Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee

Report on Diversity Awareness Projects
EHRAC Meeting 1/28/25

Ad Hoc Subcommittee Members: Haifaa Moammar, Rebecca Rona, Ifunanyan Nweke, Carlos Valverde

The Diversity Awareness Ad Hoc Subcommittee seeks to create a webpage for the City website which highlights and educates visitors about culturally significant locations in Culver City. The webpage would feature the following:

1. **The Kunisawa family** and **farm**, located on the land where Farragut Elementary, Culver City Middle School and Culver City High School currently stand;
2. **Sebastian's Cotton Club,** with a rich musical history that included performances by prominent African American artists
3. **Pacific Electric Labor Camp,** which was located in the area of the Warner Media building, where countless Latinos resided for decades;
4. **The Gabrielino,** lived and worked throughout the area, their ancestral land, any location would be appropriate.

The 'Diversity Awareness' webpage would be created exactly like the https://www.culvercity.org/Explore/Arts-Culture page, located under the "Explore" "Arts & Culture"page of the City website.

The Diversity Awareness Projects ad hoc subcommittee has developed the rough drafts for the Kunisawa Family and the Sebastian's Nightclub (included). We will continue to work on the Gabrielino and PE Mexican Labor Camp drafts for the next EHRAC meeting.

The drafts will be reviewed by ad hoc subcommittee members and will verify historical information with the City historian. Once all four drafts are reviewed and completed, we will present them to the entire EHRAC for final approval. Our target date of completion is the next EHRAC meeting in February or March.

ROUGH DRAFTS

(see attached)

DRAFT

Kunisawa Farm

Kunisawa Farm was located within the City of Culver City from approximately 19?? - 1950.

At age 10, Henry Tokuyoshi KUNISAWA (1894-1950), originally born in Shikoku, Japan, immigrated to northern California with his family with high hopes for a promising future. As an adult, Henry settled in Culver City, honing his skills and knowledge of Japanese agriculture and horticulture. As a family of farmers, Henry, his wife Yiame Ikeda Kunisawa, and their six children flourished by growing vegetables: celery, cucumbers, cabbage, lettuce, barley, and beans year round.

The Kunisawa home was originally located at 4475 Elenda Street and the farm made up much of what is the current site of Farragut Elementary, Culver City Middle School, and Culver City High School.

Kunisawa Family and farm: life on the farm (to be added…)

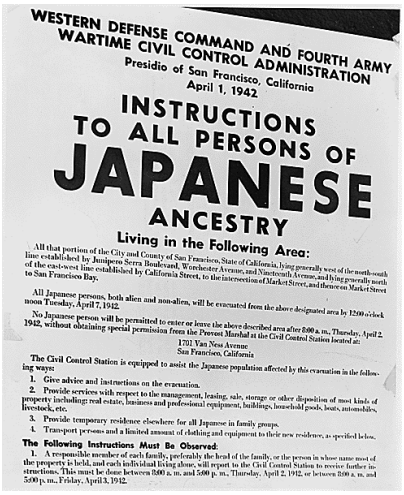
Prior to the 1940s, the Kunisawa were part of a rich Japanese American network of families throughout Los Angeles who participated together in yearly gatherings and festivals.
As members of the Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple, once located near Boyle Heights and later relocated to its current location in Little Tokyo, the Kunisawa celebrated community with other families, often bringing people together through shared food and regional Japanese cultural performances and activities.

One such festival was the yearly Obon Festival (officially in August) which commemorates deceased loved ones and ancestors through the traditions of rituals, chochin lanterns, bon fires, and traditional Bon Odori dances that vary from Japanese regions. These large yearly gatherings were quite elaborate, often including the sharing of a wide variety of foods, such as various types of sushis, kai fish, orange lobster shell, carrot salad, fried chicken, and tamales. The Kunisawa would bring —-- grown from vegetables and legumes grown on the farm and the children participated in the activities.

[include picture of grandchildren in kimonos; [kimono picture from left: Carolyn, Judy, Barbara, Nancy, Linda]

Life in the United States changed significantly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan, creating fear in Americans of Japanese ancestry. On February 19, 1942, President Rooselvet signed Executive Order 9066, which led to the incarceration of anyone of Japanese ancestry in

internment camps located throughout the United States. This included Henry, his wife, and the five children, who were interned at Manzanar. Linda, their sixth child was born at Manzanar.



WESTERN DEFENSE COMMAND AND FOURTH ARMY
WARTIME CIVIL CONTROL ADMINISTRATION
Presidio of San Francisco, California
April 1, 1942

INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY

Living in the Following Area:

All that portion of the City and County of San Francisco, State of California, lying generally west of the north-south line established by Junipero Serra Boulevard, Worchester Avenue, and Nineteenth Avenue, and lying generally north of the east-west line established by California Street, to the intersection of Market Street, and thence on Market Street to San Francisco Bay.

All Japanese persons, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from the above designated area by 12:00 o'clock noon Tuesday, April 7, 1942.

No Japanese person will be permitted to enter or leave the above described area after 8:00 a. m., Thursday, April 2, 1942, without obtaining special permission from the Provost Marshal at the Civil Control Station located at:

1701 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, California

The Civil Control Station is equipped to assist the Japanese population affected by this evacuation in the following ways:

1. Give advice and instructions on the evacuation.
2. Provide services with respect to the management, leasing, sale, storage or other disposition of most kinds of property including: real estate, business and professional equipment, buildings, household goods, boats, automobiles, livestock, etc.
3. Provide temporary residence elsewhere for all Japanese in family groups.
4. Transport persons and a limited amount of clothing and equipment to their new residence, as specified below.

The Following Instructions Must Be Observed:

1. A responsible member of each family, preferably the head of the family, or the person in whose name most of the property is held, and each individual living alone, will report to the Civil Control Station to receive further instructions. This must be done between 8:00 a. m. and 5:00 p. m., Thursday, April 2, 1942, or between 8:00 a. m. and 5:00 p. m., Friday, April 3, 1942.

With losing their freedom, the Kunisawa also lost many of their possessions and their daily way of life. The family was finally released on January 11, 1945. Much of the farmland was appropriated by the City and began constructing schools while the family continued to live at the farm house until Henry's death in 1950. Shortly after, Farragut Elementary and Culver City Junior High School, opened in 1950, and Culver City Senior High School, opened in 1951.

[include old photos of schools]

On May 18, 2018, Culver City High School honored the Kunisawa grandchildren by dedicating a vegetable garden within the school as "The Kunisawa Garden." Several grandchildren attended the ceremony and shared stories and scarce memories of life on the farm.

The Kunisawa family is remembered today as a family who endured hardship and injustice, persevering nonetheless. The Kunisawas inspire us to rise above discrimination, unfairness, and fear - to learn the lessons of their sacrifices - and to affirm that Culver City's past continues to lay the foundation of its rich cultural diversity. [This paragraph will be revised as needed]

[include snippets of Kunisawa family interview]

[include Kunisawa family photos]

[include short list of Japanese American history sites in LA]

[include photos of current location]

[include link to CCHS' Kunisawa Garden article]

[include special thanks to …]

DRAFT

Frank Sebastian's Sebastian Cotton Club: A Story of Performers, Glamour, and Legacy

Located at 6508 Washington Blvd, Culver City, California

Opened: 1926 | Closed: 1938

Introduction

Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club in Culver City, California, was not just a jazz venue; it was an emblem of the roaring Jazz Age on the West Coast. Known for its star-studded lineup, glamorous ambiance, and ties to Hollywood, the club also reflected the racial and social dynamics of its era. While Frank Sebastian provided the platform, it was the performers who made the club what it was. This report delves into Sebastian's motivations, the performers' triumphs and struggles, the club's immense success, and the reasons behind its eventual closure. The story of the Cotton Club is one of artistic brilliance, cultural vibrancy, and the shifting tides of society.

Why Frank Sebastian Started the Cotton Club

Frank Sebastian wasn't just a businessman; he was a visionary. In 1926, Sebastian opened the Cotton Club to bring the electric energy of Harlem's nightlife to the burgeoning entertainment capital of Hollywood.

Sebastian understood the allure of jazz, a genre that was revolutionizing music and captivating audiences nationwide. He envisioned his club as a haven where people could indulge in the finest music, dance, and entertainment, away from the constraints of Prohibition-era restrictions. Positioned near Hollywood's film studios, Sebastian aimed to attract a clientele that craved luxury, exclusivity, and a break from the mundane.

The Performers: The Heart of Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club

Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club owed much of its success and enduring legacy to the remarkable talents who graced its stage. These performers, many of whom were African American, not only entertained but also transcended the challenges of their time to create unforgettable art. Their contributions made the Cotton Club a cultural phenomenon and a beacon of jazz and entertainment.

Notable Performers and Their Stories

- **Louis Armstrong**: A jazz pioneer who performed a three-month residency in 1932, Armstrong captivated audiences with his revolutionary trumpet style and charismatic stage presence. His performances at the club brought national attention to West Coast jazz. Listen to Louis Armstrong & His Sebastian New Cotton Club Orchestra - "The Peanut Vendor".

- **Lionel Hampton**: Known as the world's fastest drummer, Hampton started performing at the Cotton Club at just 18 years old. His groundbreaking work on the vibraphone made him a standout figure in jazz. Watch Lionel Hampton perform "I'm a Ding Dong Daddy".
- **Valaida Snow**: Dubbed "Little Louis," this multi-talented trumpeter and singer brought charisma and musical brilliance to the stage. Her ability to command the audience made her a fan favorite.
- **Les Hite**: As a skilled bandleader, Hite assembled some of the finest musicians and led the club's orchestra, ensuring each performance was of the highest quality.
- **Aurora Greeley**: A vocalist known for her emotional depth and connection with the audience, she became a beloved figure at the Sebastian Cotton Club.
- **Dizzy Gillespie**: While it is unclear if Gillespie brought his full band to the Cotton Club, he was primarily associated with bands led by Cab Calloway and Earl Hines during the late 1930s. His innovative bebop style influenced many performers of the era and left a lasting impression.
- **Fats Waller**: A comedic genius and jazz legend, Waller's infectious energy and piano skills turned every performance into a memorable event. Watch Fats Waller perform "Ain't Misbehavin'".
- **T-Bone Walker**: One of the pioneers of electric blues, Walker's guitar performances added a unique flavor to the club's offerings. Listen to T-Bone Walker - "Call It Stormy Monday".
- **Cab Calloway**: Known for his larger-than-life personality and pushing for dark-skinned dancers in his acts, Calloway's performances were both electrifying and progressive. A notable story involves his song "Minnie the Moocher," where an on-stage mistake led him to forget the lyrics and improvise with nonsense syllables like "hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho." This improvisation became the song's most iconic feature and showcased Calloway's charismatic ability to turn a mishap into an unforgettable moment. Watch Cab Calloway perform in "A Night at the Cotton Club".
- **Duke Ellington**: As one of the greatest jazz composers and bandleaders of all time, Ellington's time at the Cotton Club helped elevate it to legendary status. Listen to Duke Ellington - Cotton Club Broadcast, March 18, 1937.
- **Earl Hines Orchestra**: Known as "Fatha," Hines brought his orchestra to the club, mesmerizing audiences with innovative piano and big band arrangements.
- **Bill "Bojangles" Robinson**: A celebrated tap dancer, Robinson's elegant and rhythmic performances brought a unique style and sophistication to the Cotton Club. Watch Bill "Bojangles" Robinson Tap Dancing.
- **The Berry Brothers**: Acclaimed tap dancers whose fast-paced routines brought excitement and variety to the shows. Watch their 1942 performance from 'Panama Hattie'.

The Sebastian Cotton Club's legacy rests on the shoulders of these performers. Their extraordinary talents and resilience not only ensured the club's success but also left a lasting impact on the world of music and entertainment.

Other Iconic Jazz Venues in Los Angeles

While the Sebastian Cotton Club was a landmark venue, it was part of a larger tapestry of vibrant jazz culture in Los Angeles. Other prominent venues, particularly along Central Avenue, played a crucial role in the city's jazz scene:

- **The Dunbar Hotel**: A cornerstone of African American culture in Los Angeles, the Dunbar hosted legendary jam sessions and performances by luminaries such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie.
- **Club Alabam**: Known as the West Coast counterpart to Harlem's Cotton Club, Club Alabam was celebrated for its luxurious atmosphere and top-tier entertainment.
- **The Downbeat Club**: A hotspot for emerging jazz talent, this venue became a haven for both musicians and jazz aficionados.
- **The Plantation Club**: Another historic venue that showcased rising stars in the jazz and blues scenes, solidifying Los Angeles' reputation as a jazz hub.

These venues, alongside the Sebastian Cotton Club, created a thriving jazz culture in Los Angeles that resonated far beyond the city limits. Together, they fostered an environment where musicians could innovate and audiences could experience the transformative power of jazz.

Why the Cotton Club Closed

The closure of Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club in **1938** marked the end of an era. While its lights dimmed, the reasons behind its decline were deeply tied to the social and economic shifts of the time.

The Great Depression

- **Economic Woes**: The financial strain of the 1930s left many patrons unable to afford lavish nights out. As attendance dwindled, so did revenue.
- **Cutthroat Competition**: New venues emerged in Los Angeles, offering fresh experiences and siphoning away the Cotton Club's audience.

A Changing World

- **End of Prohibition**: The repeal of Prohibition in 1933 removed the mystique of speakeasies, lessening the club's allure.
- **Evolving Tastes**: Swing music began dominating the scene, and the Cotton Club may have struggled to keep pace with this shift in audience preference.

Internal and Legal Pressures

- **Law Enforcement Scrutiny**: The club's alleged involvement in gambling and illicit liquor eventually drew attention from authorities, complicating its operations.
- **Operational Challenges**: Maintaining a high-profile venue with top-tier talent proved financially unsustainable as profits shrank.

A Legacy of Light and Shadow

Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club was more than a nightclub—it was a cultural phenomenon that shaped the West Coast jazz scene and provided a stage for some of the greatest musicians of the 20th century. Yet, it was also a reflection of its time, highlighting both the vibrancy of the Jazz Age and the systemic inequalities that persisted in entertainment and society.

The performers, through their extraordinary talents and resilience, were the true heroes of the Sebastian Cotton Club. They turned a venue into a legend and left a legacy that continues to inspire. The Cotton Club reminds us of the power of art to transcend barriers and the enduring impact of those who create it.

Resources and References

1. **Calisphere**
    - *Item about Frank Sebastian and his club's history*: Calisphere.org
2. **The Hideho Blog**
    - Detailed posts on performers and events at the Cotton Club, including mentions of Valaida Snow and Mae Diggs: The Hideho Blog
3. **Syncopated Times**
    - Articles covering Louis Armstrong's tenure at the Cotton Club: SyncopatedTimes.com
4. **Black Past**
    - Historical overview of Sebastian's Cotton Club and its cultural significance: BlackPast.org
5. **Louis Armstrong House Museum**
    - Official biography and details of Armstrong's career and timeline: LouisArmstrongHouse.org

6. **Free Library Archive**
    - Article on Los Angeles's jazz roots and its connection to Central Avenue: [FreeLibrary.com](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Los%2BAngeles%27s%2Bjazz%2Broots%3A%2Bthe%2BWill

Submitted by, Haifaa Moammar
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