



#### DREAM DUO: AHEAD OF THEIR TIME

Charlie Parker (left) and 19-year-old Miles Davis (right)—seen here at New York's Three Deuces club in 1947—played together at The Finale Club in Bronzeville in February–March 1946. A very rare recording of their L.A. gig was discovered and was included on the RLR Records album *Charlie Parker: At the Finale Club & More*. The Finale Club's location at 230½ E. 1st St. was later occupied by the store S.K. Uyeda, which recently closed.

# BECOMING BRONZEVILLE

For a period during World War II—when Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps—Little Tokyo became known by a new name, reflecting an influx of tens of thousands of African Americans who reshaped the community and made late nights swing with jazz.

*By Stacie Stukin*

*“The Benny Carter band arrived to play at the Orpheum Theatre in Los Angeles, and Miles was already unhappy with the job. It was a big band playing mostly old-fashioned arrangements. Parker was appearing at The Finale Club in the black quarter of the city and Miles was soon doubling up jobs by slipping down there every night when the Carter gig was over.”*

*—Excerpt from Miles, The Definitive Biography by Ian Carr*

Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo was founded in the 1880s when a Japanese sailor named Hamanosuke “Charles Hama” Shigeta opened an American-style café on E. 1st Street. The neighborhood continued to grow, and before World War II, it boasted a population of more than 35,000, making it the biggest Japanese commercial district in California. But in 1942, after Pearl Harbor attack, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which forced roundups of Japanese residents, most of whom were U.S. citizens. Japanese-American families all over the country had mere days to decide what to do with their possessions, their farms and their businesses before, under the watch of soldiers with rifles, they boarded trains destined for internment camps like Manzanar, located in a remote desert near Owens Valley, California.

Almost overnight, Little Tokyo and its restaurants, hotels, newspapers, furniture stores, dry goods shops, churches and Buddhist temples went dark. It became an eerie ghost town just blocks away from City Hall. This bleak chapter in Japanese-American history and the involuntary evacuation of Little Tokyo dovetailed with the migration of African Americans from the South who came to Los Angeles seeking war industry jobs. Since the city’s segregation laws prohibited blacks from living in 95 percent of Los Angeles neighborhoods, Little Tokyo became a destination for around 50,000 to as many as 80,000 African Americans who moved west to earn good wages.

The demographic change ushered in a new era and a new name. Little Tokyo became known as Bronzeville, a term that referred to the skin color of its residents and was at that time a name for many black metropolitan neighborhoods around the country. While the quarters were tight—many lived in squalor—a vibrant culture emerged that spawned newspapers, a chamber of commerce and new businesses including a spate of clubs where jazz and variety shows entertained patrons. Some were known as breakfast clubs, music spots that ran into the wee hours of the morning.

Martha Nakagawa, a journalist and historian, had heard about a time when African Americans lived in the neighborhood, but she didn’t know much about the history until she



James Hodge, in hat, seen smiling at the camera, was the African-American owner of a newsstand at the corner of 1st and San Pedro Streets. Opened in 1942, it remained in business until the mid-1980s.

began studying the era more than a decade ago. In fact, as a kid growing up in L.A., she and her family shopped in Little Tokyo. There she saw James Hodge, the African-American proprietor of a newsstand on the corner of 1st and San Pedro Streets, which he opened during the Bronzeville era in 1942 and operated into the 1980s. In Ichiro Mike Murase's book *Little Tokyo: One Hundred Years in Pictures*, Hodge was quoted as saying: "This neighborhood here was nightclubs and gambling and prostitutes and pimps. But they weren't like today. They were civilized. The sun never went down in this neighborhood. Guys were spending money with both hands. It was real exciting...but it only lasted about three years."

During those three years, nightclubs showcased some of the era's most progressive jazz. "The jewel of Bronzeville was Shepp's Playhouse," says jazz journalist Kirk Silsbee. Located on 1st Street, Shepp's was a three-story entertainment mecca where, Silsbee explains, "there were comics, eccentric acts, ballad singers, contortionists, shake dancers and, of course jazz." At Shepp's, legendary bandleader Gerald Wilson, who had played with Duke Ellington and Count Basie, performed regularly, and other jazz greats like Coleman Hawkins, T-Bone Walker and Joe Liggins graced the stage, too, making Shepp's a destination for white Angelenos like Judy Garland and Gene Kelly.

But it was The Finale Club on E. 1st Street—with a bare-bones, low-ceilinged room located on the second floor and accessed by an alley—that, according to Silsbee, became the locus of modern jazz. "For a brief time, in the summer of 1946, The Finale Club became the destination for every modern jazz-minded musician and fan west of the Rockies," he says. The reason: Charlie "Bird" Parker, one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century, who defined the improvisational, bold jazz known as bebop.

Parker had left Dizzy Gillespie's band and found himself in Los Angeles looking for gigs and drugs. He assembled a small band and got booked at The Finale Club (which is the subject of a new documentary of the same name directed by Robert Shoji). Parker invited a 19-year-old trumpeter named Miles Davis to join him. In Davis, Parker found an equal with lots of talent. For Davis, Parker offered a creative challenge and someone to learn from. Davis said of his time at The Finale Club: "It was a nice place and I thought it was funky because the music was funky and the musicians were getting down."

Much like the limited run of The Finale Club, Bronzeville was a short-lived period in the history of Little Tokyo. The Supreme Court's Korematsu decision at the end of 1944 lifted the evacuation orders, and at the beginning of 1945, Japanese Americans were free to return home. Hillary Jenks, PhD, a historian who wrote a dissertation on the history of Little Tokyo, says the transition wasn't perfect—there was racism and tense moments as Japanese families returned to reclaim their homes and businesses. "It wasn't smooth, it wasn't roses, but there was a conscious effort to make it work," she says.

In fact, kinships between African Americans and Japanese developed—in some cases they hired one another to work in their businesses and assisted each other to find new housing. And in 1945 an editorial published in the black newspaper, *The California Eagle*, came out in defense of their Japanese brethren when it stated: "It is the question today of whether or not California shall live up to its tradition of democracy, or shall it become a breeding place for Fascism. Shall citizens of the United States of America be allowed to live in this state unmolested, free to enjoy all

the privileges of the greatest democracy in the world, free to exercise the rights and responsibilities of that democracy?... It is not only we Negroes who are asking that question.” The editorial ended with this appeal: “California’s job in 1945 is to take the lead in the establishment of a democratic state of affairs in which the people of whatever race, color or creed may live together in peace and harmony.”

Today, Little Tokyo is still a destination for Japanese Americans and tourists alike who come for confections like mochi from Fugetsu-Do, where the Kito family has been making their delicacies since 1903 and re-established the business upon their return from internment, or who shop at Anzen Hardware, which has been selling items like specialty knives and Japanese carpentry tools since it opened after the war. Among a newer wave of stores and restaurants, Popkiller carries vintage and contemporary gifts and clothing, while ramen enthusiasts patiently wait in line at Daikokuya.

Activists like Bill Watanabe, who was born while his parents were incarcerated in Manzanar internment camp and who founded The Little Tokyo Historical Society, want to ensure that DTLA’s gentrification doesn’t erase the legacy of the Japanese-American community. To that end, Watanabe helped organize a community-based investment program to purchase heritage-based businesses called the Little Tokyo Community Impact fund. “We need to keep a connection to our historic places, people, customs and culture,” Watanabe says. “Our history and heritage live in these buildings and once they’re torn down, the memories and connections go away as if they never existed.”

For Watanabe, preservation isn’t just about buildings; it’s also about preserving history. When it comes to the legacy of Bronzeville, he observes, “racism, of course, was a huge underlying factor in why the Japanese were rounded up and incarcerated, and racism is why this area became Bronzeville because of the restrictive covenants. The fact that it happened to the Japanese-American community gives us a stronger sense that our civil rights can be taken away when people are afraid and suffering. That’s when they look for a scapegoat. Unfortunately, today that message has not gone away.”



## TRANSITIONS AFTER WORLD WAR II

These photographs show the street scene outside Kiichi Uyeda’s Bronzeville 5-10-25-Cent Store and the sales floor inside, soon after Uyeda (seen at right) opened it in 1945. The Japanese-American shopkeeper was one of the first to return to the neighborhood after being held in the Manzanar internment camp. Many African and Japanese Americans made efforts to bring a harmonious community into existence, with varying success. Uyeda hired African Americans as clerks, and Samuel Evans hired Japanese American waitresses to work in his restaurant, the Bamboo Room. Uyeda’s store, which changed its name to S.K. Uyeda and became a department and specialty store run by his son, closed in 2016.