

March 26, 2006----

Chicago's Bronzeville always has been a portrait framed by African-American culture -- and that culture is now reviving the historic community.

The South Side neighborhood that went from "The Black Metropolis" in the early 20th century to an urban-planning blight by century's end is once again brimming with a renewed fellowship. African-American entrepreneurs are lifting up the community with their own hands. It's a roots vibration that could call out from Chicago to New Orleans.

Bronzeville is an idea, always in motion.

Louis Armstrong, Nat "King" Cole and boxer Joe Louis all lived in Bronzeville in its heyday. But the neighborhood hit the ropes after World War II, and the knockout punch came in the 1960s when Bronzeville was redefined by large tracts of public housing -- nearly 4,300 units of it, mostly in the Robert Taylor Homes. Taylor himself, head of the Chicago Housing Authority, was a Bronzeville resident. That's when many homeowners and businesses started leaving Bronzeville.

But now they're coming back -- and they're bringing food and music with them.

Former tax analyst Don Curry, 35, opened the Negro League Cafe, 301 E. 43rd St. Clifford Rome, a former chef with Wolfgang Puck, is helping refurbish the historic Parkway Ballroom, 4445 S. King Dr. A "Parkway Unplugged" series starts in May, featuring intimate gospel, neo-soul and jazz sets.

"People are coming back to Bronzeville and bringing business back," said Rome, 34, who grew up at 57th and Bishop. "It is economic empowerment."

Duke Ellington and Cole performed for upwardly mobile African Americans at the Parkway in the '40s and '50s. Women wore ballroom gowns, white gloves and fancy hats. Gentlemen would come in tails. Everyone turned heads. The Parkway was one of the few upscale places open to African Americans during segregation. Then, during the 1970s, former Ald. Cliff Kelley (20th) held neighborhood strategy sessions in the Parkway's "Blue Room," a 100-person space -- which Rome now is turning into a membership-only nightclub called Bronze, focusing on wines and champagnes of the world.

There's a new bookstore (Afrocentric, 4655 S. King Dr.), the Harold Washington Cultural Center (4701 S. King Dr.), and in late January the slick 200-seat comedy club Jokes and Notes opened at 4641 S. King Drive in the former location of

Gemini Records.

Ald. Dorothy Tillman (3rd) jokes about the neighborhood's cultural rebirth, saying the logo of the neighborhood Harold's Chicken No. 7 -- of the man chasing a chicken with a hatchet -- soon will be remade for Bronzeville: The man will be wielding a guitar instead of a hatchet.

Tillman also dreams of turning the former Metropolitan Funeral Home next door to the Parkway into a health club. Muddy Waters was laid to rest at the Metropolitan.

Soul singer Otis Clay is president of the non-profit Tobacco Road Inc., which raised funds for the Harold Washington Cultural Center. He's worked with Tillman since the first Bring It On Home to Me roots festival was held in the summer of 1991 in an empty lot where the cultural center now stands. The site is the former location of the Regal Theatre.

The original Regal featured Ellington, Count Basie, Sammy Davis Jr. and others. In 1964, B.B. King recorded "Live at the Regal" there, which pop guitarist John Mayer recently cited as the finest live blues record of all time.

Because of segregation, 47th and King (which was then Parkway) was a thriving downtown for Chicago African Americans. The Bronzeville Walk of Fame with Sam Cooke, Howlin' Wolf and others heads north on King Drive to 22nd Street. Bronzeville can run as far south as 51st Street, east to the Lake, west to the Dan Ryan Expressway.

"It's hard to preserve things that are gone," Clay said. "But in another time and place you can recapture the idea of what was happening."

When Clay's family migrated to Chicago in 1956, they became members of Liberty Baptist Church, 49th and King Drive. Clay is still a church member today. Church is the soul of Bronzeville, be it Liberty Baptist, Pilgrim Baptist or First Church of Deliverance.

"I coined this phrase: Chicago was a suburb of Mississippi," Clay said during a conversation at Liberty Baptist. "As I grew older, I learned Bronzeville's roots had a lot to do with geography. Most folks from Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas -- they went to New York, D.C. and Philly. People from Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee came to Chicago. Go a little west and people from Oklahoma and Texas went to California. That's how blacks migrated."

On the day of our interview, Clay went to the Afrocentric Bookstore to pick up a favorite book, *Black Labor and White Wealth: The Search for Power and Economic Justice* by Dr. Claude Anderson. "He speaks in terms of black economics and survival," Clay said.

Store owner Desiree Sanders read the book before she opened her business in 1991. "The book talks about the economic structure in America and how blacks were capital," she said. "We came from being seen as capital to create our own capital."

Tillman moved to Chicago in 1965 to work with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the fight for open housing. She has been 3rd Ward alderman for 20 years. In 1965, her first Chicago office was across the street from her current office at 4645 S. King Dr. "Dr. King said we had to work from an economic base and deal with an economic self," Tillman recalled.

To accomplish this goal, Tillman learned the history of her constituents. "Usually the mulatto blacks lived on King Drive," she said. "There were certain streets darker blacks could not live on. During the music days, this was 'the valley.' There were the Valley Boys under Capt. Walter Dyett, and people like Sam Cooke and Lou Rawls came out of the valley."

The late Dyett was the jazz bandleader at Du Sable High School who trained Nat "King" Cole, Redd Foxx, Dinah Washington and Bo Diddley, who studied violin. A park in Dyett's honor is being built across from the Washington Cultural Center, and Tillman said it should be ready by June.

On the downbeat, though, Gerri's Palm Tavern space remains vacant. The Palm Tavern opened in 1935 at 446 E. 47th St., across the street from today's Washington center. Basie, Ellington and Jackie Wilson all hung around the Palm after shows at the Regal Theatre.

The city evicted longtime owner Gerri Oliver in 2001 after deeming the building unsafe. Much of her artifacts are now at the Chicago History Museum. Tillman has promised a variety of music clubs in the space. But five years later nothing has materialized.

Al Spearman is a veteran of baseball's Negro Leagues who pitched for the Chicago American Giants between 1949 and 1951. He has lived in Bronzeville most of his life. "This neighborhood will be like New Orleans," Spearman said during an interview at the Negro League Cafe. "It takes money. As the new comes in, a lot of people in this neighborhood now will not be able to live here because it will cost too much."

For now, the neighborhood congregates at the Spoken Word Cafe, 4655 S. King Dr., where the most popular drink is the "Inside the Hat," (espresso and steamed milk with shots of chocolate and caramel) -- a sly tip of the hat to Tillman, who owns more than 100 colorful hats. When jazz great Ramsey Lewis appeared at the cultural center across the street, he came to the cafe to sample the "Jazzy Ramsey," with shots of raspberry and almond.

The Spoken Word Cafe is across the hall from the Afrocentric bookstore. Sanders

believed so much in Bronzeville that she left downtown in 2003 to open her shop on the South Side.

"There was an opportunity for growth in Bronzeville," said Sanders, a Bronzeville resident. "Downtown in the DePaul University building I had a lot of customers who lived on the South Side, and they wanted me to expand. The alderman told me what her vision was, and I wanted to be a part of it. Things have been going very well. Here, my business is more community-based. I see an older population here than I did downtown. They read, and they give me stories about Bronzeville."

Afrocentric now features between 8,000 and 9,000 titles, and the upstairs portion of the store is devoted to kids.

Still, after 40 years of community organizing in Bronzeville, Tillman said there is much more work to be done.

"In terms of public housing, Dr. King would be sad," she said. "That is the saddest part of my whole tenure: the demolition of public housing with no replacement housing for poor people. But what we've done in terms of economics and trying to build a base from music, I feel good about bringing the music home."