

Passage to Paradise



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The Carr Center
Detroit, Michigan



A celebration of the heritage of
Paradise Valley, Idlewild & Saginaw

Authentic voices from the “Golden Age” of the tri-city connection
between Detroit, Idlewild and Saginaw, Michigan
from 1915-1960.





The "Discovery" of Carlean Gill/The Idlewild Revue

Paradise Valley to Idlewild 1957-1961



c-3702
PARADISE CLUB Idlewild Mich.

The "Discovery" of Carlean Gill



Interview, 1999



Arthur Bragg's 1960 Idlewild Revue

Carlean Gill is a Detroit native who found early stardom in the historic Paradise Valley entertainment district as a pageant winner. She would later go on to perform with the famed Idlewild Revue of the 1950s and 1960s. The Revue, headed by Arthur Braggs, a Saginaw businessman, entertained thousands of vacationers from Detroit, Flint, Saginaw, Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, and Toledo. In the off-season they toured across the U.S. Canada and Mexico. After her time with the Revue, Gill became a leading Saginaw entrepreneur, national hair stylist and educator who bred and raced horses. She now lives in Texas.

Carlean's "Discovery" (continued)



Auditioning for the Idlewild Revue

I was about 19. I didn't know where my life was going to go, but I knew I had to stay busy. The only jobs I could get were small jobs. I did babysitting for a white baby. I worked in a beauty salon, Artistic Beauty Shop near Hudson's in Southfield. I was the one picking up dirty towels and dusting off things. I'd see the white girls come in to get their hair done, girls I had gone to school with. They'd say, "Hi, Carlean, how are you?" and I got a white apron on, cleaning up. It was degrading, but it was motivating for me...I swore I'd never work like that. I later worked with my sister as a Fountain Girl on Livernois, the elite part where the well-dressed went, the elite Jewish people. When we'd ride through Livernois, we'd say, "Black people will never live here." Now it's all-Black. But I quit that job, too. I couldn't last over two months.

I got training as a switchboard operator downtown on Woodward and I started attending Lewis Business College for training in shorthand and typing. I was there about five months, and that's when a friend told me to come try out for Idlewild. She was beautiful, like six-feet tall. We'd call them showgirls. I didn't think I was pretty enough, but I went to audition. I saw my friend in one of the shows. I had seen the Revue at shows at the Flame Show Bar and some other bars when they would come into town. The night I saw my friend, Arthur Braggs was there. He had just come in from Mexico. I met him. I was there with my boyfriend. We later left, but I never thought I'd become a part of the show.

" I'd see the white girls come in to get their hair done, girls I had gone to school with. They'd say, "Hi, Carlean, how are you?" and I have a white apron on, cleaning up. It was degrading, but it motivated me. I swore I'd never do that anymore."



ZIGGY JOHNSON, surrounded by beauties featured in the sparkling Idlewild Revue at the Flame Show Bar.

'61 Idlewild Revue Sizzled at Flame

Producer Arthur Braggs unveiled one of the finest exhibitions of stagecraft seen in Detroit this year at the Flame Show Bar.

It excelled conventional nite club acts by dint of its uniqueness, its beautiful, talented cast and its top-drawer production.

It moved with bullet velocity. Its color was a panorama of brilliance, but it was never flashy or gaudy.

The girls were feminine, well-formed and provocative. Ziggy Johnson held exacting continuity of the revue as emcee, though he narrated in several spots with sheer Hollywood professionalism.

He was suave, debonaire and elegant throughout.

Star billing went to that "Don't Go To Strangers" gal, Etta Jones, who reminded at times of the late Billie Holiday with some of her phrasing.

The male quartet ("The Four Tops") added mellow spice to the show with wiggling hips and scorching voices. They displayed command and nice rhythm.

Leonard and Leonard, the dancing brothers, who recently returned from Japan, embodied old and new conceived by those in the tap dancing profession. Their special number called "Bottoms Up" had earmarks of skating on a large slab of ivory.

The brothers were together from tip to tap, and consistently impressed the audience, causing it to break

many was the Mexican Review and Leon Escobar's concept of a tribal dance called the "Possessed." It was kinetic, sensual, burning but controlled with liquid motion and exacting patterns.

At a climactic point in the dance thought the young señoritas would melt into pure excitement."

Yes, this year's Idlewild Revue should gain for Producer Arthur Braggs the plaudits he so richly deserves.

FLAME SHOW BAR

HOTTEST PLACE
IN TOWN



CONTINUOUS
ENTERTAINMENT

4264 JOHN R., Corner Canfield
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DETROIT, MICH.

Carlean's "Discovery" (continued)

Joining the Revue

I went and tried out. Braggs and Ziggy Johnson were there. Ziggy was *the* choreographer in Detroit. When they called and said Mr. Braggs had accepted me. He told Ziggy in the office "Tell that girl to come back. I like her." I talked it over with my mother. She asked if this was what I really wanted to do. She tried to warn me that there were drugs and the women were ladies of the night, stuff like that, but if I really wanted to do it, I could go and try out. When I got in, she said, "I trust you and I know you. I know you're going to be the best. I know you won't be like what we hear about show business." I couldn't disappoint her.

I would still go to school and go around to rehearsal. Finally, I dropped out. And we got ready to go on the road.



Carlean's "Discovery" (continued)

THE MICHIGAN CHRONICLE—America's Fastest Growing Weekly

★ ★ ★ Theatrical News ★ ★ ★

Famed "Idlewild Revue" Reaps Critical Praise

Nearly 1,000 miles separates Detroit from New York but while Larry Steele was making history with his "Smart Affairs" on Broadway, Arthur Braggs was doing likewise in Paradise Valley at the Flame Show Bar with his 1958 "Idlewild Revue."

Returning to Detroit in slightly less than 90 days and with little advance publicity, Braggs played the most successful edition of his famed "Idlewild Revue" to a packed house, all of whom left applauding and full of praise.

A fast opening featuring The Braggettes (6) set the pace that was not to subside until the emcee announced, "well, that's it. How did you like it?"

A quartet of handsome young men called the Four Tops picked up the pace and kept things moving until a thin, agile dancer introduced as Mona Desmond hits the stage. This girl is, as the saying goes, "Something Else."

If she has a peer in this business I have yet to see her. She turns, spins, stands on her head, displays a trained knowledge of ballet, acrobatics and a varied theatrical background.

Betty Carter, a "way out" singer does a good job but, unfortunately, does not get through to the audience that likes melodies and tunes they can hum and whistle. Her reception is, however, very big with those who dig her.

Three extremely tall and striking show girls are featured in the production number along with specialty dancer Etta Cummings.

The Rhythm Kings (3) bring back memories of the Nicholas Brothers, the Berry Brothers and other featured acts of the past era of show business. They sing, clown, strut and just about wreck the place with their antics and dare-devil routines.

A newcomer, so to speak, named Jimmy Mitchell, fills the star spot rather well. His

songs are well paced and uniquely arranged. He is a former religious singer and displays certain tonations and deep feeling that only a trained spiritual singer could display. He is young, handsome and well-dressed and shows great promise.

Comic Pat Taylor does his act from various positions in the audience and comes up with some pretty healthy laughs.

Ziggy Johnson serves as emcee and Maurice King's Orchestra supplies the music although it is understood these two are not a part of the regular troupe.

The Idlewild Revue which carries nearly 30 people is making a real stab toward returning show business to the days of dancing girls, comics, tap dancers and production ideas. This is their second year on tour. Their 1957 effort toured 5 weeks the 1958 model has already chalked up 11 weeks, with the completion of this engagement.

Carlean's Life with the Idlewild Review

Life with the Idlewild Revue

We'd get ready to go on tour. We would have rehearsals, and we'd have to exercise, too. Ziggy was the choreographer. And then they would have a captain of the girls. We'd get fitted for a costume.

We went to Idlewild, and that's where we did all our rehearsing, over the first part of the summer, before it opened—Idlewild opened at a certain time. We'd pack our stuff up and go to Idlewild. At that time, everybody would come in that was going to be in the show. They would get cabins for us and pay our salaries, too. I would get paid \$200 per week, which was a lot. The shows would be \$2.50 and \$1.50 on Sundays. About a month before Idlewild opened, we would be up there. The cooks would come in. People from all over would come in. People flew in from Kansas City—the cooks, waitresses setting up for the club. Braggs would be getting the bookings done and people came in from New York to fit us for the costumes. They'd fly into a small airport, or Detroit and just drive up.

There were four Showgirls and six "Ponies"—The Ponies did the kicking and dancing, and the Showgirls walked and pranced around like "There she is...Ms. America!" We had three costumes a piece. There were three numbers in a show:

Opening

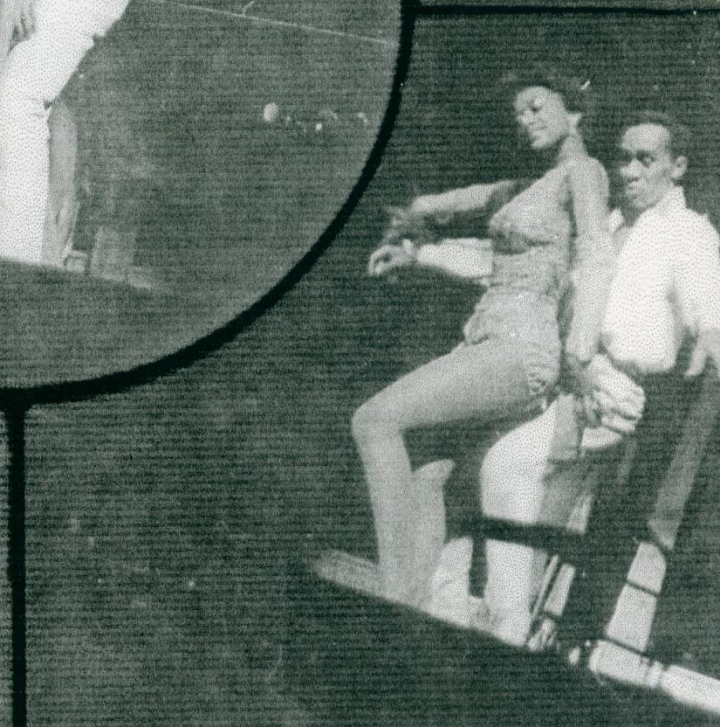
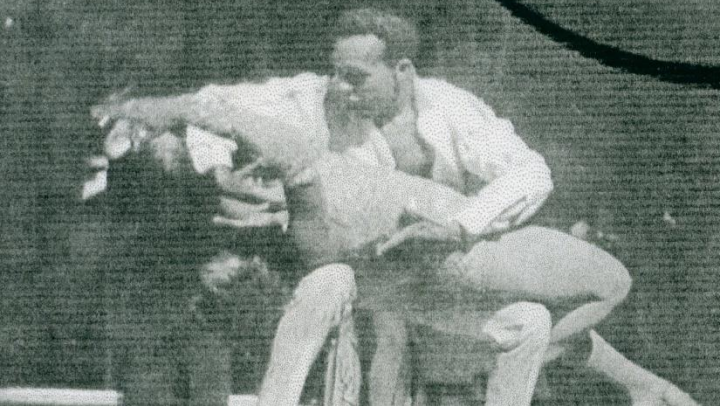
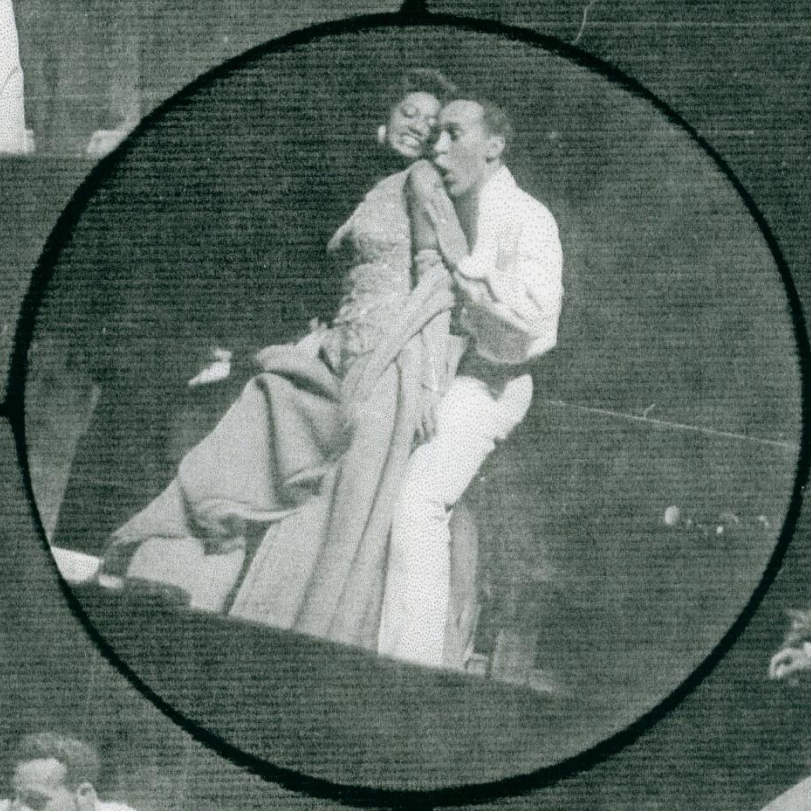
Middle

Finale

There were one-to-two acts in between—a dancer, singer, showgirl, comedian, tap dancer, or a Shake Dancer. The Shake Dancer was an exotic dancer who wore a beautiful costume. Lottie the Body was a Shake Dancer, she's still a good friend of mine, like a sister. Her costumes were worth \$10,000 at the time, all covered in rhinestones. She was married to Bruce Tatum, the baseball player. Her act wasn't nasty or anything. It was done with grace.

Jackie Wilson, Della Reese & Arthur Braggs





Carlean's Life with the Idlewild Review (continued)

The Idlewild shows would end just after Labor Day. We would do something called "Bury the Show"—we exchanged costumes and switch roles. Didn't matter if it was men or women, it was about switching roles, we'd sit down and decide who'd do what. If it was a Shake Dancer, she'd become the Star; the Singer would become the Shake Dancer and had to wear her costume. If the men couldn't fit the costumes, they would just put on the hats and jewelry and act out the part. The audience would just watch. It was fun.

I was with the Revue for four years. In the offseason we performed in Kansas City, Tulsa, Chicago, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, Boston and Canada. Idlewild is not like it used to be. When I go up there, I almost want to cry. It was fabulous.



Carlean's Life with the Idlewild Review (continued)



"Idlewild is not like it used to be. When I go up there, I almost want to cry. It was fabulous." ~Carlean Gill

Carlean's Life with the Idlewild Review (continued)



Carlean's Life with the Idlewild Review (continued)

*We are Pleasantly Forced to
Hold Over The Fabulous*



**1960
Idlewild Revue**

Featuring a Cast of 31 Artists

Starring
ARTHUR PRY SOCK - JENNIE TURNER

★ THE BRAGGETTES ★ FIESTA DOLLS
FOUR TOPS ★ RHYTHM KINGS ★ MONA DESMOND
COUNT BELCHER AND HIS ALL-STAR ORCHESTRA

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CALDWELLS

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(Saturday & Sunday \$1.50)

Black Orchid
CASINO

Carlean's Life in Saginaw & Beyond



CORE by Denise Miller

The Saginaw Connection

The Great Migration to Present Day

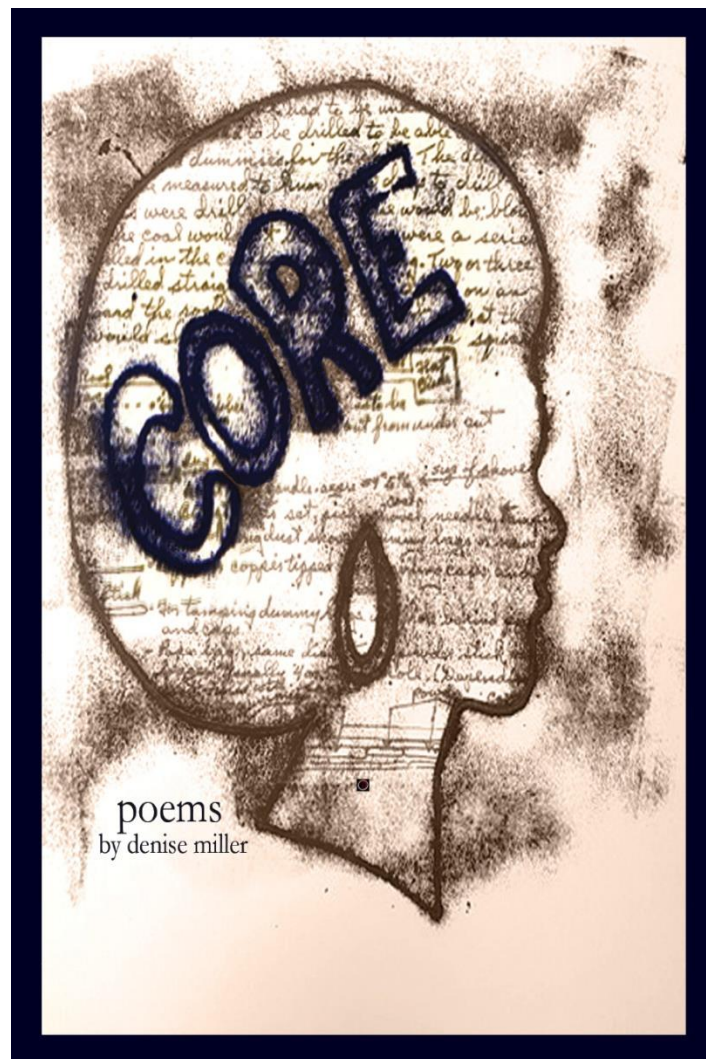
Denise Miller, born in Martins Ferry, Ohio, and raised in Cadiz, Ohio, is a Kalamazoo Valley Community College instructor, artist, poet, and community activist. She received a BFA from Bowling Green State University in Creative Writing and an MA from Central Michigan University.

Found poems based on oral histories of Saginaw

CORE by Denise Miller (2015)

Edited by Randall Horton, Ph.D.

*There was no freedom in this. Black men goin' in, skin
all shades of Saginaw soil, then coming out darker than the coal
that heated the foundry. ~ From CORE*



<http://WillowLit.net/core-by-denise-miller>

Oral History Review of Abdur Rashada, Saginaw Foundry Worker

Once every year they would take inventory. And they would have a big pile of iron maybe almost as big as this house you know, this great big pile of iron, outside, that they wanted to count you know and take inventory and they would put a lot of boxes all around this big pile of iron and put a group of us African Americans out there and tell us to put the iron in the box and count the iron as you put it in the box and when you get 100 you have the white boy over there with the pad so when you get 100 tell him and he would write it down. So when they tell me you know how to do that I would say I can't count.

www.WillowLit.net/CORE

Oral History & Poetry from CORE

HOW LONG?—FOUND POEM # 5: J.F. INTERVIEW 8-4-99

...Hot, hot, hot, I mean red hot. That's why I say you had to have a purpose or family or something in order to stay. You had to know what work were or something you know. You couldn't just go in there and I got a job. You had to have something to think about that makes you do this for 8 or 9 or 10 hours. But

soon
as you got home,
Hands swell,
take some
Epsom Salt, Mama ... and
alcohol and
rub them
down.

How long?

So you would

lift them

till I got ready to retire.

Purpose

You had to have something to think about made you able to be duberman or shake out at the Malleable. 8, 9, 10 hours of crackin' cast from sand or pouring 3000 tons of melted metal a day while sweat swilled slick into iron and flicked like fireworks on concrete.

There was no freedom in this. Black men goin' in, skin all shades of Saginaw soil, then coming out darker than the coal that heated the foundry. See, I had to find me a purpose. Somethin' to keep me shiftin' mold to belt so that every second felt light as liftin' bread to my daughter's mouth with my fingertips.

Read the full collection here:

www.WillowLit.net/CORE

Stories about Saginaw, Paradise Valley & Idlewild

Helen Hughey interviews with Michelle Johnson, Ph.D.



4/7/16



4/13/99

Jim Johnson interview with Michelle Johnson, Ph.D.



8/24/99

"Saginaw Detroiters" interview with Michelle Johnson, Ph.D.



8/5/16

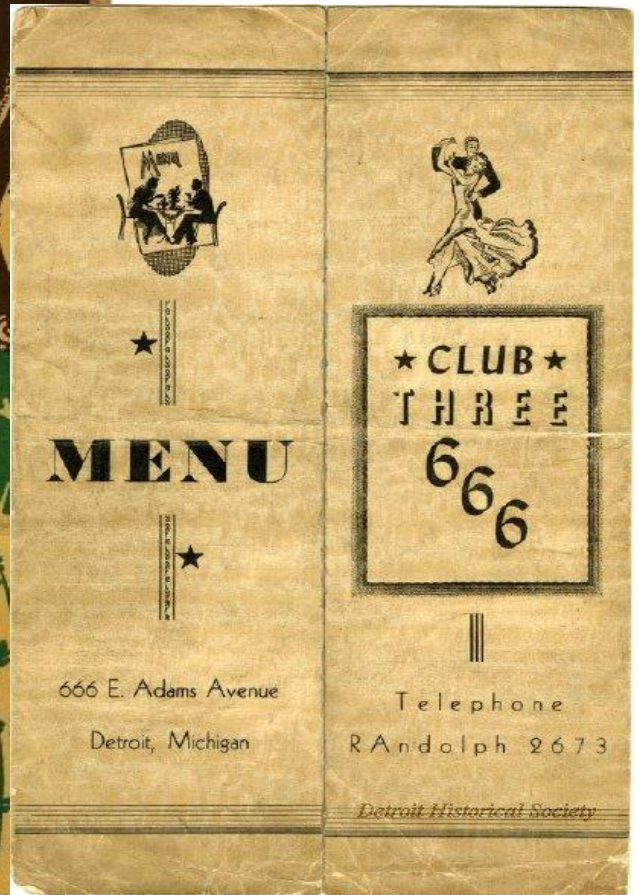
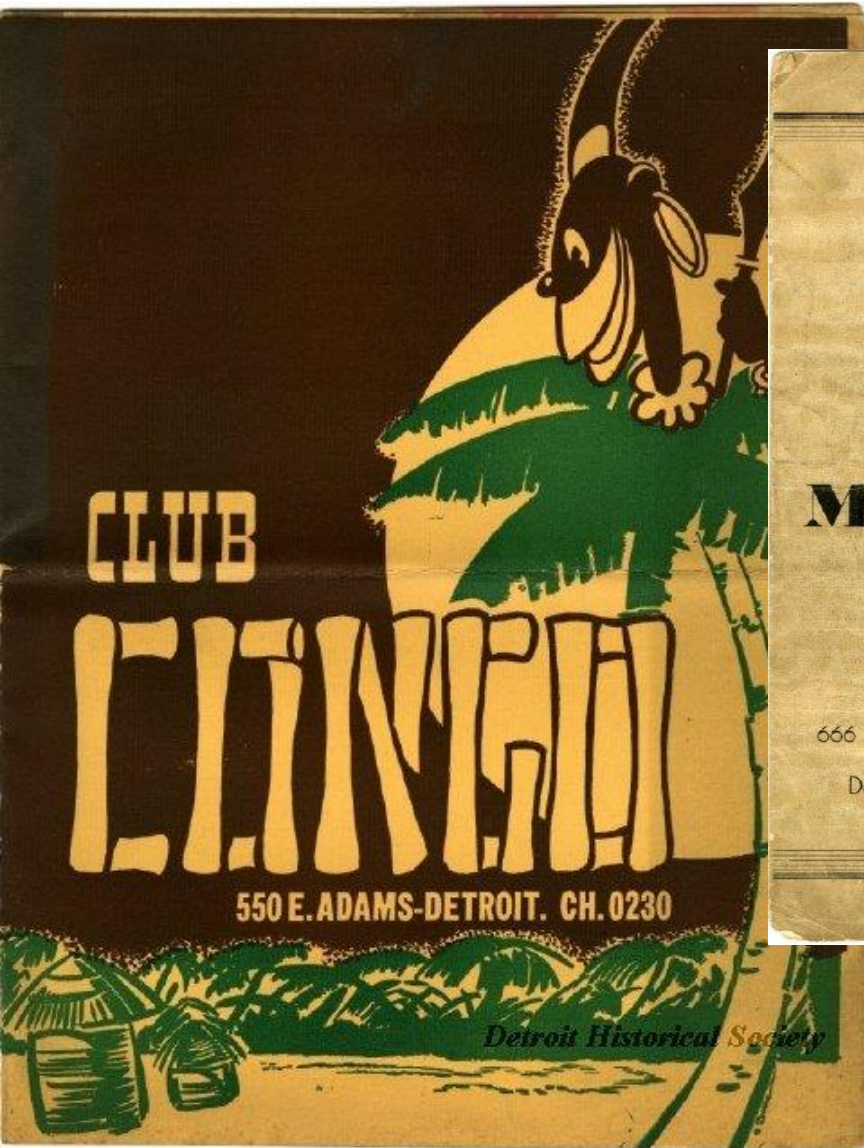
*Full transcript at Michigan
Historical Library*

Paradise Valley 1920s to 1960s



Sammy Davis, Jr. in Paradise Valley. Paradise Valley Days (1998)

Paradise Valley 1920s to 1960s



<https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/paradise-valley>

Courtesy Michigan Historical Society 2017

Paradise Valley

1920s to 1960s

Reflections of Calvin Robinson, Paradise Valley Jazz Musician

...I made a lot of money out of that hotel with my shoe shine box. Behind the Hotel Detroider was a school for Catholic nuns. The bishop used to come to the hotel for lunch and cars would be double-parked on Woodward Avenue. The only other place he'd frequent was the Book Cadillac Hotel on Washington Boulevard. A Jewish mob called The Purple Gang lived in the hotel mixing right in with the church people coming through. Back then, they liked their shoes shining at all times. That was a must...On a good day I could make almost a hundred dollars, just shining shoes...Today, the people of Detroit don't have any money...A hip city was destroyed because most of the people, black and white, were not cosmopolitan enough to live in a big city that steps. In a big city, you have to have night life...

Looking south of Vernor on John R...was the beginning of Paradise Valley. Behind Ms. Rodger's back door was this little club where Art Tatum used to play...

Gradually, all of the "cats" started leaving one by one. That's how everyone left. One by one. It was 1959, the beginning of The Great Jazz Migration. The best jazz musicians in the world left Detroit, taking with them memories of an era when Detroit was known as the Jazz Capitol of the United States. A musician had to come here to find out how good he was. And all of the best came here to hang out. With 3,000 bars and nightclubs going day and night, they had all the work they could want. This was before Motown, when Detroit was a jazz and blues city...

Paradise Valley 1920s to 1960s



Paradise Theater — Buy a ticket & stay all night
Burton Historical Library

Paradise Valley Days (1998)

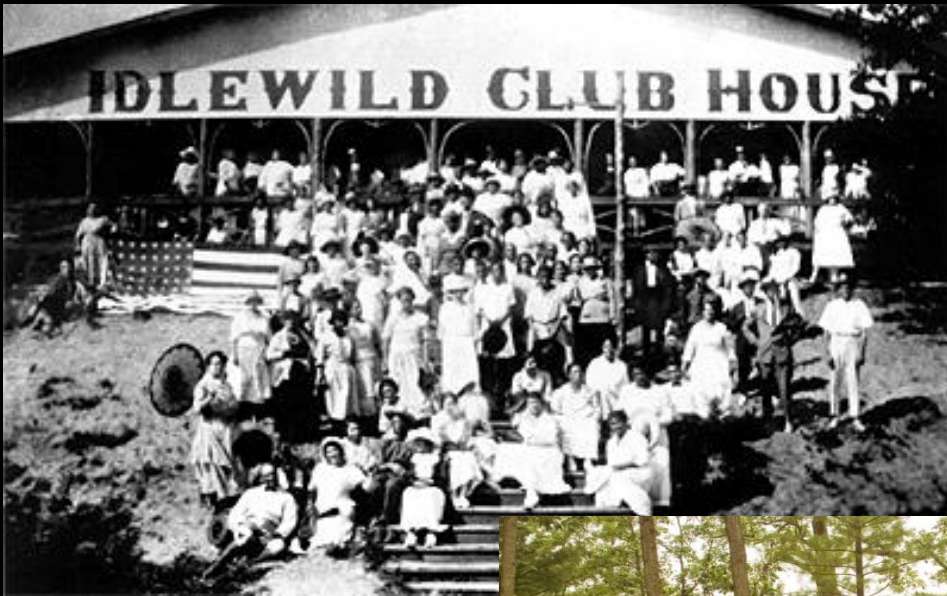
Paradise Valley 1920s to 1960s



Paradise Theater Featuring Duke Ellington Paradise Valley Days (1998)

The Legacy of Paradise Valley & Idlewild

Idlewild 2010



"We were walking in the footsteps of the greats. It was an honor to commune and create in such a special place."

~H. Buchanan, Co-Director, Idlewild Writers Conference, 2010

Idlewild 2010



Top: Ziggy Johnson, 2nd from left; Arthur Braggs 2nd from right. Bottom: Idlewild Writers Conference 2010, Randall Horton and H. Buchanan, Co-Directors

Idlewild 2010



Derrick Harriell, poet, debuting his first poetry collection, Cotton



New bridge constructed for the Idlewild centennial

Idlewild 2010



*Workshop with poet Quraysh Ali
Lansana*



*Master Class with Co-Director Randall
Horton, Ph.D.*



Paradise Valley 2016



<http://www.craigslist.com/article/20160629/NEWS/160629705/-52-4-million-paradise-valley-plan-includes-hotel-restaurants>

New Reflections from Carlean Gill, 2017



3/26/17



3/26/17, part 2



3/27/17