



Club Zamzibar

RECOLLECTIONS OF
DOROTHY McNEIL





Billy Bland's 1960 hit "Let the Little Girl Dance" was one of many recordings he made on New York's Old Town label.



Mickey Lee



Cal Jenkins



Billy Frazier



Little Johnny Taylor is best known for his hits "Part Time Love" and "Everybody Knows About My Good Thing."



The Soul Sisters



Jeanette "Baby" Washington is best known for her hit "That's How Heartaches Are Made."



The Victories



Lloyd Price, known for R&B hits "Landy Miss Clandy," "Ain't It A Shame," and "Bad Conditions," later joined with Don King to promote Muhammad Ali's legendary bout with George Foreman in Zaire.

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DOROTHY MCNEIL

THE HOBOKEN
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

VANISHING HOBOKEN
The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of
The Hoboken Historical Museum
and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library



This oral history chapbook was made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the interviewers, the Hoboken Oral History Project and its coordinators, the Hoboken Historical Museum, the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, or the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Additional source for entertainers' backgrounds: *All Music Guide to Soul*,
V. Bogdanov, ed. (Backbeat Books: San Francisco, 2003)

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Title page image: Dorothy Blackwell behind the bar at the club, New Year's Eve, 1980

Contemporary photo of Dorothy McNeil on page iv by Robert Foster, 2006

All photographs are courtesy of Dorothy McNeil and
the Richardson family, unless otherwise noted.

The Zanzibar had all kinds of entertainment, all different—singers, dancers, comedians. It was unique to the African American community for two reasons. One, at the time, in the surrounding areas—Jersey City, Union City—bars closed at two o'clock. Hoboken bars closed at three o'clock, so you had an extra hour. Two, women were not allowed, especially in Jersey City, to sit at a bar, though they could go to the hall. [At closing time, patrons] would leave the Jersey City clubs and come to Hoboken.

Promoters are always looking to put their acts in more than one location. So the acts would leave the Apollo and come to the Zanzibar. We had some of everybody there. I'm sure you've heard of the "Chitlin Circuit." Well, the Zanzibar was one of the last stops on the Chitlin Circuit. You left the Zanzibar, and you headed back wherever you came from.

—Dorothy McNeil, July 13, 2005



Introduction

Dorothy McNeil

Club Zanzibar was an African American nightclub at 601 First Street in Hoboken. During its twenty years in operation (1961-1981), it was distinguished by its roster of performers, who often followed appearances at the legendary Apollo Theater in Harlem with visits to Hoboken, and for its place in the lives of the working people who patronized this neighborhood bar, named after a tiny slip of land off the coast of Tanzania.

Dorothy McNeil, who grew up in Hoboken, began visiting the club as a teenager and worked there as a bartender. She later married Charles McNeil, the club's co-founder. She describes the Zanzibar as a stop on the "Chitlin Circuit"—a series of venues throughout the eastern and southeastern United States that primarily served African American audiences (prior to, and also after the civil rights movement began) and featured performances by popular African American entertainers. Although the Zanzibar stopped booking big acts in the 1970s, it remained in operation as a bar and continued to be a popular gathering place.

In this chapbook Ms. McNeil also talks about changes in the Hoboken Housing Authority and recalls some of the history of another place in Hoboken that has been very important to her, and

to her family—Mt. Olive Baptist Church. She retains her strong ties to this longstanding institution and teaches Bible Studies to young people.

Club Zanzibar is based on interviews with Ms. McNeil conducted by Robert Foster and Holly Metz on July 13 and August 31, 2005. Transcripts of these interviews have been deposited in the collection of the Hoboken Public Library.

Family

RICHARDSONS, BLACKWELLS

My mother was Gladys Elizabeth Richardson, and she came to Hoboken in 1934. We were one of the earlier [20th century African American] families in Hoboken. There used to be an argument whether we were first or second, but after doing some research for our African American firsts, I found that we were neither. My mother [originally] came from Alabama, and my father, David Blackwell, his family came from Haverstraw, New York. There were job opportunities over here. My father worked for Erie-Lackawanna in some kind of way. I remember going to the train station, to pick him up sometimes—to meet him. He did lots of different things. I'm sure it was

some sort of labor, because he was not a professional person.

My mother had seven children, from two marriages. We had lots of big families around, when I was



Dorothy's mother, Gladys Richardson, in her office at Day Care 100, Hoboken, date unknown.



Adams Street, Hoboken, where the family lived for a while, date unknown.

growing up. I'm the middle child. I have two brothers and two sisters older, and two sisters younger than I am: William Richardson, Lonnie Richardson, Gladys R. Richardson, Marilyn "Susie" Richardson, Rosa Blackwell, and Lora Blackwell Hill.

We were all over the city, always renting. I can tell you several addresses where we lived, but which one at which time, I can't. I



Dorothy Adele Blackwell, 1953

know we lived at 71 Adams Street, which is no longer there. I know we lived at 209 Willow Avenue, 72 Garden Street, 68 Park Avenue. I grew up over Leo's Grandez Vous at Second and Grand Street. I had Italian food every other night!

I was actually born in Jersey City, in Margaret Hague Hospital. When I was six weeks old, there was a fire on the Adams Street property. We lived on the sixth floor, and I was thrown out of the window—caught by a homeless person. I had a nickname [for him], I called him Mr. Buddy. It was interesting. I used to be embarrassed, when I was a young child, because he claimed me as his own—and rightfully so—but he would always give me dimes. He walked around with dimes, a pocketful of dimes, and he would give me dimes to play the shuffleboard machines, wherever there was a shuffleboard machine, in one of the different clubs. He would take me to that club, and I would play shuffleboard.

There Was No Place In Hoboken I Could Not Go

I love Hoboken. I've always loved Hoboken. The memories I have of Hoboken are of a community that—You have to understand, I was a teenager in the '60s, and I did not know racism as a child, in Hoboken. It happened all around me, but the people we associated with, you didn't experience it. Like with the cheerleaders—it was there because it was always institutionalized—but [with] the cheer-

leaders, I taught the cheers, but I couldn't be on the cheerleader's squad. I always thought it was because I was tall and thin, but looking back over the history of it, I'm not so sure. I'm really not so sure.

But my best memory of Hoboken is Halloween. I loved Halloween. Being a mile-square city, we would go trick-or-treating from one end of Hoboken to the other. We would go trick-or-treating with pillowcases, because paper bags broke. We didn't have plastic bags. So we would have pillowcases, and you would load two or three pillowcases into one pillowcase, and by the time you got back you had three or four pillowcases full of candy.

It was such a different time. It was safe. I remember always having friends all over town. There was no place in Hoboken that I could not go. Right now, I don't feel so safe with my daughter. She likes to hang down at this end of town [The Shipyard area], but I'm very leery, because there are so many things that can happen now. There was always safety there. I thought it was the safest place. [Long pause] Well, there was a reason it was safe.

I also remember the police department was different. I remember (and I'm sure I'm going to get somebody in trouble, but they're retired now, so it doesn't matter) we would be able to call up the police. I used to hang out in Jersey City as a young teenager—seventeen, eighteen years old—and I remember calling the police station, to whoever was on the desk, and tell them to call the Jersey City police department, so the Jersey City police department would give us a ride to the Hoboken line, and the Hoboken police would pick us up and take us home.

So that's the difference in the relationships we had then. Now it's still a small town, but it's too big. You don't even know your neighbors. You don't know your neighbors. We knew everybody, everybody knew everybody. Kids would get into things, and before you got home your family knew about it. I remember having those kinds of relationships from one end of town to the other.

You know, when I was reading the journal [published for the City Sesquicentennial], I was really surprised there was less influence, from the Italian community, in early years. That surprised me. Because when I grew up, I grew up in Italian Hoboken. To me, it was like if my friends weren't black, they were Italian. When I grew up, there were very few Hispanic or Latino people here. So for us, it was just us and the Italians. I didn't come into contact with—we were all over town and we saw people, but I didn't know other cultures, what they were. We weren't raised like that. You know Italian food, so that was the only way that you knew to say "Italian." But other races of people, other ethnic groups, we didn't identify like that, so I didn't know—maybe I'm calling somebody Irish "Italian," I don't know. It's a possibility. But my best friends on Monroe Street were the Addio boys. Ricky Addio was a good friend. We were all the same age. We went to high school together. We were all there on the same block. That was one group of friends.

Like I said, I lived all over town, all over the city, so that group of friends was each given a section of town. In every neighborhood we had a different section of friends. Monroe Street was interesting. We had the run of everybody's yards. You know, everybody had a yard back then. They did have fences, but they didn't really matter. They had little ways for you to go in or out, so we would be all up and down the yards.

The Fabian

We used to go to the Fabian theatre as children, every Saturday. We'd get fifty cents. Twenty-five cents for the movie, and we were able to buy soda, popcorn and the ice cream, the bon bons, with [the rest of] that fifty cents. The special thing about it was, every

Saturday, when I came home from the movies, there was always something new in my house, something important new. My main memory is the year we got the washing machine. I don't know what year it was, but we came home from the movies and had a washing machine for the first time. That's the way my father was. Every week it was something different. [We'd come home and find] a new gadget of some kind.

Out of School

I have [only] two horrible memories of Hoboken. Both of them happened in school. This is actually the earliest memory I have. I remember being in kindergarten, and the teacher's name (and she can get published, because I still haven't forgiven her) was Miss DePalma. We were drawing, we were doing cutouts of windmills. I drew it and I was ready to cut it, and she had said, "Don't cut it out until everybody is finished." But an assistant came to me and told me to go ahead, that I could cut: "You're finished, everything's perfect." I cut it out, and the woman slapped me in my face. I will never forget that, as long as I live. I had never been hit in my life. That was the first time I had ever been hit—that I can recall. I had never been hit.

Well, I went and got my daddy, and my daddy came back and slapped her on her face. (At that time, he was there. Our family didn't stay together. I think



School portrait of Dorothy Blackwell, known as "Pee-wee," 1960.

he left when I was about seven or so.) I don't know what happened to my father [for slapping her.] I got kicked out. I was suspended from David A. Rue School, in kindergarten. I remember that. I was suspended—they took me out of school. I don't know how long I stayed out.

The other bad memory, also in school—Mr. Gallagher pulled my hair. You know how you have certain, distinct memories. As I'm talking to you, I can see that. I see him pulling my hair, and it was over a math problem. I'm looking at that board now. And I see him pulling my hair because I didn't answer that fast enough, and he thought I should know the answer.

I thought he would have learned from Miss DePalma not to do that, but he didn't. I didn't tell my mother or my father that time. That time I told my big brother, and my big brother came to school and threw him through the blackboard. I know my brother was arrested. This was eighth grade. But I can't remember how long he stayed in jail, or anything like that. I know he was arrested for Mr. Gallagher.

My brother was an interesting person, in and of himself, but he was very protective of me. He was the kind of person who, if I called him, he was coming, and he's going to hit you first and ask questions later. I just told him that this man pulled my hair. I didn't go to my parents, I went directly to his house and got him. What they did after that, I don't know. The next thing I know, I was out of Demarest. I don't remember being upset about it. The only thing about it is it cheated me out of a [middle school] graduation. I was removed from the Hoboken school system completely after the second incident. I left, and I went to Lincoln [high school], in Jersey City, in 1968.

I don't know if that was a political thing going on at the time, because that was 1968, and there was a lot happening in Hoboken. My mother was very protective, and I think it was a safety thing for me. She was concerned about my safety at that point, and she took me out of the school and sent me to Lincoln. I went to stay with my

father for a year. I did a year at Lincoln, then it was over. I was back at Hoboken High.

I graduated in '71 from Hoboken High. In my graduating class—half of them died. We lost a lot to drugs and a lot to the war. And if they didn't die in Vietnam, they died shortly after they got back. Actually, I remember, even with the class—they didn't graduate. It was like a lot of them did not make it—people you grow up with all your life, by the time you got to the twelfth grade, they're there in September, but in June, it was like every time you turned around somebody else was dying, somebody else was shipped off to Vietnam. That was a strange year.

I started going to college in '71, with Dennis McMullen, when he started Hudson County Community College. I was in the first semester of classes. He did classes everywhere. When I do my résumé, I write: "I attended classes at Stevens, at St. Peter's, at N.J.C.U. [New Jersey City University]"—because we took classes everywhere. But I didn't finish then. I stayed there for, I guess, two semesters. I went back and graduated in '87, from Hudson County. Now I'm at N.J.C.U. It seems like I can't do it except in twenty-year increments.

Club Zanzibar

NEW JERSEY'S HOME OF THE WORLD'S
GREATEST ENTERTAINERS

The Zanzibar was purchased in 1961 by James Smith and Charles McNeil. James Smith (we called him Zimp) already owned the club at 460 Newark Street, which, if I'm not mistaken, was called Zimp's at the time. Most of his bars were called Zimp's, over the years. He and Charles—everybody called him Charles or Charlie—were good friends, and as partners, bought the Zanzibar. They stayed together



Charles McNeil working the door of the Zanzibar, 601 First Street, Hoboken, late 1960s.

in business, I think, until 1963. But Charles bought Zimp out, and the name became Zanzibar, Club Zanzibar, 601 First Street. How did it get that name? Well, its connection to Africa. Charles liked that name, Zanzibar.

At the time most clubs, they were generally the same thing. You had a bar in the front, and you had a hall in the back. When we moved into 601 First Street, [it had already been set up as a club.] That's where Frankie used to sing. They tell that story all the time—that that was the club that Frank Sinatra used to sing in, on stage.

The Zanzibar had all kinds of entertainment, all different—singers, dancers, comedians. It was unique to the African American community for two reasons. One, at the time, in the surrounding areas—Jersey City, Union City—bars closed at two o'clock.

Hoboken bars closed at three o'clock, so you had an extra hour. Two, women were not allowed, especially in Jersey City, to sit at a bar, though they could go to the hall.

In Jersey City, there were several nightclubs, also, but they closed at two. So [patrons] would leave the Jersey City clubs and come to Hoboken. At that time there was the Zanzibar, the "88" Club, and Zimp's Bar. There was no hall in Zimp's.

Club Zanzibar

601 FIRST STREET, HOBOKEN, N. J.
NEW JERSEY'S HOME OF
The World's Greatest Entertainers
DINING & DANCING NIGHTLY

Charles was a friend of Jimmy Evans. They were business associates and friends. Jimmy Evans was a promoter at the time, and he had lots of acts. Promoters are always looking to put their acts in more than one location. So the acts would leave the Apollo and come to the Zanzibar. We had some of everybody there. I'm sure you've heard of the "Chitlin Circuit." Well, the Zanzibar was one of the last stops on the Chitlin Circuit. You left the Zanzibar, and you headed back wherever you came from.

[Performers might have a week's engagement or just an evening.] It depended on the act. The Zanibar acts all had to have a hit record. They were popular acts at the time. If it was a really, really big act, if Jimmy was trying to book them all over town, then we were lucky to get them one night. When I say all over town, I mean New York. They would leave Hoboken and go to Newark, too, but they couldn't play in Jersey City, and they couldn't play Newark until after they'd



played the Zanzibar. That was definite. But they would leave us and go to Newark. We didn't want them in Jersey City at all, because that would cut into what we were doing.

There would definitely be a Wednesday night show, Friday

Soul star Wilson Pickett performed his many hits at the Zanzibar, including "In the Midnight Hour," "634-5789," "Mustang Sally," "Ninety-Nine and a Half (Won't Do)," and "Land of 1000 Dances."



Now cited by Billboard magazine as one of the most successful R&B acts ever to perform on stage, Millie Jackson got her start at the Zanzibar in Hoboken.

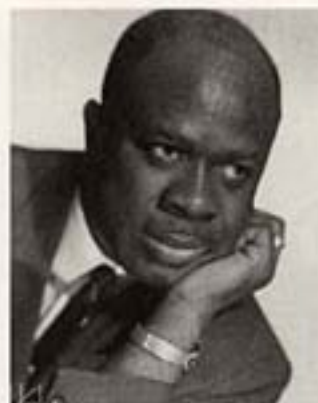
night, two shows Saturday night, two shows and a Sunday matinee. So they would usually be there a week, but if it was, like, say, Wilson Pickett—if Wilson was there, Wilson didn't work on a Wednesday. It wasn't happening. He'd leave the Apollo and work

Friday night, Saturday night, maybe Sunday, in the afternoon.

And of course, we also booked other acts, like The Manhattan Transfer, and Kool and the Gang—we were their practice studio. They practiced whenever they were recording. I heard all of their music before they recorded it. They would put those songs together in the back of the Zanzibar, mid-'70s. That "Jungle Boogie" album was worked on in the back of the Zanzibar.

Millie Jackson started her career in the Zanzibar. In the black community everybody knows who she is. She's an entertainer, and we saw her, not at the Apollo, but at a club in Brooklyn. We had the Drifters, the Coasters—the originals. All those original acts. We had a lot of RCA record people, and Columbia [Records acts] would come from there. We had the really soulful, soulful acts, more than the R&B acts. We would have Rufus Thomas. He's got several records out there. The Limelights. They were really big back then. One of the ladies I [featured in the "Hoboken African American

Blues Hall of Famer Rufus Thomas was also known for his fancy footwork on stage at the Zanzibar.



Firsts" display at the church], Eloise Little, her group, the Ad Libs, recorded "The Boy From New York City." That was a big hit for them. Gladys Knight did not make it. The night that Gladys was supposed to show, we got a telegram from the hospital. She was pregnant. She was coming, but she actually went into labor with her daughter, Kenya, on the night she was to appear at the Zanzibar.



The legendary Coasters ("Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown"), who performed at the Zanzibar many times, were the first vocal group to be inducted in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Dining and Dancing Nightly

I got involved with the Zanzibar—my sister used to hang out there. Even as a child, it was always there. You know, you weren't allowed to go in there, but they sold food, so you could go in to buy food. So when I was about fifteen or sixteen years old, I would go into the Zanzibar to buy whatever dinners they were selling. You would go in a side door, and the kitchen is right there, so you're standing there, but every time the back door opens, you're watching whatever show's going on, and you see acts coming and going. That's my first memory of it. I was about fifteen or sixteen years old. I didn't meet my husband [Charles McNeil] until, I guess, about '71 or '72. I was always coming from school with my sister, who was coming from work. Her name is Marilyn Richardson (we call her "Susie"), and she worked at the employment agency in Jersey City. I was at H.C.C., one of the campuses over there, so we would come back together to Hoboken, and she was stopping in the Zanzibar every day. Later on, I would go in there, and it was always fascinating to me.

[My mother wasn't happy about me going to the club.] She wasn't raised that way. By the time I was sixteen-and-a-half, seventeen



years old, there was a bartender there, and his name was Jimmy Hawkins, and he was Ollie McNeil's brother [Ollie was Charles's first wife]. Jimmy and I were very close, we were good friends, and he would

Charles McNeil and his first wife, Ollie, at the Zanzibar, early 1960s.

Dorothy and Charles McNeil celebrating together, 1989



let me come in there at that time. And Jimmy, I'm telling it—I would be able to buy beer or whatever. Because, you

know, as teenagers we drank beer, but I could get it from Jimmy—and Cold Duck. I'll never forget that nasty stuff. Cold Duck was the thing of the time.

I remember one day coming to the club (this was in the summertime) to get a bottle of Cold Duck, and Jimmy telling me, "I'm not going to sell you a thing tonight or ever again. Your mother just left here, and she threatened that if I let you in these doors again, she's gonna shut this place down."

She was not happy about it. She was not happy about it at all. It took her years to get used to my husband, but she knew that—eventually she understood that when you have a soul mate, you have a soul mate, and that's all there is to it. And he definitely was my soul mate. She came around in the end, but it was in the '80s. It was in the late '80s. The l-a-t-e '80s.

Working at the Zanzibar

When I was right out of high school, I used to work for the coat company, the Alorna Coat Company, and they used to have us modeling coats. They would take us to New York to do—well, not all of

us, but I was tall and thin at the time—so they would take me to New York to the show room, and I would model coats over there. I did a fashion show there, and it was really exciting and really fascinating to me. But it was also scary. I knew it was too exciting. It was just too much excitement for me. I couldn't take it at the time (I probably still couldn't take it), but it was too much at the time, but I knew then that I could not model. But when I was in the Zanzibar with my sister, and I would watch the barmaids, or the bartenders, going up and down that bar, it was like modeling without the pressure of modeling. So I wanted to work at the bar, and I did. That's how I got involved in it. I started working as a waitress in the back. And, of course, the law changed. It used to be twenty-one [was the age to buy alcohol in New Jersey], and at first I couldn't work outside. They would let me work, supposedly serving food, but I was serving everything. But I was serving food. Then when the law

changed, I started serving whiskey.

How did it look? This is the little door. The kitchen was right there. Charles would sit there, Charles and Ollie. [There was a mural that] went all the way around the room. It was all African, a jungle motif. I don't know the name [of the



Dorothy bartending at the Zanzibar, May, 1980.



Left to right, Ollie McNeil, Leroy Pledger and unknown, at the Zanzibar, with a painted mural behind them, circa 1965.

man who did it]; he was out of Jersey City. The room was huge. It held 220 people, but it was huge. If you pass by [the building] now, you can see how big it was, because there is the house structure, then an add-on in the back. That add-on was the whole back room. At least twenty-five by fifty. We had a platformed area for seating, and that area held, I guess, about twenty-four tables. Then you had, of course, the bar. Then you stepped down from that platform, there, and you had the dance floor and tables around the dance floor.

People got dressed. You got dressed to go to the Zanzibar. That's one of the things that, when the clubs changed, we tried to switch from a nightclub to a more community-based clubs, and that was one of the things that hurt us, because they thought we were snobs. We weren't, but they thought we were. Not only was there a dress code, but there was a certain mode of behavior that was automatic.

[It was a place for] working people. No kids. I was the youngest person in there. Actually, you can see that from the pictures. I'm literally the youngest person there.



Miriam and Gladys Goodwin, sisters who worked at the Levelor factory in Hoboken, and who were Zanzibar regulars, early 1970s.

Did I tell you about Steve Cappiello and the Zanzibar? Well, one of the things that the Hoboken police department does (and, I think, most police departments) is that police officers work off-duty as security officers in some places. One of Steve Cappiello's assignments was the Zanzibar, in the late '60s [before he ran for, and became, mayor.]

[Most of the patrons would be African Americans]—except for Marty [who owned Casella's Restaurant] and his crew. We were very close. And [the black bars] had all kinds of interaction with each other. In the black bars, we used to do what was called the round-robins, which means that this week I'm at your spot, and I have to spend X-amount of dollars. Next week—we'd go to different spots. So each bar owner or his representative—say if there were ten members in the association, and the fee was \$100, you knew that night you were going to make \$1,000, so that was automatic. To stay in the association, you never spent less than that \$100. You quite frequently spent much more, because the bar owners were all—you know, they were bar owners, so they'd want to outdo everybody else.

Charles McNeil

TRUCK DRIVER, CLUB OWNER, INFORMAL BANKER,
PROFESSIONAL GAMBLER, GO-TO GUY

Charles was born in Atmore, Alabama, and moved to Jersey City. He came to Hoboken with the Zanzibar, [but] he'd never lived here. And he hadn't operated a club before the Zanzibar. He was a truck driver. (He drove a truck for nine years and six months.) That's another one of those stories where life intervenes. He actually was an owner-operator for a while. He was the first (which is a very interesting story), the first African American driver for a company that was called Cooper Jarrett. Cooper Jarrett, at the time, was the biggest trucking company in this area. How he got the job was, he was working in the union hall—they call it "shaping the halls"—and he had had an argument with one of the bosses there. I feel so bad that I don't remember his name. He smoked a big cigar. (Charles told me all these stories.) He and the guy had a fight, and the guy told him not to come back. But when the guy told him, he didn't look him in his eye, so Charles knew he was really scared.



Left to right: Sailors Raymond Hebron and Bill Billings of the USS Bristol. On the reverse of the photograph they wrote "To Our Friends at the Club Zanzibar: We've had quite a memorable time during our stay in Hoboken. It all has to be credited to you. Of all days, remember 6 February 1964."

ridiculous, because you can't beat somebody on their own machine. You practice all the time. So you would have people coming, thinking that they could win. I remember once a trucker came in. It was around Thanksgiving, and this trucker came in and he was determined to beat Charles. All I will say about that is that when it was over, we had a tractor-trailer full of turkeys to give out to everybody, to whoever in the city needed them. That was in the mid-'70s.

Charles was interesting, too, in having been a truck driver, he would cash all the checks for them. He would cash all the checks for the post office, too—black or white. It didn't make any difference. Everybody came there to get their checks cashed. Maxwell House, all those people. Pay day was Thursday—every week. One Thursday was truckers, the next Thursday was the post office. Most people at that time (especially black people) did not have a relationship with the banks. Charles got stopped on the highway one time, and the troopers couldn't understand it, because he had thousands of dollars in deposit slips. Because what he would do was, he knew how many checks he was going to cash. So he would go to the [bank] and transfer the money from the savings account into his checking account, withdraw the cash (to cash the checks), then deposit the checks back in the savings account. But all they saw was cash transactions; they didn't understand it. It was straightened out in the end, but we were talking—even in the early '70s, we were talking \$30-40,000 deposits every week. Think about it. Because what were they making? I'm talking every trucking company would come to the Zanzibar on Thursdays. I have literally poured \$1,000 worth of liquor at a dollar a shot, in a given night, easily. In a night. And I didn't start to work until 6 p.m. You're not gonna get your check cashed if you're not havin' a drink!

And [when a 1971 protest by Puerto Rican residents concerning city conditions and lack of political empowerment turned into unrest on First Street] it didn't affect the Zanzibar one bit, because A, every-

body knew who Charles McNeil was, and they were not going to hurt the Zanzibar. And, B, he was also very giving. He would loan money, and never pressure them when to give it back. So in September—like he had the money ready for those checks? He would have the money ready for school clothes. Christmas, toys, and Easter. On those three occasions, you knew you didn't have to worry about having the money you needed for your children. It wasn't a gift. And everybody always paid that money back, because they knew they could always come and get it again. He didn't ask questions, he didn't belittle anybody. They just knew they could get it, and he didn't talk about it.

I remember even in my own case (it's one of the reasons why I

ended up marrying the man), my son was three years old, and toys [for Christmas that year] cost me \$98.00. This was a week's pay. I bought a red fire truck, and lots of other things, in Journal Square—McKinley Square. But I wasn't satisfied. I had to go to another store. My girlfriend Renee Goodwin was driving the station wagon, and we left the stuff in the back. This was on Christmas Eve, and everything in there got stolen. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew my baby had to have toys on Christmas morning. I picked



Sterling Harrison, the last act to perform at the Club Zanzibar before it closed in 1981.



*Sign for Mother's Day Matinee at the Zanzibar,
May 11, 1975. Artwork by Joan Butler.*

up the phone and I called Charles. I told him what happened (I was working at the club at the time). He told me to go back to [the store] and stay there. And he came and replaced every single thing I had bought. That's the kind of person he was. He was really a great guy. He was there. And he was there for everybody.

It wasn't like a community thing, because, if anything, he was never an activist. Whoever came to that door for money [for political donations] got it. We never had Republicans in Hoboken, but whoever was running. . . . Back then it was DePascale. If Cappiello's people came, they got the same amount of money. He would tell them straight up, "You know I don't put signs on my door, or on my window," but everybody got equal—he wasn't political. He didn't like politics at all. The only people he knew were the people who came through the doors of the Zanzibar, because he wasn't in and around Hoboken a lot. But if you look at those pictures [in my photo album], that's half the community. That represents so many of the families in Hoboken, that are actually here, still, now.

I believe Sterling [Harrison] was our last performer. And he was

so gorgeous, women went nuts whenever he was around. He had such a beautiful voice. But the sad thing about his voice is it didn't record well.

In the '70s, after we stopped doing entertainment, [the Zanzibar] turned into a corner bar, so to speak. We did entertainment in the back, still, but it was rented out to whoever wanted to rent a hall. But we became, actually, just a gathering place. What I remember most about that is that Charles—he could tell jokes. Anyone who had a joke, he had one of the same thing to match it. So we would have contests a lot, with people coming from all around, to tell him a joke that he didn't have one to tell about back.

We closed in October 1981. It was almost exactly twenty years. The business died. Drugs played a part. Again, everything has more than one cause, but drugs—people stopped coming to bars and started taking drugs. The bars changed their hours in Jersey City from two o'clock to three o'clock, and they allowed women in the bar, so that hurt our business. It was kind of slow after that.

But Charles was also a professional gambler, so it wasn't like he had to stay in Hoboken with a slow business. He was in Atlantic City a lot. He was a craps player. When it got slow, he was gone. And he did extremely well.

Hoboken Housing Authority

THEN AND NOW

[When the Hoboken Housing Authority apartments on the west side first opened], you had to have connections to get in there. Believe it or not, Italian families had a hard time moving into that place, too. When I was eighteen years old, after I graduated from high school, the Hoboken Housing Authority, if there were five black families

there, I would be surprised. I may be wrong, because this is not scientific research I'm doing right now, but there were very few.

I remember when I moved into an apartment there, I was excited to be there. I remember that when my son was born, I was eighteen or nineteen. I remember he couldn't sleep inside. He just did not like—he would not go to sleep in the house. I would take him outside, to the front of the house. The house used to have flowers, at 540 Marshall Drive. The house had flowers all around the front of the house, and benches were out there. I literally would go outside, in pajamas, and have my son, rocking the carriage, until he went to sleep. Sometimes that took two or three hours. But that was where he wanted to sleep, out in the air, especially in the summertime. Now, the thought of even—I get in my car. I live in housing. I get in my car, I go to my house, I get out of my car, and I go wherever I'm going.

When I came back to Hoboken—I was living in South Jersey in 1996—I hadn't been in Hoboken in years—and I was appalled at what I saw. I just realized that part of it was my fault, because I left. Instead of staying here to do what I was taught to do, I walked away. It was depressing. If you could leave, you left. Now it's so hard, because it's unbelievable. The whole African American community here is devastating to me. Ninety-percent of it is. It's very difficult. To have the whole community in one section of town [in Hoboken Housing Authority apartments on the west side] blew my mind. I couldn't understand that.

Mt. Olive Baptist Church

Mt. Olive Baptist Church has been in several locations in Hoboken. It started at 900 Clinton Street, an Episcopal church. Black people in Hoboken used to worship at that church, and in 1909, we decid-



Mt. Olive Baptist Churchwomen (left to right) M. Mills, V. Watson, Gladys Richardson, and Vikki, Hoboken, New Jersey, date unknown.

ed we wanted to have our own church. The First Baptist Church of Hoboken was what it was called—I don't know whether they put "colored" [in the title]—but people kept getting confused between the two names of the two [Baptist] churches. It caused some confusion, so at that time we changed our name to Mt. Olive Baptist Church of Hoboken.

We left Clinton Street. We were at 460 Adams Street. We bought our first property, at 67-69 Jefferson Street, I believe, in the '30s. We stayed until it became a little too small. Then we bought 719 Washington Street, in 1967.

The fire was in 1979. We had to fight to rebuild it. They didn't want to let us rebuild.

We were back in the church in 1980. It took about a year and a half. But to show you the commitment of the community, even at that time, while officially they fought us every which way (we literally had to go to court to get a permit, to rebuild our church), the

community, especially the Catholic community, was very supportive. We have the documents in the church history, what's left of it —of where the different churches did fundraisers and everything, to help us rebuild it.

Right now we have only about 100 people. To me, I feel it's like a new church, almost, because all of our people (and I guess this is just a sign of progress) moved away, or they're so much older, and the young people, my generation—one of the reasons I'm sitting here doing this with you, and all of the things I do with the church, is that I feel my generation dropped the ball. I would only come in when my mother called me to come. She had "days." I do the same thing now, with my cousins and family who don't go to church. "You gotta come to church today. I've got to have this amount of money." But she would call me (I moved to Cherry Hill) and say, "I need X amount of dollars" for whatever program was going on. And, "Oh, by the way. You have to bring it in person." So those were the days that I was there.

[Of the current congregation], I would say about half of them are Hoboken residents. Why aren't there more? If I had the answer to that one, I would be able to fix it. There is never one answer to a situation. I think religion, in and of itself, is in crisis. Again, like I said, my generation dropped the ball. With my son, I taught him every religion under the sun, "and you can choose the one that you want," which is not the right way to do things. You can choose when you get to be an adult, but you need to have a strong foundation. I thank God every day for my foundation, because it works when you need it to work.

The [geographical distance] between the church [on Washington Street] and the community [on the far west side]? Not really, because we have two vans. We have vans to pick you up and take you home, everywhere. I really do think it's upwardly mobile people leaving. People come from out of town. I have people come in from

Pennsylvania to church every Sunday. My pastor comes from Englewood. I'm concerned about that. It's that kind of thing. I think younger people view religion a little bit differently than older people. One of the struggles we have in the church is trying to connect the old ways with the new. I think that's part of the problem. Another part of the problem is—that fire scared a lot of people. It really, truly did. From that time on there has been a decline.

Different Cultures

Even now I run into—because, again, I'm quite vocal, and I'm quite an activist at heart, and when I see things that are wrong, I'm going to say that they're wrong. I have some members of my church who really are afraid when I speak out on certain issues. I did a youth forum after that accident in the river [an African American teenager, fleeing Hoboken police, jumped into the Hudson River and drowned], and I thought I was dealing with the anger of children. My purpose was to calm children down; to let them know that things are happening. You don't see them happening, but this is just not being accepted. Things are going down behind the scenes, and you just have to protect yourself. Also, to let them know how you have to deal with the police. There's a certain way you have to do this. You just can't be yellin' and screamin' at police. They're already in a stressful situation, regardless of what happened. This is a stressful situation, so you can't be confronting police.

This was my goal. There was a point in there when I was listening to people with my mouth wide open. I couldn't say a word. I was standing in the front of the church with my mouth wide open, because the level of fear was—I don't understand it. I've never seen that. I've never experienced it. Like I told you, my early relationship,

the way I grew up—even now, that boggles my mind. I call the Hoboken police department with homework questions. I'm a criminal justice major. I call up there and have somebody give me the answer if I don't know it. I don't understand that fear.

But more than anything in the community is fear. A lot of people don't want to come out of their projects. They won't. And one of the reasons I do everything I do, I do it in my church, because it's like *this is our city*. This is not your projects, this is our city. Sometimes you really just have to force people.

They feel very threatened, yes. And some of it is really justified, I have to say, when you have kids. . . . When we were children, you had groups of kids going everywhere. We were mobs. We went twenty deep. The only difference is, when I was a kid there was no race divide. We went all over, the group of kids I hung out with. Nobody bothered us. We had fights. Not that we would fight each other, we'd fight other groups, but you weren't called a gang. You didn't have to worry about being arrested. And even if you got picked up by the police, you were gonna get either disciplined by the police, or sent home, because the police, they were close to your family, like they were to mine. Captain Keily was wonderful. He would call, probably my mother. It was different. Now the kids, if they go to the park, automatically the police are being called, "There's a bunch of kids here." If they get into a fight, "they're making terroristic threats." They've ratcheted it up so that behavior that was normal for teenagers—joyriding—is now Grand Theft Auto. It's much more dangerous, and I'm not saying it's not dangerous, but a lot of times it's the same thing that it was, but depending on where you are and who you are, the charge is going to be different.

I don't put [the differences] on money. I put it on different cultures. I don't knock money at all. Make it if you can, I don't care who you are. I don't mind that. But I think they come from a different culture. You know, everybody who comes to Hoboken loves

Hoboken—"Hoboken is clean, Hoboken is this, Hoboken is that"—and the first thing they want to do is change it. The new people, newcomers, don't think in terms of community. They say they want community, they say they come to Hoboken because Hoboken is such a diverse city, but they are actually afraid of diversity. I think it's fear of difference. Cultural differences.

Is it also about people wanting to take and not give? Well, you know, that's true. Take the church, for instance. We used to do this thing called the Chinese Auction. All the churches in Hoboken were involved in this—Sts. Peter & Paul, St. Matthew's, St. Ann's, St. Francis—and we would have an international smorgasbord, to go along with the Chinese Auction. We all came together as a community. We would go to the stores (and at the time it was only Washington Street and First Street), and all the stores knew when you were coming, and all the stores contributed to whatever it was. Now all the stores up and down the avenue have on them "No Soliciting" signs. So that's a difference.

I think the biggest thing I see is that people are not very friendly at all, and very, very rude. As a driver (I'm not a walker), I have never seen people who have so much faith in another person's brakes in my life. Everything is "all about me." They say that the '70s was the me-generation, but. . .

Hoboken is unique in this way. It doesn't work unless the other person allows it to work. For instance, don't tell me there's anyplace in Hoboken that I can't go. It's not happening. This is Hoboken. You do have to do things in a certain way. Like normally I would never eat outside. But whenever I eat at one of the restaurants on Washington Street, I sit outside, weather permitting, so you know there's black people here. You make little adjustments like this. Every now and then I have to fight with whoever's in City Hall (lately it's been Mr. Roberts, but we're friends again now). But you have to say it. To me, Hoboken tends to ignore its black community because it's not going

to get that money otherwise. So it's trying to pull the money in, and in doing so, you're changing the face of the community. And we need the money, because nobody wants to pay taxes, higher taxes. What's going to be interesting is if we lose the Abbott money [state funding for in-need school districts.] That's what I'm watching for. Then you'll see how valuable the other half of your community is to you.

I've never felt as isolated in Hoboken as I do now. Well, except to the extent that I won't let it happen. Like I said.

You know, I'm committed to Mt. Olive, and as long as that church is standing there, I'll be in Hoboken. The day that that church is no longer standing there, I'm probably sure I'm gone. But as long as the church is there, I'll be there. And I intend to make sure it stays there. I want my daughter, my granddaughters, my grandsons to be married there. So I think I'll be here a while.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan,

were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. The Project focuses on collecting the oral histories of residents who can evoke Hoboken’s vanished industries through their recollections of employment in the city’s many factories and on the waterfront, and those who can capture for present and future generations the ways in which Hoboken’s rich ethnic and cultural diversity was once evident in the everyday life of the city. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. Since 2002, eight chapbooks have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Hoboken Oral History Project


The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

... small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material

continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.


Although some of the chapbooks in the Vanishing Hoboken series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.



Ace & the Kings



The Fabulous Nic-Tones



*Dyke & the Blazers were known
for their funk and R&B hits
"Funky Broadway," "We Got
More Soul," and "Let a Woman Be
a Woman—Let a Man Be a Man."*

