

Jazz in the Sutherland Lounge

by Charles Walton

The Sutherland Lounge was located on the first floor of what the Sutherland Hotel at 4659 South Drexel Boulevard, a building that has been refurbished and converted into residential apartments. The Lounge was located at the north end of the first floor. It had a large square bar, and in the middle of this bar was a raised stage which was large enough for the Gerry Mulligan Big Band to perform on.

The Sutherland Hotel an elegant abode for Black people including, among many others, Louis Armstrong. With a plush mauve carpet, crystal chandeliers, the Sutherland was be one most elegant and spacious Jazz rooms in the country. During the 1950's and 1960's the Lounge was one of a number of top jazz places on the South Side attracting performers like Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillispie and Von Freeman. In 1961 and 1962, Larry Smith, who was to become Chicago's most prominent jazz radio host, got his start by interviewing celebrities in the hall outside the Lounge.

Whites came from nearby Hyde Park and from the suburbs. It was 'Black and Tan', or integrated we would say now, as were a number of nightspots on the South Side: Club De Lisa, Mc Kee's, The Bee Hive, and Becky and Danny Munroe's all-night restaurant in the Evans Hotel at 61st and Evans, where the late night crowd and celebrities gathered.

As a drummer I played the Sutherland Lounge many times. I still play, but now I mainly try to record the memories of others and keep alive the story of Chicago jazz. Some of the memories of the Sutherland are recorded here:

Artie Frazier (prominent bar tender at the Lounge and other places on the South Side): "I started working in the fall of 1958 when the Lounge began the big name entertainment starting with Billy Taylor and his trio. They had a packed house, with a majority of the people connected with show business.

"I remember that different musicians drew different types of crowds. Monk's crowd probably was the most 'way out' group. People were coming long distances to see their favorite artist. They would arrange their vacations around the appearances of different attractions. The Sutherland was more a white clientele club and the people felt comfortable bringing their kids in to see an artist."

Larry Smith, Broadcaster: "What really gave my career a springboard was radio station WSBC-FM, who had an idea of doing a live interview show from the Sutherland Lounge. In 1959, the person doing the show could not handle it. Big names such as Lenny Bruce, Count Basie, etc., would come by. I was sent out to fill in until they could get someone of Daddy-O or Sid McCoy stature. I continued to do the program. One month went by, then two, when someone said, 'I think we have the right man doing the job.' I lasted there on the job for two and a half years, working every night except Monday, which was jam session night. Joe Segal ran the jam session in a room in the basement, under the Sutherland Lounge.

I had a chance to meet everyone that was anyone during that time because of the name acts that were booked in the Sutherland Lounge and the stars that came to see them. I was ordered not to interview three people — Redd Foxx, Dinah Washington, and Miles Davis — because of their free use of profanity. Redd promised not to do any blue material during one of my shows, but when he got into it, all promises were forgotten."

Joe Segal — Jazz Promoter: “I started doing jam sessions at the Sutherland Lounge when the Vee-Jay Record Company had the Lounge. It was probably through Sid McCoy that I became associated with the Vee-Jay people; Ewart Abner, then the President of the Record Company, was the person I dealt with. The company had a couple of places other than the Sutherland Lounge. One was in the Rush Street area, called Basin Street. I promoted a couple of sessions there with Johnny Griffin and, I think, the other was with Eddie Harris. The other club, The Bird House, was at Dearborn and Division, where they were in partnership with a person whose name I can’t remember now. I did the last date that was held there — it was a Charlie Parker Memorial Concert, and Vee-Jay recorded the program.

“I started doing jam sessions in the Lounge and shifted to the New York Room in the basement, and the jam sessions caught on. It was there that drummer Joe Dukes was discovered and saxophonist Roland Kirk caught on. I can’t remember when I stopped at the Sutherland — probably just before the Lounge closed.”

Artie Frazier: “I had known Vivian and Jimmy before they became owners of the Lounge. When I got out of the army in 1946, Vivian was a waitress at the Club DeLisa. I married a girl who was also a waitress at the Club DeLisa. We were so poor that the four of us — Vivian, Jimmy, my wife and myself — would walk from State Street to Washington Park (seven blocks) to catch a jitney cab for 10 cents each. Jimmy and I were so close that we could have been wearing the same clothes, except that I was too tall.”

In the 1960’s “Cadillac” Bob Lee reopened the Lounge as the “Gene Ammons Foundation” with Lloyd Price and his big band, with no success. Bob held on for awhile but he finally closed.

Three hotels in the Black community — the DuSable on Oakwood Blvd and Cottage Grove Ave., the Pershing, on 64th and Cottage Grove, and the Sutherland —were hotels where “Cadillac” Bob Lee had operated the last night club in each of them. Each of the hotels had been a focal point of activity in their time. Each had been a gathering place for entertainers and for entertainment in BRONZEVILLE.

The Sutherland went through a long period of decline and was closed in 1982. In 1989 renovation began which lead to the creation of 159 units of affordable housing. At the present time a fundraising campaign is underway to renovate the ballroom so that the area can be used for live performances as well as arts training.

[This is one of a series of articles being published monthly through a collaboration of the Herald with the Hyde Park Historical Society.

Charles Walton is a professional jazz drummer and writer of two monthly columns on the web site of the Jazz Institute of Chicago. This article was modified from the original published by the Jazz Institute of Chicago at <http://jazzinstituteofchicago.org/index.asp?target=/jazzgram/bronzeville/sutherland.asp>. The Hyde Park Historical Society’s Annual Meeting, taking place on February 22, at 6:00 p.m. at the Quadrangle Club, will focus on a similar theme. It will feature Timuel Black and Jimmy Ellis remembering how it was to “Grow Up with Jazz on the South Side,” accompanied by *The Jimmy Ellis Combo*. For reservations call 773/288-1242.]