Little Harlem Club Collection, Rare Books Room, Buffalo/Erie County Public Library

Completed October 2013 by Alison Fraser, with support from the Riverrun Foundation.

Brief overview of the physical holdings:

The Buffalo and Erie County Public Library acquired the Little Harlem Club Collection in 2002. It includes a 4th anniversary program for Montgomery's Hotel (342 Curtiss St.); a 14th anniversary program for the Little Harlem Club (494-496 Michigan Ave.), which is signed by many of its employees and musicians; a small poster for the Little Harlem Club; and 27 8"x10" photographs from inside the club and of entertainers, several of which are signed. These photographs seem to date from the mid- to late-1930s. The Collection also includes approximately 125 family photos, some of which were in a photo album, potentially of the Montgomery family. These photographs seem to date from the 1920s. While many people in the photographs have been identified, many more still need to be assessed.

Brief overview of the significance of the Little Harlem:

The Little Harlem Club was a keystone business in the African-American community in Buffalo, as an artistic venue, social meeting place, and political hub. The Little Harlem complemented Buffalo's place on the Chitlin' Circuit, the nation-wide jazz route, absorbing the influx of musicians and providing the launching pad for the careers of many significant musicians including Jean Eldridge, who sang for Duke Ellington; LeRoy "Stuff" Smith, jazz violinist; and orchestra leader Jimmie Lunceford. Ann Montgomery, one of the first female African-American business leaders in Buffalo, established and ran the club. She booked talented female bandleaders like Lil Armstrong and Sherdena Walker, and producers like Florence Hill. Aside

from being a trailblazing business in Buffalo, the Little Harlem proved its worth to the business community by being successful through the Depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt invited its manager, Harold Tyler, to a national conference on business and the country's economic situation, where Tyler made headlines. These photographs thus provide a look into the successful club itself as well as the intimate world of its owner.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the photographs be stored in a different order and in different materials. The photographs that remain in the photo album should be removed and sorted into archival-grade, acid-free storage folders. The library should attempt to purchase copies of the *Buffalo Criterion* from 1925-1952, and establish an agreement with the Buffalo Historical Society and the Colored Musicians Club Museum to jointly share images and materials.

Disclaimer:

This report does not offer a complete picture of the Little Harlem Club, much less the jazz scene in Buffalo in the 1920s and 1930s. The information assembled here is taken primarily from research in archives, newspapers, and other scholarly sources, and does not offer personal anecdotes, reminisces, or other more important sources of the history and life of the Little Harlem. In short, there is much work still to be done on the collection and the history of the Little Harlem. It is my hope that this report will offer the scaffolding for future projects—scholarly, creative, and personal alike.

Brief history:

The history of the Little Harlem Club offers insight into the burgeoning music scene in early-twentieth-century Buffalo and across the United States, as well as race and gender relations. The Little Harlem underwent several reiterations starting in 1910, when it was an ice cream parlor. It was at various times a Chinese-American restaurant, billiards hall, and musical venue until its destruction in a fire in 1992. Until her death in 1978, Ann Montgomery ran the Little Harlem. The photographs in the Grosvenor Room at the Buffalo/Erie County Public Library illustrate a small period of the life of the Little Harlem during its most productive years in the 1930s. Scenes from floorshows as well as signed portraits of performers dominate one half of the collection. The other half contains photographs of a wealthy family in Buffalo.

The Little Harlem was well known in jazz circles across the United States. A special 1935 article on the club in the *Chicago Defender*, "Buffalo Has Red Hot Night Club," proclaims that "[a]bout the hottest spot in town is Anne Montgomery's 'Little Harlem.' . . . Chicago has its Grand Terrace and New York its Cotton Club, but Buffalo steps up for her claim to night life fame with Miss Montgomery's swanky rendezvous for the pleasure-seekers. 'Little Harlem' [has a] marvelous show, fine bar and great band." The article's focus on Ann herself is notable: it reports that when customers enter the club, they immediately ask, "Where's Anne?" "Anne's place reflects Anne," the article confidently reports. "This night club could be of no other kind with[out] Anne at the helm. Her technique—that is her flair for giving her guests correct entertainment[—]remind you of the late Texas Guinan" (2/2/35, 8). Tippy Tee, writer for the *Chicago Defender*, observed that "Ann Montgomery's Little Harlem again showed itself to be the class of all nite clubs west of New York City. . . . [T]here are few in the big city that excel it"

(“Florence Hill” 9/26/36, 21). Also known as “The Institution” and “The finest theatre restaurant in Buffalo,” the Little Harlem enjoyed accolades from many (“Willie Mae Lane” 23). In another special article in the *Chicago Defender*, “Buffalo Has Plenty of Hot Night Spots,” two Montgomery establishments, the Montgomery Hotel and Little Harlem, are two of three clubs singled out for praise (the other is the Vendome Hotel). The Little Harlem is “another famous landmark of joy, owned and operated by a most capable business woman” (“NYS; Little Harlem” 8/1/42, 10). Perhaps no other journalist captures the common feeling toward the club like entertainment writer Len Reed, who, after describing the current floorshow at the Little Harlem at length, concluded: “um um um Buffalo gets the best of everything” (4/24/37).

According to the *Polk Business Directories*, Daniel Montgomery and his wife Ann (who is sometimes referred to as Anne or Anna) operated a saloon at 158 Exchange Street, the future location of one of two Montgomery Hotels. (The directories offer an individual’s occupation and where they reside, and little else.) Ann is not listed as a Montgomery in the directories until 1922, but she and Dan appear to have been together from at least 1920, when meeting minutes from musicians’ union Local 533 call her “Mrs. Montgomery.” Ann’s sole inclusion in these minutes suggests that by the early 1920s, she was the key operator of the Little Harlem.

By 1923, Anna M. Montgomery is listed as working and residing at 496 Michigan Avenue, while Daniel is listed as working and residing at 158 Exchange Street. This information points in several directions: that the Montgomerys were experiencing marital difficulties; that they were so wealthy they each could maintain a separate address; or that there was some benefit, financial or otherwise, to listing separate residences. (The two locations are a 15-minute walk apart.) The next year, Ann is not listed at all, and Dan appears to have taken over the

billiard parlor at 494 Michigan, which is also listed as his residence. For the next six years (1925-1931, excluding 1929), Ann is listed as owning and living at 494 Michigan, and they are both listed as owning the billiards parlor at 158 Exchange. In 1930, they acquired another property, 342 Curtiss, which became the second Montgomery Hotel. In 1930, Ann acquired the property next door to 494 Michigan, where she opened up a restaurant alongside her billiards parlor. However, in 1933, the billiard parlor at 494 Michigan is listed as a restaurant owned by Joseph Green of 1101 William St. It is unclear what happened in this year, but possibly financial difficulties caused by the Great Depression (1929-1939) could be the reason for this brief change in ownership. It is only in 1941 that the *Polk Business Directory* lists the Little Harlem by that name, though it had been known by that moniker since the 1920s. By the 1940s, it had a seating capacity of 350 with a dancing area, making it the largest nightclub in the area.

Dan Montgomery was "said to be the wealthiest" African-American in Buffalo (Campbell 7/24/37). Given their financial success, it is not surprising that Dan and Ann were taken to long driving cruises, which were frequently reported by the papers. Cars and filling stations also figure prominently in the family snapshots. In 1919, they brought out their new McLaughlin, likely a Buick H-45, the company's most popular touring vehicle that year. The next year, they spent seven months on the road to Mexico by way of Chicago. In 1940, after their divorce, Ann was spotted driving her luxury Parkard with companions around Buffalo.

The Montgomerys enjoyed sharing their success with their employees and friends. Ann hosted a picnic, possibly recorded in the photographs, on the fourth of July, 1937, for all employees of the Little Harlem. The outing, held at Como Lakes, included "canoeing, swimming, ball games" and many other events" ("July 24, 1937" 18). Ann held gatherings at her

country estate in Wanakaha, where guests enjoyed "motor boat[ing], fishing and swimming . . . [at her] private beach" (Campbell, "Add NY" 21).

Ann also spent much on the Little Harlem itself. The interior of the club was rich: tinted walls and draped ceilings were a nod to the so-called "Oriental effect" popular in the 1930s, and the "unique bandstand" that invoked "a night in Wonderland" was designed by Ann ("Mae Johnson" 8). The club was redesigned by Kampoulis in time for the eighth anniversary in 1936 (Tee, "Florence Hill" 21). In 1942, the club was redecorated again, this time with "many new ovations, including a circle bar, [a] streamlined chromium plated cocktail lounge in pastel shades and a galaxy of personable lady attendants" ("New York State; Little Harlem" Aug 1, 1942, 10).

Ann and Dan were divorced by 1938, when Dan is listed as residing with a woman named Mildred. Somewhat surprisingly, there was speculation in the early 1940s that the pair would soon reunite, but the wedding ring spotted on Ann's finger may have been that from her marriage to Paul Woodson, whom she married some time in the early 1940s, around the same period that he became manager of the Little Harlem ("NYS; Little Harlem" 8/1/42). Before he moved to Buffalo, Paul was stationed on an Army Air Force base in Tuskegee, Alabama. Ann later sat for a portrait at Tuskegee after their marriage (this photograph is located in the Buffalo Historical Society Research Library). Paul was a descendent of President Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings (Woodson 148).

Ann died in 1978 at the age of 87. She ran the Little Harlem in some capacity for 68 years. Born in Georgia, she lived in Los Angeles and Texas before moving to Buffalo in 1910, the year she opened the ice cream parlor. Her sister, Mamie Ellis, also moved to Buffalo and operated the jazz club the Gallant Fox until her death in December 1956. She had lived in Buffalo since the 1920s, when she moved here from Los Angeles. Her residence at time of death

is listed at Lake Shore Road in Wanakah, Ann's summer residence. Surviving family at the time lived in California and Georgia; Ann was the only one from Buffalo.

Relationship with Local 533:

In order to understand the Little Harlem's contribution to the local cultural scene, it is important to discuss Local 533, the African-American musicians' union in Buffalo. Local 533 required each black musician to sign in upon arrival in Buffalo and served as the liaison between musicians and venues. Local 533, the only local for African-Americans, was particularly successful in comparison to other locals in New York State, even during the Depression. While musicians traditionally had secured work playing in movie theaters as the musical score, the invention of talkies with film scores was making this line of work obsolete. Nevertheless, at the New York State Musicians Conference held on September 24, 1933, Local 533 was nearly alone in its positive report of its status: "membership hold[s] steady," the report reads, and the "Finances of [the] Local [are] good. Doing fairly good business" (2). More typical accounts from other locals reported that "business [is] quiet" or that they have experienced a "seventy-five percent drop in membership" and the "Depression [is] felt much" (NYS Musicians Conf. 3). Speakeasies like the Little Harlem that operated during Prohibition opened up new avenues of work for musicians and helped contribute to the Local's unique success. While there were conflicts between the Local and the club, both establishments enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship, and in 1938 the Local held their annual banquet at the Little Harlem.

The Buffalo 1920s labor movement "was small and, for the most part, unenthusiastic about black membership" (Watkins 93). (It is not incidental that Buffalo's KKK chapter was established during the same period.) Music was the exception, and this trend predated the 1920s.

In Buffalo, the African-American population was less than 1% of the total population in 1917 (Lee and Lee 5). Additionally, very few businesses were owned by African-Americans: for instance, in 1905 only 11 African-American women (2% of the African-American population) were successful business owners; in 1915—after Ann Montgomery began her business venture in 1910—this number increased to 23 (3.3%) (Williams, "Development" 161, 162). As Charles S. Johnson, Director of Research for the National Urban League, put it in 1923, opportunities for African-American women "are ridiculously low" (54). An early 1923 article in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (a journal that Johnson edited), "Opportunities for the Educated Colored Woman," written by Eva D. Bowles, elucidates on Johnson's pronouncement:

> The World War bridged over many years in woman's economic development and along with all women the Negro woman was given a chance and she made good. This fact has given her courage and strength to take no backward steps, but go on thru the doors already open and with the creative power with which she is so richly endowed, press on into other realms [besides teaching]. She will have the wisdom to minimize her handicaps, by thorough preparation, with the cultivation of a pleasing personality, with the developing power to think straight, by an appreciation of true values and with the power of adaptability. Thru rich experience and growing patience will come poise, balance and charm of ideal woman leadership. (10)

However, by 1925, 13% of African-American women owned their own businesses (Williams, "Development" 173). As Ann was not only a major entrepreneur but also a trailblazer in the African-American community, it would not be unfair to suggest that her success contributed to the rising number of African-American women business owners in the mid-1920s. In the early

1940s, Ann was first rumored to have sold the business to Dan, and then limited floorshows to the weekend, but the Little Harlem never went out of business under her leadership ("Late Stage" Nov. 4, 1939, 20; "New York State; Little Harlem" 10).

Legal Battles:

The Little Harlem had occasional brushes with the law, including in the ongoing war between mobsters and the police in the 1930s. Perhaps the most notorious event involved Joe DiCarlo, Jr., Buffalo's Public Enemy No. 1, and a Buffalo Police captain, Daniel G. Regan, who "was suspended and fired in May 1938 for 'soliciting business for Joe DiCarlo' when he was caught trying to get a DiCarlo vending machine into the Little Harlem restaurant" (Rizzo 24). On the basis of testimony given by Little Harlem manager Harold Tyler, Commission McClellan convicted Regan of asking Tyler to "place a DiCarlo controlled coin phonograph in the establishment" ("Buffalo Police Official" 24).

The Little Harlem and its proprietors were not seen by the Buffalo Police as at fault for the DiCarlo incident, but it did experience police conflicts over liquor: Prohibition (1920-1933) forced the saloon owners to turn to selling non-alcoholic soft drinks, at least officially. Prohibition Officers raided the Little Harlem several times in 1930. One raid on New Year's Eve netted a "small quantity of gin and whisky" ("Dry Men Make Score" 1/1/30, 7). Ann was cited, along with two bartenders, George Todd and William Harris. Little Harlem clientele were characterized, according to popular reports of the time, as a "crowd of whoopee makers," among whom included "a number of the city's so-called elite, out 'slumming.'" Another raid two weeks later included the seizure by federal agents of "furniture and fixtures valued at more than $20,000 [$279,755 today]" ("Little Harlem to Ask" 1/16/30, 4). Ann was arrested and released

on bail; a *Buffalo Courier-Express* article gives her occupation as “housewife” (“Dry Agents Dismantle” 1/13/30, 13). Maynard Johnson, a waiter, and Harris were also arrested. The raid was suspiciously carried out: while federal agents had a search warrant, based on the allegation that whisky had been purchased in the club, they did not find any alcohol. However, they divested the club of its furnishings, including “the silk drapes and the frosted panels and the glittering piano and all the rest of the furnishings of the downstairs.” This piano is pictured in many of the collection’s photographs, and is noted in Ann’s obituary as being the most expensive bought in Buffalo.

Musicians of the Little Harlem:

Jazz violinist LeRoy “Stuff” Smith managed first the Little Harlem, then the Montgomery Hotel at 342 Curtiss from at least 1935-1937, and was intimately involved with the Montgomery chain of hotels and restaurants. Originally hired to play during radio broadcasts, Smith was “later hired steady” (Meeting Minutes, 15 Nov. 1930). While engaged to play at the Little Harlem, Stuff Smith met his future wife, Miriam Harris (“Duke and Cab”). He and his wife appear in the frontispiece of the 4th anniversary program of the Montgomery Hotel.

Local 533 had a sometimes-tempestuous relationship with “Stuff” Smith, who found himself in the middle of a battle between hired musicians at the Little Harlem and Ann Montgomery. In 1930, orchestra leader Mathew Harlon complained that he “was continually annoy[ed] with instructions from both bosses of Little Harlem how to manage the orchestra” (13 Nov. 1930). Harlon had been asked by one boss, Willis Harris, to fire the tenor saxophonist Milton Stubbs, but had refused to do so. The minutes end ominously: “Since conditions at Little

Harlem appeared to be so bad the Board decided to have members of the former band and present leader of the band now there appear for questioning" (13 Nov. 1930).

At the meeting two days later, members of the local came forward to testify. Harlon testified that Ann had agreed to let him give Stubbs another chance, although he would not be paid for the probationary period. However, Harlon explained, Ann had arranged for James Bell to take over for Stubbs, since she "wanted the pick of the best players in town and did not like the use of tuxedos" (15 Nov. 1930). When questioned by the band, Ann explained, "Red [Roscoe Simmons] was the Leader and she did the hiring and firing and that the leader was more of a medium" (15 Nov. 1930). With the former band out of the way, LeRoy Smith's "were to stay, and . . . he did not think he was taking the job in violation of any laws." Further, Smith "stated that he knew certain men were to get thru [sic] but didn't think it his duty to let them know, and that he was working for Anna and not Harlon and was hired by Anna" (15 Nov. 1930). Two days later, the Board ruled against LeRoy Smith for his maleficence.

Lil Hardin Armstrong, who was married to trumpeter Louis Armstrong, is credited creating with his name by first insisting that he become a solo act and then promoting his talent. Lil was a respected musician and bandleader in her own right, and developed her orchestra at the Little Harlem after her separation from Louis. Before her Little Harlem orchestra, she led two all-female groups. Eventually she took over "Stuff" Smith's orchestra at the Little Harlem (c. 1933-1935). This takeover happened through an agent, who asked Stuff Smith's band if they would like to leave him for Lil. According to an interview with jazz historian Sally Plackson, George Clarke, tenor saxophonist, succinctly explained the event: "Well, the whole band quit

Stuff and went with Lil" (61). The band played together, as is pictured in one of the photographs in the collection, until Lil left to return to Chicago as a solo artist in 1935.

Aside from a signed portrait of Lil, there is a performance shot of her with her orchestra and other members of the show in the Little Harlem Club Collection. The signed headshot is dated from 1935, which suggests that the performance picture with the band is also from this year. The entire band, along with Lil in her signature outfit of a top hat, white silk dress, baton, and curled hair, can be seen in this photograph. Trombonist Milt Robinson, drummer Johnny Washington, bassist Sylvester Turpin, and pianist Jimmy Sherman can be seen from left to right in the top row. Trumpeters Jonah Jones, Sleepy Tomlin, and Henry Clay, guitarist Luke Stewart, and saxophonists Al Williams, Al Gibson, Teddy McRae, and George Clarke can be seen in the front row.

It could be argued that Jimmie Lunceford's career was launched at the Little Harlem, even though he had played all over the United States before his arrival in Buffalo. But it was here that he formed the orchestra that he hit it big with. Lunceford moved to the city in 1931 (McRae 48). As Lunceford explains in 1934 during his first interview, Buffalo was

> the turning point in my story. While in Buffalo I ran across a few of the men who were in my first band. The idea hit us all at the same time, for within three weeks we had contacted the other fellows and we had formed another band. We tried out in Buffalo and seemed to go pretty big. We avoided as much as possible the old type band which played nothing but "Tiger Rag" and featured a clarinet that pierced your ear-drums. I was out for something different. (Tucker 8-9)

In 1934, the thirteen-piece band went on tour (Ellis, “Orchestra”). A few months later, in 1935, Lunceford added two men and traded out another, so the photo in triplicate in the collection must date from 1934 (“Under Radio”). Two are signed, one to the Check Room attendant and sometime-dancer Lena Bell Thomas (who is pictured in another photograph in the collection holding a doll), the other to someone named Humphrey. (Lena was also sometimes featured as a matinee dancer [Campbell, “Buffalo” 2/11/39]). The third is unsigned. Pictured in the photograph, in the front row, left to right, are: trumpeters Sy Oliver, Eddie Tompkins, and Thomas Stevenson (order not yet determined); pianist Edward Wilcox; saxophonist and leader Jimmie Lunceford (standing); alto saxophonist William (Willie) Smith; saxophonists Joe Thomas and Earl Carruthers (order not yet determined). In the back row, from left to right, are: trombonists Russell Bowles and Henry Willis (order not yet determined); drummer James Crawford; guitarist Al Norris; and bassist Mose Allen (Ellis, “The Orchestra” 8).

There is a fourth portrait of Jimmie Lunceford’s orchestra, also signed, but this one contains only four members. None of the men in the photo are holding a saxophone, Lunceford’s instrument, and none wear a black necktie with the orchestra’s uniform white necktie, as Lunceford does in the three group photos. Bassist Mose Allen, guitarist Al Norris, and pianist Edward Wilcox can be positively identified; drummer James Crawford, despite his washed-out face in this photograph, seems to appear as well. The photograph is signed from Jimmie Lunceford and dated to 1934, but underneath reads another inscription in different ink: “To my old Pal.” The rest of the signature is illegible. Among other high-profile engagements, the orchestra was selected to play on the same bill as Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians at the 1931 Navy Ball at Cornell University (“Lunceford” 5/16/31, 5). In 1935, the orchestra swapped

out two players and added two others, suggesting that the photographs in the collection must be from before 1935 ("Jimmie Lunceford's Band" 1/19/35, 8).

One of the most striking photographs in the collection shows a scene on a desert island: a woman painted in gold steps out of a box, while a sailor holding back a bulldog reaches for her in desire and fear. They are flanked by six Harlemnette dancers and Jimmy Perkins and his orchestra. A description of the scene appeared in the *Chicago Defender* in 1937:

> The middle number featuring Abdeen Ali and Ravida is so dramatic and awe-inspiring that one wonders if the magic hand of Cecile De Mille [sic] has not been waved over its production. The poignant story of a shipwrecked sailor on a deserted island meeting island girls after being on the island for months alone moves with a finesse to a dramatic finish to a death scene that the master Eugene O'Neil [sic] could not have portrayed in a finer fashion. ("Willie Mae Lane" 23)

Invoking the great film director and producer Cecil B. DeMille to illustrate the scene, the *Defender* journalist points to the flamboyance and showiness characteristic of his films—something that comes through even in this still shot. The reference to Eugene O'Neill suggests the tragic and perhaps pessimistic ending, but this is not apparent in this photograph. Journalist Tippy Tee wrote in the *Defender* a month later of the revue, noting the visit by famed singer, composer, and saxophonist Rudy Vallée to the Little Harlem. Vallée is known for his rendition "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries" and, in Maine at least, for composing "The Stein Song," otherwise known as the University of Maine fighting song. Tee compares Ravida's daring entrance from the box to Sophie Tucker, known for her risqué songs:

> Rudy must have thought we had bronzed Sophie Tucker for this occasion. This four star special should go far. Abdeen Ali, Ravidi, Jean Eldridge and those beautiful Harlemnettes complete a revue that is so powerfully good that it would have stopped the Ohio river during the flood era. Sherdena Walker's band moves out this week after a six months' engagement. . . . You have the finest show band in the business today. This girl has kept her band working steadily for the past three years. She is a real leader. (Tee, "Shelton Brooks" 20)

Tee's article helps explain why it is Jimmy Perkins's orchestra in the photo, rather than Sherdena Walker's, who opened the show's run, since the photo must have been taken after she departed. Her mention here is notable for other reasons, particularly Tee's emphasis on Walker's skill as a leader who has kept her band together and profitable during the Depression.

Several years later, Abdeen Ali and Ravida made the papers again, but instead of receiving praise, they were charged with indecency, possibly for a largely similar act. Brought before Judge S. Dougherty in Chicago, the pair

> appeared before his honor on a charge of indecent exhibition made by Jessie Buford of the Crime Prevention Bureau. The dancers were arrested . . . in the wee hours of October 5 at Club DeLisa where they are featured. Judge Dougherty, after hearing the complaint against the dancers, related that the previous night he had attended a local theatre and had seen women from a far eastern island with the upper part of their bodies exposed and he saw no reason for condemning the Beachcombers act. ("Dance Act" Oct 18, 1941)

Many more musicians, dancers, producers, and other performers graced the Little Harlem, and several of them are pictured in the Little Harlem Collection. Gladdess Ellis, billed as a Virgin Island shake dancer, is pictured in at least one of the photographs in the collection. She signed the picture sometime in the 1930s (the year is unclear), which was taken in the lobby of the club. From Chicago's Swingland Café, Gladdess was a star dancer ("At Ann's" 19). MC Lovin' Sam Theard wrote the song "Rascal You," which became a Louis Armstrong hit (Hayes 6/9/34). Hertell Collins, "shapely hipstress," had previously appeared at Skoller's Swingland Café in Chicago, and is featured in the fourteenth anniversary program ("S.H. Dudley" 10/9/37, 11). Helen Carter, whose autographed headshot is in the collection, wrote to Bob Hayes letting him know "that she can again see the sidewalks of Buffalo" (Hayes 4/6/40, 21).

While it cannot be proven that the following incident happened at the Little Harlem, it did involve players associated with the club, and bears telling. Sometime in the 1940s at the "leading theatre in Buffalo," Duke Ellington's orchestra was playing a show "when suddenly the audience's attention [w]as diverted":

> A short, sturdily built man, so boyish-looking that an estimate of his age would be difficult, came out of the wings, walking with his shoulders erect, his hat on his head, a topcoat folded neatly over his arm.
>
> Obviously, the newcomer was not part of the scheduled act. He moved quietly behind the musicians, carefully laid his coat on an empty chair, took off his hat, placed it on top of the coat, sat down in another empty chair on the bandstand and calmly went to sleep.
>
> A wave of curious amazement went through the audience. There was no curiosity or amazement on the part of Maestro Ellington or his musicians.

> After one glance at the little man they all continued as if nothing had happened. Throughout the ninety minute show, Billy Strayhorn sat on the stage, sleeping peacefully as a baby. (Duckett 7)

Strayhorn, a long-trusted confidante and collaborator of Ellington's, composed "A Train," "Lush Life," "Day Dream," and "Something to Live For." George Arthur thinks this scene occurred at Shea's Buffalo, given the duration of the show.

Strayhorn was gay, and Ellington shielded him from the homophobia prevalent at the time. The Little Harlem itself was welcoming to lesbians, as well as many other nightclubs in the Jazz Triangle, as recorded by Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis. One frequent patron Kennedy and Davis interviewed, named only as Arden, explained that "it was free and open and there was no pretense" (36). Arden had fond memories of Ann, who would toss mail out the window and ask her to take it to the post box. In thanks, Ann would tell Arden, "Go into the bar and ask George [the bartender] to give you what you want." "Ann Montgomery was a dynamic woman with a colorful reputation. One night she even referred publically to Arden as a lesbian," as Arden recounts: "There was a whole slew of people at the bar and Ann came in and told the bartender to give everyone a drink. . . . The bartender hesitated when he got to me and Ann said, 'Yes, give that lesbian a drink too.' I nearly died" (37).

Jean Eldridge was launched to larger fame at the Little Harlem and under the personal direction of the manager, Harold Tyler. A reporter prophetically announced that Eldridge is a "singing sensation that is bound to reach Broadway" ("At 'Lil Harlem'" 19). Eldridge was discovered in Buffalo by Duke Ellington in 1938; by the end of August, she had signed with him for radio performances and recordings. Ellington proclaimed her "as one of the finest voices he

has ever come across" ("The Duke" 8/27/38, 18). Eldridge, "thrush-voiced singer," has a "heart-warming personality" that makes her "the foremost singing star of the day." Not "just another singer, [Eldridge is] an artist with secure knowledge of an ability to paint a graphic picture with words and music" ("Jimmie Perkins" 6/4/38, 19).

Little Harlem and the national stage:

Harold Tyler, manager of the Little Harlem throughout the 1930s, was invited by the Secretary of Commerce Daniel C. Roper to participate in the Small Business Men's Conference "at which 600 'small business men' were asked to tell what they thought was wrong with the country"—one of two businessmen from Buffalo asked to attend. Tyler was also president of the popular men's club, the Adelphos Breakfast Club, and the Café Owner's Protective Association, which covered Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburg, and Buffalo and was based out of Buffalo (Campbell "Buffalo" 8). At the Small Business Men's Conference, Tyler "gave an impressive talk. He urged the fixing of tax and wage scales to fit the individual's business instead of the present methods," and the *Chicago Defender* speculated that he "[m]ay talk with FDR."

After the conference session, it was anticipated that twelve men from the conference would be selected to present their findings to FDR. Tyler had strong critiques of the administration. "'The government,' [Tyler] explained to Secretary Roper, 'uses the same yardstick for both the big and the small businessman. For instance, our wages are based on the seating capacity of our club. Small businessmen should not be taxed on the basis of comparison made in larger restaurants or industries. Small businessmen are not interested in the undistributed profits tax because most small businessmen haven't made any profit. Wage scales should be fixed on the present condition of an individual's business rather than on a nation-wide scale.'"

("Night Club Head" 4). Tyler's remarks earned him nationwide attention and even acknowledgement from President Roosevelt, who was reported to have commented, "That fellow from Buffalo must be pretty smooth."

The conference had decided not "to submit a minority report to the president"; Tyler, disagreeing with this report, wrote his own and gave it to FDR's butler, who passed it on to the president. "Questioned about his success in getting his views before the chief executive, Tyler smiled. Evidently pleased at the compliment paid him by President Roosevelt, Tyler said, 'The President's always right, isn't he? I don't want to disagree with the President.' Tyler's report, it has been learned, differed slightly from the second minority report the President received because it included some recommendations regarding Race business. Chief among Mr. Tyler's suggestions were development of Race industry; unemployment; wage and hour improvement for Race workers; solution of the Race's housing problem; and control of installment buying" ("Tyler's Views" 7).

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