

Wally's Café – A Boston Landmark and a Neighborhood Treasure

The modest entrance to Wally's Café at 427 Massachusetts Avenue belies its significance as a nationally, indeed internationally, acclaimed jazz club which has hosted the likes of Sarah Vaughn and Sabby Lewis, has imported jazz musicians from around the world, and continues to serve as a training ground and the venue for young talent. Founded in 1947, it is one of the oldest jazz clubs in existence and has remained in the same family for almost 60 years.

Wally's was founded in 1947 by Joseph Walcott (Wally), who in 1910 arrived at Ellis Island from Barbados to join his brothers LeRoy and Eddy, already in Boston. Over the years, the brothers worked at various jobs (private cab company, cooks) and acquired property in the South End of Boston. With help from the then Mayor James Curley and City Council President Gabrielle Piemonte, Wally opened the jazz club with his savings and named it "Wally's Paradise". Its original location was on the other side of Massachusetts Avenue, at 428, and it joined a host of other clubs on Massachusetts Avenue and in the South End...the "High Hat", the "Savoy Ballroom", "Chicken Lane" and others, making the South End a major factor in the New England jazz and music communities. Wally was not only the first African American to own a club in New England, but he also was a man with a mission and a sense of the audience he wanted to reach. Early on, he would travel to Harvard Square and distribute fliers to the academic community. The result? One of the earliest integrated jazz venues with a dedicated following of Harvard and other college students, a base which has remained constant over the years.

Wally's has hosted such historical figures as Martin Luther King (who regularly had breakfast with Wally while Dr. King was a student here), Malcolm X, and W.E.B.DuBois, the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard University and a founder of the N.A.A.C.P. The club was also an informal meeting place for local members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In 1979, Wally's moved across the street to its present location at 427, after the original building was taken by the City.

Wally's is now owned and managed by Joseph Walcott's three grandsons, Frank, Lloyd, and Paul Poindexter, with assistance from their mother, Eleanor Walcott, Wally's daughter and a life long resident of 27 Rutland Square.

Frank Poindexter was gracious enough to share with us his thoughts and memories of growing up in the neighborhood (brother Paul adding details). Frank, who is 40 years of age and has 4 children, graduated from Boston Technical and New Prep in Cambridge. He continues to maintain a presence in the family home on Rutland Square, and is active in supporting and organizing basketball leagues in the City of Boston. He works out regularly at The Sports Club, LA. Frank and his brothers have worked at Wally's since they were youngsters, washing bottles, cleaning up, listening to music, and gradually taking on more management duties as they grew older.

Frank and Paul remember growing up in the South End, which was a cohesive and family oriented neighborhood with, even then, a diverse population...Greek, Lebanese, and Spanish families added to the mix. They recall running and playing on Columbus Avenue and Tremont Street and hanging out at the South End branch of the Library. It was the kind of setting where, as Paul noted, "if you misbehaved, your mother knew about it before dinner." Every street had block parties, and kids set up Kool-aid and cake stands. What is now Bijan Cleaners was a pool hall, next door a shoe shine parlor, and Wellington Greene was a favorite spot to throw horseshoes on a Sunday afternoon. One of Frank's earliest friends on Rutland Square was Steve Bowers. As preschoolers they played together daily. Now, almost 4 decades later, Steve orchestrates the summer concert series at the Titus Sparrow Park, and Frank provides support and musical talent.

While Frank misses the sense of cohesive and community that informed the neighborhood when he was growing up, he is also clear that change is a part of the dynamics of life, of the South End, and of Wally's. He sees more city services now being provided to the South End and an increased involvement and awareness of community groups demanding those services. Our own Frank Jordan is high on Frank Poindexter's list of local heroes. Events like the Street Fair, the Jazz Festival on Columbus, and the Titus Sparrow Park concert series, Frank notes, enhance the neighborhood and provide a new

sense of community and participation. Wally's supports all these programs with funding and talent.

What does Frank like most about the new South End? Primarily, he loves Wally's as it is evolving, but enjoys the plethora of restaurants, particularly Jae's, The House of Siam, and the Claremont Café, and the challenge of getting to know the neighbors. How best to get to know the neighbors? Frank suggests more personal interaction in informal settings. Drop by Wally's for their Sunday afternoon jam sessions. Ask for Frank or Paul or Lloyd. Introduce yourself. Become a regular.

Wally's works hard at being a good neighbor. Although open 365 days a year, the café closes an hour earlier than their license allows to accommodate residents. They participate in community events and the neighborhood association. Frank and his family want to support the neighborhood and in turn want neighborhood support. Over the decades that it has been in business, Wally's has become an internationally recognized cultural institution which has played an integral part in the development of American jazz, an accomplishment of which Frank is justifiably proud as he greets visitors from France or Italy or Germany who have read about Wally's in their guidebooks.

What's next on the agenda? Wally's is planning an expansion, hiring a chef, and serving a bar menu, although Frank is determined to keep the same low key presence. So, let's look forward to the evolution and support our good neighbors. Check out Wally's web site at www.wallyscafe.com for all the latest or to book a band for your next party!