

Breakfast Clubs

By 1945, San Pedro Street, from First to Fifth, had a concentration of popular night spots that competed with clubs around 42nd and Central. Shepp's Playhouse was one of the most well-known breakfast clubs.

In the fall of 1944, the Los Angeles City Council targeted breakfast clubs by forbidding business to be conducted between the hours of midnight and 6 a.m., except by special permit. Most breakfast club applications for these special permits were denied, and Roy "Sonny" Howard of the Apex Breakfast Club was one of the first to be arrested for violating the ordinance. A group of breakfast club owners, including Tommie Lewis of the Creole Palace in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo, protested. Attorney Walter L. Gordon Jr., successfully persuaded the council to reconsider the previously denied applications.

In March 1945, the city again targeted breakfast clubs by enacting a curfew that forbid entertainment after midnight. Some breakfast club owners temporarily closed their doors, while others like Shepp's Playhouse moved their entertainment hours to end at 10:30 p.m., rather than their regular offerings of a 10:30 p.m. and 12:45 a.m. floor shows. The unpopular curfew was lifted by May 1945.

CREOLE PALACE - 105 North San Pedro Street, upstairs (First & Pedro streets)

Creole Palace, run by Tommie Lewis, opened in the summer of 1943 and was one of the first breakfast clubs in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo. Actors Mantan Moreland and Lillian Randolph were regulars. Entertainment included Helen Andrews, Roy Milton and His Solid Senders, and Avery Parish and the Four Tones. In November 1943, Lewis remodeled the bottom floor into a cocktail lounge.

CIELITO LINDO " 131 North San Pedro Street

Cielito Lindo, translated "Beautiful Heaven," was another early breakfast club and opened in the fall of 1943. Its hours were from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m.

COBRA ROOM or COBRA CLUB " 300 East First Street (First & San Pedro streets)

The Cobra Room opened its doors in August 1944. Earl Griffin, who made an unsuccessful bid for a Los Angeles County Supervisor's seat earlier in 1944 and sometimes referred to as the "Mayor of First Street," hosted the shows before leaving for another Bronzeville/Little Tokyo night spot, the Club Rendezvous. Guests included well-known performers such as Louise Beavers, Herb Jeffries, Rex Ingram and Harry Nicholas of the Nicholas Brothers dance team. Entertainment included Red Callender, Zutty Singleton, Mabel Scott and the Flennoy Trio.

SHEPP'S PLAYHOUSE " First & Los Angeles streets

Gordon Sheppard, a former Hollywood cameraman, opened Shepp's on Sept. 12, 1944. He hired Ben Waller to manage the club, and Leonard Reed to produce the floor shows. Reed was a nationally known performer and producer, who worked at New York's Cotton Club and headlined the popular Southern California theater act, "Sweet 'n Hot" at the Theater. In 1945, Reed went through a nasty public divorce filing with Artie Brandon Reed, a dancer at Shepp's.

The music at Shepp's was broadcasted five nights weekly at 12:30 a.m., except Sundays and Tuesdays. In May 1945, Waller started a radio program on KPAS titled, "The Central Avenue Breakdown," which took listeners on an imaginary train ride to "Avenue" spots, accompanied by the latest music recordings. Waller even opened a booking office at 223 West Second Street.

Floyd Snelson, New York transplant and former journalist, was hired as public relations director. With so many New Yorkers, the club formed a New York Colony Club of Los Angeles and met weekly.

In 1946, Billy Berg, well-known Hollywood supper club owner, purchased a half interest in Shepp's.

Many notable performers appeared at Shepp's. When Gerald Wilson left the Jimmie Lunceford band to form his own orchestra in 1944, he first performed at Shepp's for 12 weeks. Wilson returned to Shepp's in the fall of 1945 for a 15 week engagement.

In 1945, Foster Johnson produced the floor show, starring Valaida Snow, who made her first West Coast appearance at Shepp's on July 30, 1945. Snow had survived eight months in a Nazi death camp.

Other well-known performers to appear at Shepp's include the Bardu Ali Band; Peg Leg Bates; the Harris Brothers dance team; Coleman Hawkins; Eddie Heywood; Herb Jeffries, formerly with the Duke Ellington band; Joe Liggins and His Honey Drippers; Marva Louis, briefly married to Joe Louis; Effie Smith; dancers Snooks and Allen; and T-Bone Walker.

Of note was a July 1945 event co-sponsored by the California Eagle and the USO Caravan Service. The show featured Peg Leg Bates, a dancer with one wooden leg. His dancing both entertained and inspired the battle-scarred soldiers, some of whom were missing limbs like Bates. The dancer regularly appeared at hospitals and Army camps.

Shepp's reputation attracted the likes of Count Basie, Helen Humes, Heavyweight Champion Joe Louis, Judy Garland, Gene Kelly and Pearl Bailey, among others.

In 1946, attorney Walter L. Gordon successfully represented Sheppard in an entrapment case. The Los Angeles Police Department's vice squad, posing as armed servicemen, appeared towards closing time and implored the management to serve one more drink as a patriotic favor, thus forcing Shepp's to break a no-liquor after midnight law. The State Board of Equalization revoked Shepp's liquor license suspension and condemned the vice officers for using the uniform of military men to entrap law violators.

Friendly rivalry among local clubs extended to the basketball courts as workers at Shepp's played against other club employees at the 28th Street YMCA.

FINALE CLUB â€” 230 1/2 East First Street

The Finale Club first opened in the fall of 1944. Among the fundraisers the club sponsored was one to raise money to purchase equipment for the Bronzeville playground. A few months later, the club closed and re-opened in the spring of 1946, with Foster Johnson and Taylor H. Cooper as the new proprietors. Prince Spencer served as host of the floor shows. Charley Parker headlined the club show on March 21, 1946. Radio station KXLA broadcasted the shows every Saturday, Monday and Tuesday nights.

CLUB RENDEVOUS -251 East First Street, upstairs (First & San Pedro streets)

Club Rendezvous opened in February 1945 under the management of Beatrice (mother) and Edgar (son) Reeves, with Earl Griffin as club host. It was one of the few, if not the only club, to serve both American and Chinese food. By this time, competition among the clubs was fierce. A March 1945 California Eagle column claimed that someone was telling potential customers that there was nothing at this address and encouraging them to patronize another club across the street. To boost publicity, the club hosted a testimonial dance in honor of Charlotta Bass, publisher/editor of the California Eagle who was running for a Los Angeles council seat. Entertainment was provided by Barney Bigard and his Rascals of Rhythm. The club temporarily closed and re-opened in May 1945, with extended hours of a breakfast club. Among those who played at Club Rendezvous were: Roy Milton and His Solid Senders, Charles Waterford, Happy Johnson's Swing Quartet and Clarence William's Rhythm Quintet.

OTHER BRONZEVILLE/LITTLE TOKYO CLUBS

CHERRYLAND COCKTAIL LOUNGE â€” 725 East Fifth Street
(Walter H. Hawkins, proprietor, later opened the International Theatrical Agency in Bronzeville)

COPPER ROOM â€” 119 North San Pedro

DOWN TOWN HOUSE â€” 117 North San Pedro Street

ELITE CAFÃ‰ â€” 114 Weller Street (near First at Los Angeles streets)

OWL CAFE â€” 623 East Fifth Avenue (brother opened Ringold CafÃ©)

THE PALMS â€” 131 North San Pedro Street

RINGOLD CAFÃ‰ â€” 243 East Second Street

ROSE ROOM â€” Fifth and Central

SAMBA THEATRE-CAFÃ‰ â€” 707 East Fifth Street

SAN MARK CAFÃ‰ â€” 208 North San Pedro Street

OTHER ENTERTAINMENT FACILITIES

LINDA LEA THEATRE â€” 324 East First Street

Linda Lea Theatre opened in February 1945. The first opening week featured stage acts as well as a movie showing. Sammy Yates and his Linda Lea orchestra provided the music. Stage performances included Spike and Mike, dubbed

the "futuristic tapsters"; Bill Kay's Kayettes, a line of chorus dancers; Cannibal White and Co., a comedy team; among others. On the screen was "Minstrel Man" and "Brazil." The theater, with the Rev. A. A. Jenkins, held a fundraiser in 1945 to raise money for a new church recreation/community center on First Street.

THEATRE ARTS BUILDING " 313 1/2 East First Street

The Theatre Arts Building housed a number of entertainment-related businesses. Foster Johnson and Prince Spencer opened their dance studio in June 1945. Howard McGhee taught modern swing in Suite 28, and actor Rex Ingram offered drama classes. The International Theatrical Agency opened their doors in August 1945 and sought new talent for radio, stage, screen and television.

UNION

In March 1946, a picket line formed in front of the Last Word Club, 4206 S. Central Avenue. The breakfast club was owned by Curtis Mosby, who also owned the Club Alabam and had been voted the "Mayor of Central Avenue" by Los Angeles Sentinel readers.

The newly formed Culinary Workers and Bartenders Union, which was part of the Retail Clerk's Union Local 770 of the AFL, had earlier been successful in unionizing other African American establishments along Central Avenue, including the Downbeat Room, Clark's Hotel, Dynamite Jackson's Club Paradise and Johnson's Caf .

To counter the union, Mosby and B.B. Bratton organized the Southeast Businessmen's Association, and a heated debate on the union drive was held at the Forum.

The union claimed that the businesses charged higher prices for food and services than similar establishments in other districts but paid lower wages, while the businessmen alleged that the African American workers were incompetent and lacked experience.

BEAUTY CONTEST

The VFW auxiliary No. 2651 held a "Bathing Beauty Contest" on September 27, 1945, at the Elks Hall. Contestants were sponsored by various clubs and organizations. The winner was sponsored by the Digby Hotel, a Bronzeville business.