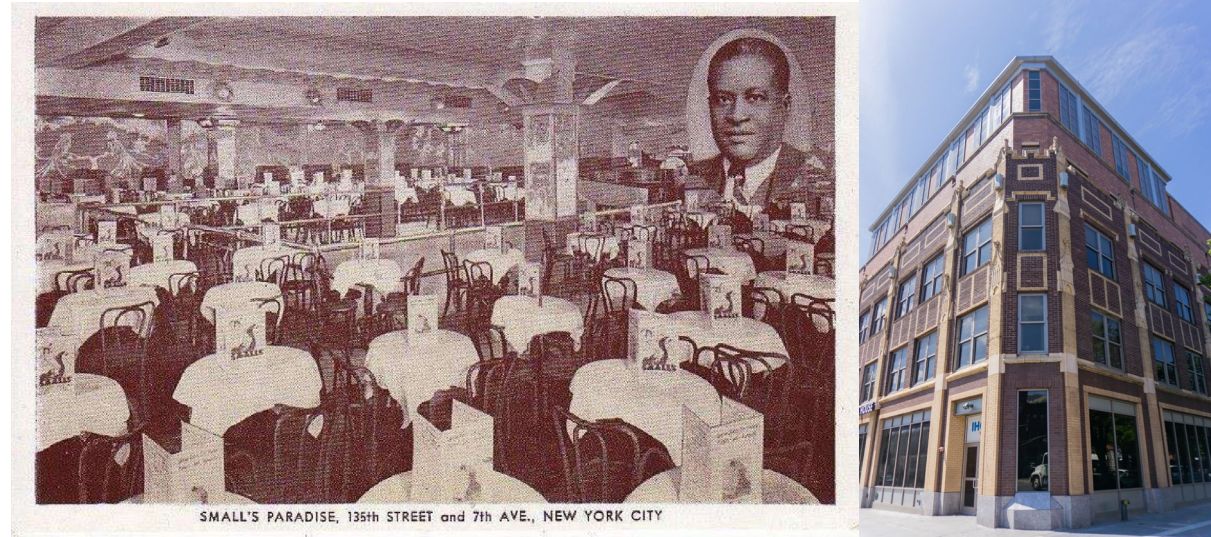


Smalls Paradise

Interior Demolished 2002

2294 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd



Left: Photo of the Paradise Room at Smalls Paradise in New York. The man pictured at upper right is Ed Smalls, founder of the club and its owner until 1955. Pre-1978. Photo by Eagle Post Card View Company, distributed under public domain.

Right: Looking up at the corner of Small's Paradise. Photo: Lorraine Colbert

Smalls Paradise was owned by African American Edwin Alexander Smalls, grandson of Robert Smalls, an escaped slave, civil war hero, and member of the United States House of Representatives. Smalls Paradise was the only one of the well-known Harlem nightclubs owned by an African American, and integrated.

When Smalls opened the club in the rented basement of a newly built office building at 2294 Seventh Avenue (now Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard), he envisioned a night club which would include his neighbors but would also be attractive to New Yorkers who lived in the city's downtown. Smalls arranged a lavish gala for the club's opening on October 26, 1925, with almost 1,500 people in attendance. Though Prohibition was in effect, patrons were able to bring their own liquor, or purchase bootlegged liquor from the club's waiters. On any given night, the patrons at Smalls could include movie stars, New York's social elite, and folks from the neighborhood.

The entertainment at Smalls Paradise was not limited to the stage. Waiters, including Malcolm X, (Malcolm Little at the time) danced the Charleston or roller-skated as they delivered orders to customers. Unlike most Harlem clubs, which closed between 3:00 and 4:00 am, Smalls was open all night, offering a breakfast dance featuring a full floor show, beginning at 6:00 am. For 10 years, the house band was Charlie Johnson and his musicians. Members of Johnson's band included Jabbo Smith, Benny Carter, Jimmy Harrison, Sidney De Paris, and Sidney Bechet, all of whom became famous solo musicians.

In 1955, Ed Smalls sold the club to Tommy Smalls (no relation). In May 1956, Tommy was elected as the unofficial Mayor of Harlem, with a parade held on 125th Street in his honor. Tommy sold the club to Harlem businessman Pete McDougal and basketball great Wilt Chamberlain. The club was renamed Big Wilt's Smalls Paradise.

Smalls Paradise was the longest-operating club in Harlem before it closed in 1986. Smalls Paradise had two major competitors when it opened, the Cotton Club and Connie's Inn, both of which closed in 1933. The building had at least three different owners between 1987 and 2002. In 2002, Abyssinian Cultural Building Corp., a nonprofit affiliate of Abyssinian Baptist Church, bought the building. It was immediately leased to the NYC Board of Education for Thurgood Marshall Academy, named for America's first African American Supreme Court Justice. The building's interior was demolished, and additional floors constructed.

Edwin Alexander Smalls and Tommy Smalls were lifelong Harlem residents after migrating from South Carolina and Georgia, respectively.