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Aug. 30, 1939

Ed Smalls

Edwin Alexander Smalls, better known as Ed Smalls is the owner of Harlem's foremost and oldest cabaret, Small's Paradise at 2294 $\frac{1}{2}$ Seventh Ave. Mr. Smalls opened his Paradise in October, 1925. Since the opening the place, the propriety hasn't failed to open the doors of his night club a single night. He has enjoyed a successful business enterprise for over thirteen years. This is an enviable record of achievement for any night club owner. Smalls Paradise opened during the lush days of the twenties. It has withstood the loss of those lush days, the loss of a large spending public brought on by the depression, the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, the Harlem riots and the aftermath, which brought on a tremendous fear of Harlem night life.

There have been more pretentious cabarets and proprietors who have enjoyed more profits than the Smalls. The heyday of these clubs have been spasmodic. Their glamour lasted for a short time. They opened and closed monthly, weekly and there have been instances where they lasted only for one night. Small's opened his Paradise at 2294 $\frac{1}{2}$ Seventh Ave. It has remained at this same address to this day. There have been times when Smalls Paradise operated at an absolute loss. People stayed at home, money did not pour in and for a-while the few patrons on the night club scene sought other cabarets than Small's Paradise.

Ed Smalls had seventy-five people employed in his cabaret. These people had to make a living. He couldn't possibly continue to operate without at least making his expense. The local press was blazing with headlines of the breadlines, the crime, the hunger-marches and bank failures. Ed Smalls observed his hat check girl in her booth, He study the face of his faithful doorman standing outside smiling and directing a few club patrons. He talked the matter over with his manager, Gene Tyler. Yes, Gene also knew what it would mean if Ed closed the doors of his Paradise. There was the Chinese cook, a host of young waiters, the orchestra, the entertainers and even the scrubwoman. What would these people do ? The task was at trying one. Something must be done.

Ed Smalls realized that when he was a youngster he had always wanted to run a night club. At first he thought only of the public--a hungry public. A public hungry for entertainment. As he matured in his thinking, he further realized that there was another side to his ideal night club. There would be the people who would offer this entertainment. These who would be in his enterprise had to have salaries, salaries in order that they might eat. Therefore, his night club must have a two-fold purpose. The equation between the hungry public in need of entertainment and the hungry workmen engaged in providing this entertainment must always be balanced. He could not let his workers down:

Seventy-five workers looked at him askingly. Ed Smalls turned a sea of sad faces into happy ones. He told them Small's Paradise had passed its crisis. No one would lose his job. To keep the place open, Smalls needed a lot of money. There was but one place to get it. He was owner of several pieces of property. He would have to get money from his real estate enterprises. He did not want to do this. He had used his profits from the Paradise to engage in building up his real estate holdings. Now they must shrink. He was compelled to ask himself whether he was a cabaret operator or a philanthropist. After all didn't the immensely wealthy Rockefeller close the Dunbar Bank when it failed to bring a profit. Where does this idea of business end and benevolence begin? Smalls made the step that endeared his workers to him for life. He sold some of his property, lost even more and drew his own belt up a few notches to keep his place going. Looking about now at seventy-five happy faces, he felt that the loss was worth it.

Small's Paradise is one level below the street at the corner of Seventh Avenue and West 135th St. It is a huge place, about two hundred by two hundred and fifty feet. The place is lighted in deep amber. The effect is easy on the eye. A dance floor is in the center of the cabaret, in back of this is the orchestra pit. Tables for parties from two to six or eight spread out from this central location on an elevated plane. At the extreme west end of the cabaret is the waiter's bar.

A host of courteous waiters wait patiently to attend the patrons without putting on a "rush act". No customer has ever complained about the service at Small's Paradise during the thirteen years of its operation.

The patrons of the Paradise come almost exclusively from that section of New York which lies between West 110 Street and West 155th St. Mr. Smalls can account for this by several factors. One of these factors is that first, the white trade that once attended Small's has drifted back towards Broadway for their entertainment. The novelty of "Black Paris" as Harlem as know in the twenties, has worn off. The few who still came after this were frightened by ugly crime headlines featured by certain Harlem papers. After the Harlem riot his trade fell off to practically nothing. It remained only for Harlem itself to attend Small's Paradise. Today ^{Harlem} night clubbers make up about seventy-five per cent of the Paradise patronage.

Mr. Smalls is proud of the fact that he has been able to provide a night spot for the meager pocket-books of his Harlem trade. There is no minimum charge, nor cover charge. The level of prices has been geared down to about fifty cents. Small's Paradise is boasted as being the only night club with a bar, entertainment and a good dance orchestra that can offer one an enjoyable evening for fifty cents. With such prices it is easy to understand why the minimum of three hundred patrons attend the Paradise nightly.

It is not hard to understand how Small's Paradise has been able to withstand competition from the whole of New York City and about a dozen night clubs in Harlem at one time or another. This credit is due to the personal initiative of Ed Smalls. Ed is a mahogany colored man of small stature. He is quiet and unassuming. He is a man who says little but thinks deep. His face is pleasant and lined with wisdom. He has gained his knowledge through the hard school of experience. He did not go to college. He was compelled to work in order to help support his parents. There is a peculiar twinkle in his eye which connotes the fact that Ed Smalls is a rather wise man. After all he has seen ten night clubs open up in Harlem and exactly ten flops after a time.

The attitude of the Harlem church folk has undergone a change since witnessing the growth of Small's Paradise. He has convinced the church that a night club is a respectable business not to be looked upon with suspicion and scorn. He knows that it is a psychological truth that people must be entertained. The church has its place and the night club has its place. He has always tried to give his patrons clean and artistic entertainment. The very "good" people who used to give his Paradise as well as other night clubs hell are some of his most permanent patrons customers.

Ed Smalls contributes to the community welfare of Harlem. He makes donations to the churches and other civic bodies. He holds benefits for the poor of the city.

He lives a quiet life. Prizefighting is his hobby. He is an Elk. He has full confidence in his race. He points with pride that he is not an armchair race man. He practices it. He helps it. He believes in its future. He has met the threat of racketeers. He has been able to settle all labor relations without strikes, walkouts or closing his cabaret's doors. He believes that the future of the Negro lies in the field of education. The best bet for the young Negro today is to prepare himself for Civil Service. It may seem strange that a man who has made a business of selling entertainment should hold that there isn't much hope for the Negro in the entertainment field. However it does not seem strange when he says that he bases his belief on the fact that the Negro has been so thoroughly exploited in this line of endeavor and has in term realized little for his efforts. Unless he can capitalize on his own artistry, entertainment should not be encouraged as a livelihood, Mr. Smalls reaffirmed.

The major weakness of Negro business is the lack of business ethics. Jealous, deception and distrust of his own kind are the contributing factors hampering the progress of Negro business. These factors are being destroyed, Mr. Smalls holds. Education is bringing this about. All businesses must maintain certain commercial ethics. A business man does not wish to have matters of a confidential nature exposed at social gatherings. This is one of the more hazardous instruments Negro business men use too frequently. This only does harm. This must

stop if big Negro business is to succeed. Ed Smalls was pretty firm on this matter. After thirteen years in business, he should know.

In 1936, in order to meet the demands of a section of the Harlem public that could not meet even the cheapest prices in a night club, Smalls opened up a bar on the street level. It is just over his night club. Here he enjoys one of the best representative clientele in Harlem. Patrons with ten or fifteen cents can linger at a modernistic bar, drink and mingle with people from all walks of life, celebrities, professional people and the ordinary bar flies. The place is all modern. The booths around the wall are conveniently located so that those who do not like to stand may sit. The seats are made of oak wood and red leather. The upstairs bar is open all day. It is a financial as well as social success.

Ed Smalls is credited for having discovered such theatrical personalities as Hazel Scott, Myra Johnson, the Three Rhythm Team and Pearl Harrison. His Paradise has been starting point for many more who have found success in the field of entertainment.

The owner of Small's Paradise is soon going to retire. He is going to turn his business over to Gene Tyler, his manager for seven years. Ed's brother Charles will be associated with Gene in running the business. Smalls is as proud of Gene as he is of his Paradise. Gene has won the great confidence that Ed bestows upon him. Gene

Smalls has no fears about the future of his club. Under Gene's management, he will have a man who he feels is as close to him as any son would be. He doesn't mind stepping off the scene. He wants to retire to a haven somewhere in the country and idle away the time.

SOURCE OF MATERIAL

The New York Amsterdam News---Mar. 1937
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Interview with Mr. Smalls

Mr. Smalls in a soft voice and in the office of his Paradise gladly told me about the development of his business. He was not boastful and did not feel that he rated such an interview. The atmosphere of his club was that of a family reception room. The employees were intimate and pleasant. They lacked that professional necessary and somewhat boring front. Mr. Smalls made the interview a very friendly one and topped it off with a drink to the interviewer.

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He emphasized the fact that very few people knew that he employed about six other races in his club. His lack of discrimination among races is followed in his policy of employment.