regularly seen going there as well was, for some, a little too much to accept.

Beginning in 1949 and continuing regularly until the club closed in 1960 (two years after Filippi sold it), members of the Providence Police Department staged raids on the Celebrity Club, ostensibly to search for drugs, although most often they came up empty-handed. As saxophonist and Lippitt Hill/Mount Hope native David Hector (now head of the neighborhood's Camp Street Ministries) remembered, the police subjected clubgoers to "constant harassment." And while whites were usually admonished to go home, according to Hector, "colored folks were searched, put in paddy wagons, and beaten."⁴⁴

In late 1954 and early 1955, Detective Commander Walter E. Stone of the Providence Police organized a series of high-profile raids, primarily against the Celebrity Club, reportedly to combat a local high-level narcotics ring. By this time Paul Filippi and his brothers had opened a number of other clubs and restaurants in Providence—including Filippi's Café, at 18 Ashburton Street in Randall Square, and Club Downbeat, at 1049 Westminster Street in Providence's West End—and these establishments too were targeted in Stone's raids, although there was no evidence that the supposed "narcotics ring" had any ties to the Filippi family. In all, approximately 125 people were detained for questioning during these particular raids, but only 4 were charged with any crime.⁴⁵

The biggest of these raids occurred on 5 January 1955, when 85 "suspects" were detained, but none were found in possession of illegal drugs or drug paraphernalia of any kind. However, Stone boasted that a "Cuban native" and a sixteen-year-old with an illegal knife were caught in the dragnet. Additionally, he claimed that two-thirds of those brought in for questioning had previous police records.⁴⁶

The *Providence Journal* reported the police version of events, without any indication that its reporters had interviewed any of those detained, the Filippi family, or other witnesses to the raids. As Jim Mendes, a longtime Providence broadcaster and Rhode Island's first African American radio disc jockey, put it, "If someone got knifed in Providence, [the *Providence Journal* would] say it was planned at the Celebrity Club."⁴⁷ The paper rarely mentioned the Celebrity Club in its pages during the club's years of operation, except when there was a crime or other disturbance in some way related to the club. "Music magazines all over the country and in Europe, too, would list every engagement here," Paul Filippi commented in a 1982 interview. "And what did we get from the *Providence Journal*? Zip."⁴⁸

To the *Providence Journal*'s credit, the paper did print one article that raised questions about Commander Stone's raids, including statements made by Juvenile Court judge John M. Booth and Department of Social Welfare assistant director Harold V. Langlois. Booth and Langlois both warned that there might have been too much hysteria surrounding drug use and trafficking and not enough tangible evidence. "All reports that I can recall, except one, proved to be false," said Judge Booth. "I am fearful of combating something if it does not exist." Langlois added.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, many whites received lenient treatment from the state's criminal justice system during this time. For instance, less than two weeks after the largest of the raids, a white Providence man who "in a rage threw a dime tip at a waitress [in a local restaurant] and followed it with a plate of ham and eggs in her face, causing injuries that required 20 stitches," was found not guilty by Superior Court judge Mortimer A. Sullivan. Even the prosecuting attorney, Assistant Attorney General Francis J. Fazzano, asked the judge for leniency in the defendant's case on the grounds that the

man had an “excellent World War II record.” “I’m sorry, Your Honor,” the defendant explained. “I know my nerves are not all they should be.”⁵⁰

There was not much that Paul Filippi, or any other single person, could do about such racial inequity and harassment other than to keep places like the Celebrity Club going, to continue to speak out against injustice, and to support collaborative efforts for racial equality. Filippi attempted to do all of these things, and his determination in the face of opposition was commendable. For example, the Celebrity Club sponsored numerous benefit shows for community groups and youth scholarship funds. Filippi also decided to cut off all ties with radio station WICE when one of its disc



jockeys refused to allow a black band, the Billy Williams Quartet, to perform at Hope High School,⁵¹ and he teamed up with Carl Henry (nee Henry Schiavino), a white local radio disc jockey, to sponsor several events to support African American music and culture. Henry opened the Carl’s Diggins record store next door to the Celebrity Club to offer African American music that was unavailable anywhere else in the city, and he supported progressive social causes until his death in 1986.

By the mid-1950s the expense of taxes and the significant loss in revenue stemming from police raids began to add up for Filippi. On one occasion he was arrested for

disorderly conduct when he strongly admonished two detectives during a raid on the Celebrity Club. Years later he remembered saying, “You guys here again? What are you poking for this time? Why the hell don’t you bring your beds with you? . . . I pay \$80,000 a year in taxes, and the raids the police are making here cost me \$5000 last week.”⁵²

The end of the beleaguered Celebrity Club was now in sight. “I’d get someone like Ellington to come here directly from a command performance for he Queen of England—and what would happen?” Filippi recalled in a 1982 interview. “He’d have to put up with being frowned upon by two-bit politicians and cops. It was a shame . . . Finally, it all got to be too much so we just closed it down.”⁵³ Thus the efforts of

the Providence police, and of others hostile to the Celebrity Club, such as Superior Court judge Eugene Jalbert—a man who had treated the club with disdain from its inception, and who referred to it during its final year of operation as “a place where crime is inspired and promoted”⁵⁴—had succeeded in doing away with this remarkable institution.

It should be recognized, though, that there were other factors contributing to the club’s demise as well. Not least of these was the changing face of American popular music, with jazz taking a back seat among some audiences to the nascent popularity of rock and roll. No longer was there enough momentum to keep the venue’s mission alive. The club’s image had been tarnished in the press, and this contributed to a decline in the number of suburban whites attending the shows. Moreover, Filippi had become less able to attract the biggest stars to the club, for there was growing competition from other venues that now wanted a piece of the pie he had done so much to create.

The Celebrity Club survived under new management for another two years after Filippi sold it in 1958, but it was no more than a mere shadow of its previous stature, and it closed for good in 1960. Eventually the building was demolished during Providence’s urban renewal wave of 1963, in an elaborate public

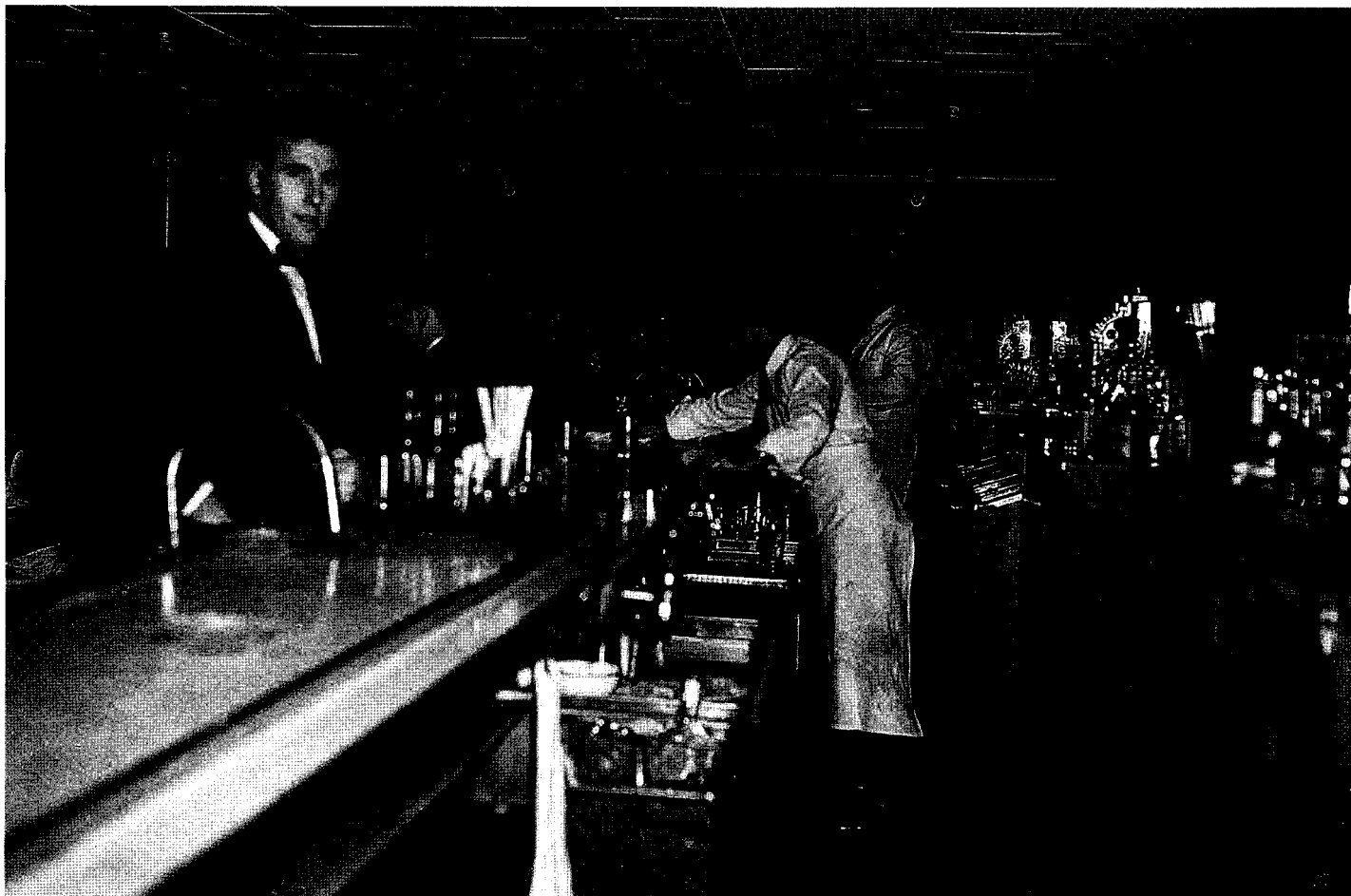
works project that displaced Providence’s Randall Square and Lippitt Hill communities to make way for the Interstate 95 highway. “My club was able to go on for a good number of years,” a philosophical Filippi reflected, “but like all good clubs, they have their day, they have their time, and they wear themselves out.”⁵⁵



George Shearing was the Celebrity Club’s featured attraction on 19 December 1951. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 7789, 7786).



The extent of the Celebrity Club's influence on the social environment of Providence is not easy to measure. It is clear, however, that the postwar interracial jazz scene, for all its growth, was not unaffected by wider social conditions, and that although the Celebrity Club doubtlessly helped to foster new perspectives and behavior among some Rhode Islanders, such changes were limited by the powerful prevailing tradition of racial discrimination. As James Rhea wrote in 1953, "A goal of true racial equality is not yet in sight. At their best, the gains in employment and in personal relations between whites and Negroes are little more than indicators of what is possible in the United States."⁵⁶



The Celebrity Club was an important site that brought people from diverse backgrounds together, and in this way it helped create new forms of dialogue and understanding. Yet social change does not happen overnight, or through isolated events or situations. During the 1950s black and white musicians alike still knew when they could play together and when they could not, just as they had known for decades previous. With racial restrictions in place, white musicians had far greater opportunities than their black counterparts; they might perform at the Celebrity Club, for instance, and then travel across town to another gig, while African Americans most often could do no more than retire to house parties or after-hours clubs in black neighborhoods, such as Daddy Blacks on Pleasant Street.⁵⁷ Although white musicians may have grown to respect black musicians more during this time, they usually did so at a distance, rarely challenging the status quo by working to level the uneven playing field of the mainstream music business. This racial separation was reinforced

by the Providence musicians' union, which barred African Americans from membership: most union members would not play with nonunion musicians.⁵⁸

When the color line finally began to blur in the 1950s, and black and white local musicians started to work together with greater frequency, all too often the camaraderie did not extend much beyond the stage. The Celebrity Club set an important precedent by helping to break down superficial barriers between blacks and whites—who could now play, and listen to, music together inside such an establishment—but the club's role in creating altogether new social relationships was less significant. Generally speaking, musicians and patrons of the Celebrity Club tended

to keep to their respective neighborhoods, families, and friends. The interaction between the club's diverse patrons was indeed new and subversive, but real social change requires deeper relationships.

The bandstand and dance floor may have been a good first step in this direction, but they were not an end in themselves. As Rhode Island jazz musician Tony Agostinelli put it in an interview, "We didn't think, 'Are we building relationships?' But looking back, it made a great impact on cultural fertilization."⁵⁹ "It was a melting pot," said singer Clay Osborne, reminiscing about the Celebrity Club. "That's what I liked about it . . . Yes, that made a big change in Providence. Certainly. Mostly [before the Celebrity Club opened] blacks went to black-owned clubs, and vice versa. But this place got them together. They didn't have much trouble with it either, except maybe a couple nights when somebody got drunk, but it wasn't a race thing."⁶⁰

Other accounts concur with this description of the Celebrity Club. LaMoyne

Waite frequently witnessed arguments where he ran a shoe-shine business in front of the club, but "they were never racial—it was based on jealousy, girls."⁶¹ When Barrington resident Paul Darling took a photo of his date's silhouette inside the club one night, and the photo was published in the Providence Journal, Darling received an irate phone call from a man who mistakenly believed that the woman was his girlfriend. The issue was cleared up without incident.⁶² According to bandleader Arthur Medeiros, anyone talking too loud at the club would be asked to quiet down, and would usually do so without argument.⁶³

Several white veterans of the postwar jazz scene, such as Tony Agostinelli, subsequently joined the multiracial civil rights movement of the latter 1950s and 1960s. The musicians' union eventually was desegregated, as were more and more of Providence's musical venues. Musicians and audience members from diverse back-



Some patrons at the Celebrity Club, 12 December 1951. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7783, 7784).

grounds began to grow closer. The jazz scene, and the Celebrity Club, had helped to plant certain seeds, and it was now up to individuals, and the rest of society, to water them.

The work for social change remains incomplete. The path to racial equality in Rhode Island has been long, marked with many difficulties and setbacks. However, the culture of such institutions as the Celebrity Club, and actions taken by individuals and groups to challenge the status quo, have inspired important, if gradual and piecemeal, alterations in our social attitudes and customs. Though much has been accomplished, much remains to be done; and in the ongoing efforts for social transformation, the Celebrity Club—for all its limited success—may serve as an example of what can be accomplished by people of vision and goodwill.

Notes

1. Lloyd S. Kaplan and Robert E. Petteruti, *Who's Who in Rhode Island Jazz, c. 1925 to 1988* (West Greenwich, R.I.: Consortium Publishing, 1991), 7.
2. Tony Lioce, "Inner City Arts Salutes the Celebrity Club," *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 25 June 1982, p. W-8.
3. Ken Franckling, "Rhode Island Has Rich History as Jazz Incubator," *Providence Journal*, 28 July 1991, p. E-5.
4. Andrew J. Bell Jr., *An Assessment of Life in Rhode Island as an African American in the Era from 1918 to 1993* (New York: Vantage, 1997), 103.
5. *Jazz on a Sunday Afternoon*, pamphlet for a concert featuring Rose Weaver and Greg Wardson, 1981, Black Heritage Society Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society.
6. Only part of the Raymond Building's first floor remains today. Carmen Maiocco, *Downcity: Downtown Providence in the 1950s* (Providence: n.p., 1998), 59.
7. Lloyd S. Kaplan and Robert E. Petteruti, *Who's Who*, 3.
8. *Ibid.*, 33.
9. *Ibid.*, 13-15. See also Anthony J. Agostinelli, "Some Rhode Island Jazz Notables" (paper presented at a meeting of the Music Library Association, New England Chapter, Brown University, 20 Oct. 1984), 3; Michael Erlewine, Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, Scott Yanow, eds. *All Music Guide to Jazz*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1996), 319.
10. Arthur Medeiros, interview by the author, Pawtucket, November 2001.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Erlewine et al., *All Music Guide to Jazz*, 291.
13. *Ibid.* See also Agostinelli, "Rhode Island Jazz Notables," 4; Vaughn Watson, "100 Years in Music: A Century of the Rhode Island Music Scene," *Providence Journal*, 19 Dec. 1999, p. E-1; Franckling, "Rich History." The solo is captured on the recording *Ellington at Newport, 1956*, Columbia/Legacy.
14. Bradford F. Swan, "Pawtucket Sax Star Big Hit at Newport," *Providence Journal*, 5 July 1959, p. N-19.
15. Mike Boehm, "Reaching for a Star," *Providence Journal*, 12 Oct. 1986, p. M-6.
16. Clay Osborne, two interviews by the author, East Providence, October 2001.
17. *Ibid.*
18. "Local Nite Club Denies Service to All Negroes," *Providence Chronicle*, 10 Sept. 1949, p. 1; "Negro Couple Here Sues Night Club," *Providence Journal*, 11 Nov. 1949, p. 19.
19. Doug Riggs, "On Race, R.I. 'Could Be Better,'" *Providence Journal*, 4 Feb. 1996, p. A-17.
20. Osborne, first interview; Maiocco, *Downcity*, 65.
21. Clay Osborne spoke with me candidly about white Providence musicians who refused to play with blacks, even as it became more accepted in the latter postwar era and beyond.
22. Bell, *Life in Rhode Island*, 56.
23. Lioce, "Inner City Arts."
24. "Gala Opening for Celebrity Club," *Providence Chronicle*, 26 Nov. 1949, p. 5.
25. Advertisement, *Providence Chronicle*, 5 Nov. 1949, p. 8.
26. Donald D. Breed, "For One Monday It Will Again Be Saturday Night at the Celebrity Club," *Providence Journal*, 10 Feb. 1986, p. A-2.
27. Quoted from the independent documentary film *Oh How We Danced*, by John Belcher, Brian Jones, and Dorothy Jungels, Providence, 1982.
28. Lioce, "Inner City Arts."
29. "Celebrity Club Enlarges," *Providence Chronicle*, 1 July 1950, p. 6.
30. Frederick Williamson, "At the Celebrity Club," weekly series, *Providence Chronicle*, 30 Sept. 1950, p. 4.
31. *Ibid.*, 14 Oct. 1950, p. 4; 21 Oct. 1950, p. 4.
32. *Ibid.*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 4.
33. *Ibid.*, 2 June 1951, p. 5.
34. Breed, "For One Monday."
35. Rhea, James N., "Attitude toward Negroes Gradually Changing Here," *Providence Journal*, 13 Dec. 1950, p. 11.
36. Williamson, "At the Celebrity Club," 2 Dec. 1950, p. 4.
37. Rhea, James N. *Bulge in the Color Line* (Providence: Providence Journal-Bulletin Co., 1953), p. 4.
38. Mike Boehm, "It's Time to Stomp Again: At the Celebrity Club Revival, a Rhythm and Blues Reunion," *Providence Journal*, 18 Feb. 1986: p. C-1.
39. Kaplan and Petteruti, *Who's Who*, 7.
40. Watson, "100 Years in Music."

Notes *continued*

41. "Jazz Pianist Edward Soares Dies at 77," *Providence Journal*, 2 Mar. 1993, p. D-10.
42. Williamson, "At the Celebrity Club," 2 Dec. 1950.
43. Donald D. Breed, "Celebrity Club Lives Again for a Night," *Providence Journal*, 25 Feb. 1986, p. C-1.
44. David Hector, interview by the author, Providence, October 2001.
45. "Detectives Arrest 4 in Narcotics Raids," *Providence Journal*, 18 Dec. 1954, pp. 1, 3; "Pleads Innocent in Dope Cases," *Providence Journal*, 19 Dec. 1954, p. 26; "6 Night Spots Raided in Narcotics Search," *Providence Journal*, 6 Jan. 1955, p. 1; "Police Continue Drive on Drugs," *Providence Journal*, 7 Jan. 1955, p. 11; John Strohmeier, "Teenagers Buy Drugs in Ice Cream Parlors," *Providence Journal*, 7 Jan. 1955, p. 11.
46. "6 Night Spots Raided"; "Police Continue Drive"; Strohmeier, "Teenagers Buy Drugs."
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49. "Finds No Youth Drug Problem," *Providence Journal*, 18 Dec. 1954, p. 1.
50. "Plate Thrower Gets Leniency," *Providence Journal*, 19 Jan. 1955, p. 1.
51. Frederick Williamson, "Night Club Owner Assails Anti-Negro Radio Disc Jockey," *Providence Chronicle*, 13 Dec. 1952, p. 1.
52. Breed, "For One Monday."
53. Lioce, "Inner City Arts."
54. "Celebrity Club Blasted Anew by Judge Jalbert," *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 8 Apr. 1960, p. 34.
55. *Oh How We Danced*.
56. Rhea, *Color Line*, 48.
57. LaMoyné Waite, interview by the author, Providence, November 2001.
58. The Boston scene was also segregated in this regard, but it supported two separate unions, one white and one black, and some of Rhode Island's African American musicians carried Boston union cards.
59. Anthony J. Agostinelli, interview by the author, Portsmouth, R.I., September 2001.
60. Osborne, first interview.
61. Waite interview.
62. Paul Darling, interview by the author, Barrington, September 2001.
63. Medeiros interview.