

The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino

Demolished 2015

2341–2349 Seventh Avenue



The Renaissance Theater and Renaissance Casino and Ballroom. Photo: Wikipedia

The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino, located on the northeast corner of Seventh Avenue (now Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard) and West 137th Street, was the place where black folks went to celebrate life's milestones, party, and just have fun. "The Renny," as it was called by Harlemites, was the brainchild of West Indian immigrants William H. Roach from Antigua and Cleophus Charity and Joseph H. Sweeney from Montserrat. The three were members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and believed in Garvey's ideology of self-reliance for people of African descent.

Messrs. Roach, Charity, and Sweeney financed the purchase of the land and construction of the building by selling shares in their company, Sarco Realty & Holding Company, Inc., for 10 cents a share. In 1920, they commissioned African American architect Harry Creighton Ingalls to design the Moorish-inspired building, which housed a ballroom, a billiard parlor, stores, a basketball court, a restaurant, and a 900-seat theater. The Renaissance was most likely America's first entertainment complex.

The Renny, unlike the segregated Cotton Club and Savoy, was opened to African Americans and offered the same level of entertainment and excellence. Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, and others entertained African American audiences at The Renny. The Renny provided a variety of entertainment for all ages, including prize fights, movies, shows, basketball games, with its in-house team, dance parties, and private events. The Honorable David Dinkens, New York City's first African American Mayor, held his wedding reception at The Renny in 1953.

The Sarco Realty Company sold the Renny in 1931, and the new owner continued to operate the business until 1979. The Abyssinian Development Corporation purchased the property in 1991. Also, in 1991 the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission calendared the building for Individual Landmark designation, but it was never designated. The Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts III, the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, told The New York Times in 1995 that he expected to start the restoration of the ballroom by the end of that year, saying "People have got to have a place to laugh, sing and dance," however, the ballroom was never restored.

The Abyssinian Development Corporation sold the property to developer BRP Companies for \$15 million. BRP demolished the building and built a luxury condominium building named "The Rennie." A listing of apartments for sale describes The Rennie as follows: "In the heart of this community, a full-service building with a dedicated, full-time doorman. This complex also comes with a variety of amenities, such as a furnished rooftop terrace with grills, a second entertaining terrace, a party room with a screening area, a gym, a children's playroom, a laundry room, and, for an extra fee, storage, and private parking. This is a pet-friendly building with a pet spa." Current costs for an apartment in The Rennie range from \$598,000 for a studio, to \$925,000 for a two-bedroom.