

Chapter 10

Paradise

Chapter from *The Boston Jazz Chronicles: Faces, Places and Nightlife, 1937–1962*. © 2012 by Richard Vacca. All rights reserved.

The year 1947 brought a new owner to the property at 428 Massachusetts Avenue. Joseph L. Walcott opened Wally's Paradise there on January 1, 1947, launching a Boston jazz institution that is still in operation and still a family-owned business, more than 60 years later. Sixty years is no small accomplishment for any small business, let alone one in the nightclub business. In 1947, Wally's first year, James Michael Curley was mayor, the John Hancock Building—the one topped by the weather beacon—opened its doors, and the Boston Braves drew a million fans to their Commonwealth Avenue ballpark for the first time. Curley went to prison, Hancock built a bigger tower, and the Braves moved to Milwaukee, but Wally's survived changes in popular taste, neighborhood decline, "urban removal," and racial unrest, and it still presents the music and still provides a place for local musicians to play. Of all the rooms mentioned in this book, it alone survived.



Joseph "Wally" Walcott, 1947. Courtesy of Elynor Walcott.

The Barbados-born Walcott arrived in Boston in about 1908 and worked at various jobs, but the one that was critical to his future was as operator of a taxi service. Prominent politicians were among his fares, and one was Curley, who was mayor of Boston (and under federal indictment for mail fraud) in 1946 when Walcott applied for his liquor license. Curley helped Walcott; the calculating Curley undoubtedly thought it could help him pick up votes in the black community. Without a good word from the mayor, it is doubtful that Walcott could have obtained the liquor license held by the Little Dixie's owners—in 1946, a

black businessman simply did not have the clout or the capital to obtain the necessary permits and licenses to operate a nightclub. Walcott was the first, and he remained a part of the club until his death in 1998 at age 101.

Walcott had two reasons for opening a nightclub. First was to provide a place where black patrons were welcome. Other area clubs, like the Hi-Hat, admitted whites only, and the stories that make us shudder now, of "passing,"

and the “brown paper bag test,” were everyday facts of African-American life in 1946. So Wally’s was a place where the black community could relax and socialize. Second was a more typical reason for a man raising a family: economic security. “I wanted something to eat,” he told an interviewer the year before his death. “I wanted to earn something independent of my friends or my family. I wanted something I could say was mine.”¹

A Jazz Corner Musical History

In the early years, Walcott built his business with good local jazz and relentless promotion. Sabby Lewis, the top name on the local scene, was already playing the club in 1947, at the peak of his band’s postwar popularity. Saxophonist Jimmy Tyler, restive, broke away from the Lewis band in 1948 and brought a new band into Wally’s that September, one featuring trumpeter Lennie Johnson, pianist Curtis Brown, and bassist Martin “Gator” Rivers, with the steady Bey Perry keeping time. They worked at Wally’s until the summer of 1949. Lewis was back for the entire year of 1950, and trombonist J. C. Higginbotham led a house band for much of 1951, for a time featuring Frankie Newton. Wally’s Paradise, during its first five years, was home to some of the best jazz in Boston. The peripatetic Tyler, who was always setting up a session somewhere throughout his career, for a time organized Sunday jam sessions at Wally’s. A photo of one appeared in *Down Beat* in 1948, showing a stage full of musicians from the Tyler and Nat Pierce bands.² Every modernist in town was making the scene at Wally’s in the late 1940s.

Bop was one development coming into its own when Wally’s opened. Another was the jump blues, and Boston favorites Fat Man Robinson and Pete Brown brought this music to Wally’s in the early 1950s. In fact, Wally’s featured music from every corner of the jazz world except Dixieland in its opening years.

These were the best of the Jazz Corner years, when jam sessions were common and sitting in an accepted practice. Coleman Hawkins, Oscar Peterson, and Sarah Vaughan were among those who dropped by. One night in 1950, Lena Horne’s trio, an all-star group of pianist Gerry Wiggins, bassist Joe Benjamin, and drummer Chico Hamilton, took over the bandstand after they finished their show at the Copley Plaza’s Oval Room. It was a time when you might find a Roy Haynes or a Paul Gonsalves working for the night in a pickup band.

The early years were straight-ahead jazz, but starting in about 1952 Walcott scouted the “chitlin circuit” for entertainers, bringing to Boston Al Bryant’s Harlem Swingsters, the dance troop of Lorraine Knight, Austin Powell’s The Cats & The Fiddle, the comics Apus and Estrellita, and revues with names

like *Mambo Rhapsody* and the *Harlem Gone Paris Revue*. “Yes!” read a Wally’s advertisement in 1953. “The Show’s That Good!” Even though such shows tailed off at Wally’s by the mid-fifties, they played at other Boston clubs for another ten years.

Walcott worked hard at promotion. He went to the local college campuses and distributed handbills, advertised in the *Record*, and for parts of six years, sponsored his own program on the radio. Eddy Petty was broadcasting from Wally’s as early as 1948 over WVOM, and he was followed by Art Tacker on WTOA and Speed Anderson on WVDA.



Caught in the act: Jam session at Wally’s Paradise. From left: Curtis Brown, Gigi Gryce, Gator Rivers, Jimmy Tyler, Bey Perry, Gait Preddy, Frank Winters, Lennie Johnson, Charlie Mariano. Courtesy of the *DownBeat* archives.

Wally’s Paradise, though not a hole-in-the-wall operation (when it first opened, the club had three bars, a full kitchen, and a dance floor), could not compete with Storyville and the Hi-Hat in the 1950s for the big-name, national talent. There were a few, such as Higginbotham, Pete Brown, and Milt Buckner, with reputations that went far beyond Boston, but they were the exceptions. Wally’s started as, and remained, a room for local players.

Through the 1950s, a reliable core of Boston musicians provided Wally’s music, including Fat Man Robinson, Bunny Campbell, Art Foxall, Herbie and Roland Lee, Joe Perry, Stanley Trotman, and Mabel Robinson. Jaki Byard led small groups there on and off through the decade, with his noteworthy Wally’s effort being a short-lived Tuesday night big band in late 1958. Saxophonist Dan Turner, nicknamed “Hurricane,” and a veteran of both the Lewis and Tyler bands, had the house band at Wally’s in 1955, and stayed on to work with Eddie Logan, who took over the house band in late 1956:

I played at Wally's with Baggy Grant and Red Garland for about six months. I was playing bass. Red lived in Boston for about eight months back then. After Red left, I had a trio with guitar and drums, and I expanded that with Dan Turner on tenor. Then Alan Dawson came in on drums. No piano."³

Dawson himself led the house band at the club after Logan.

Walcott liked jazz, and it never occurred to him to replace it with the more popular sounds of R&B and soul music even when the popularity of those forms eclipsed jazz in the eyes of the public

There were times when he had to be a businessman first and a jazz fan second. Eddie Logan remembered one such instance in 1948:

He was tough, he was smart, and he was always looking out for the business. I remember that he was quite proud of the fact that he had Claude Hopkins coming in, and he'd be talking about that, how the great Claude Hopkins was coming to Wally's. I remembered Claude Hopkins from when I was a kid. So he's there, but it wasn't going well and people were just walking out. And Wally said to Claude, "you're ruining my business. You gotta get out of here." He was doing what he had to do for the business. Even though he put that effort into booking Claude Hopkins, he could see it wasn't working.⁴

Firing Hopkins was probably a difficult thing for Walcott to do, because Walcott, who was 50 years old when he opened his club, personally liked the style of swing rooted in earlier decades that Hopkins and other bandleaders in the early years (Sabby Lewis, J. C. Higginbotham) played. But he had to do what was right for the business.

Trumpeter Hy Lockhart remembered another aspect of working for Wally—being treated fairly. Sabby Lewis needed a place to break in a new band after his long-standing unit broke up in December 1949. Lockhart recalled how Walcott welcomed his friend Lewis:

This was the new band, with Alan Dawson and Lennie Johnson and Danny Potter and the rest, and we went into Wally's right after the first of the year and we played there for the whole year. And Wally treated us well. He always paid us on time, and he paid union scale. Not every club owner worked that way.⁵

One well-known presence at Wally's in the 1950s was drummer Alan Dawson. Dawson was born in 1929 in Pennsylvania but his family moved to Boston when he was a boy, and while in high school he was already gigging with the bands of Tasker Crosson, Hopeton Johnson, and Wilbur Pinckney. His first inspirations were Bobby Donaldson and Roy Haynes. After his high school graduation in 1947, he started five years of instruction with the well-known teacher Charles Alden. He began playing marimba and vibes in the late 1940s.

Dawson was a key player in the emerging modern jazz scene. He played in groups with Sam and Martin Rivers, Gig Gryce, Jaki Byard, and other leading lights of the time. In December 1949 he was with Frankie Newton at the Show Boat opposite Sabby Lewis, and when the Lewis band broke up that month, Lewis asked Dawson to join his new group. Dawson stayed with Lewis for a year until he was drafted. Out of the army in 1953, he toured Europe with Lionel Hampton, then returned to Boston and the Lewis band. He stayed until 1956. That's when he joined Eddie Logan's band at Wally's. In 1957 he led his own quartet at Wally's with tenor saxophonist Roland Alexander, then joined Al Vega's trio and recorded the *All by Al* album with Alex Cirin in 1958.

In 1957 Dawson joined the faculty at the Berklee School of Music. Then came trio work with Toshiko Akiyoshi, John and Paul Neves, and Rollins Griffith, and a stint with Herb Pomeroy's big band in 1961–1962. In the mid 1960s he was the house drummer at Lennie's-on-the-Turnpike, where he renewed musical associations with Jaki Byard and Booker Ervin, who had lived in Boston in 1950. In 1965 the *Down Beat* International Critics Poll named him a talent deserving of wider recognition, which he duly received as a seven-year member of the Dave Brubeck Quartet, starting in 1968. In 1975 he left both Brubeck and Berklee, and got off the road for good. Dawson remained a first-call drummer and sought-after teacher until his death from leukemia in 1996.

The 1960s brought changes to Wally's. For one thing, in 1960, the club changed its name from "Wally's Paradise" to "Wally's Cafe." The music changed, too. The early sixties were the time of organ duos and trios, and Boston had its share of notable combos: Hillary Rose, Jimmy Tyler, and Baggy Grant at Connolly's; Joe Bucci and Joe Riddick at Lennie's-on-the-Turnpike; and a few at Wally's as well, here remembered by Elynor Walcott, Wally's daughter and later club manager:

The club had a Hammond organ, a 1937 Model A, and Wally was proud of it, he had a guy who came up from the South Shore to service it, keep it in tune. We've still got it in storage, and I hope to restore it to use some day. I remember very well two of the men who played it. Hopeton Johnson, he played at Wally's for a long time with his trio, four or five years. Hopeton, he always played with his eyes closed, looked like he was sleeping, off somewhere in another world. He'd rock back and forth, always with his eyes closed. Bunny Smith was his drummer, he'd come up from Connecticut to work here with Hopeton, and Jay Talbert played tenor.

The other was Fingers Pearson, George Pearson, who was a perfect gentleman, very pleasant, very dignified, never raised his voice. Then he'd raise the

roof when he played. He'd just sort of lean back and let go. He had a day job, driving for a funeral home. I couldn't believe it when I heard that!⁶

It was true; Fingers Pearson and his drummer Sammy Ellcock sometimes closed Wally's in the early morning and perhaps jammed a bit after that, and a few hours later, Pearson would arrive at the morgue in his hearse. When he could, Pearson practiced on the organ in the funeral home's chapel. Pearson had attended Schillinger House on the GI Bill and was an accomplished keyboard man, having taken over the piano chair from Mabel Robinson Simms at the Pioneer. He wasn't nicknamed "Fingers" because of his piano playing, however. It was because of his skill with a pool queue. Pearson, and then Johnson, kept Wally's in the groove when the clubs were filled with that big Hammond sound.



Sabby Lewis and an unidentified man outside Wally's Paradise, ca. 1948.
Courtesy of Elynor Walcott.

Perseverance

While the music inside Wally's put some swing into the early sixties, the scene outside was becoming more difficult. Although Mayor John Collins was busy building the "New Boston," people in Wally's neighborhood did not see much of it. What they saw were the ugly realities of racial inequality and a declining quality of life—in housing, in the schools, in public safety. Mass Ave and Columbus wasn't the Jazz Corner anymore. There was no Hi-Hat, no

Eddie Levine's, no Savoy. There was just Wally's, and Walcott kept his business going in spite of it. Said Elynor Walcott:

What kept the club in business all those years? My father's tenacity. This club was his life, and he worked hard to keep it going. Even when the neighborhood went bad, with the robberies and the prostitution, he would be down here every day. He'd put on a suit and a white shirt and a tie and he'd go to work. He'd be down here first thing in the morning, with his pants legs rolled up, mopping the floor, cleaning the bathrooms. Then he'd roll 'em down again and open up.

There was a bar up the street and my father used to say they ruined Massachusetts Avenue, with the prostitutes hanging around there. They'd be turning tricks in the hallways...my father eventually bought our building, and had to stand outside to protect the place, keep them out of the halls. And the drugs...people used to tape drugs to the inside of the toilet tank, and he'd find them and flush them down...He ran the place with a strong hand. He wasn't big, but he could grab a man by his collar and throw him out if he had to. If he told you to leave his club, well, you had to leave.

That's how he stayed in business, it was his perseverance.⁷

The perseverance paid off, despite the hard times and the shutdown of the club's original location at 428 Mass Ave when the Boston Redevelopment Authority took the building in 1978. The club reopened in 1979 at its current location across the street, and has remained open since. Walcott himself accumulated numerous honors and accolades, among them from the City of Boston, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the Berklee College of Music.

In 1997 the City of Boston's Business Heritage Project called the club "historic" because it had stayed in business for over 25 years, quite a feat for any small business.⁸ Is that what makes Wally's historic? Walcott himself would probably have called that part of it "making a living." The historic part? That would be Wally Walcott himself, and his dedication to jazz and his willingness to do just about anything to keep the music going. And it would be the spirit of the countless musicians who came to blow at the jam sessions over the club's 65—65!—years of Sundays. In spite of a shrinking jazz audience, neighborhood turmoil, racial unrest, the Boston Redevelopment Agency, and the uncertain economics of the nightclub business, Wally's just kept making the scene. *That's* the historic part.